

HOUSEWITCH

 *Katie Schickel*

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK 
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For Michael

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CHAPTER 1

For every evil under the sun
There is a remedy or there is none.
If there be one, seek till you find it;
If there be none, never mind it.

—MOTHER GOOSE

Misery Shoal, Massachusetts • 1945

“Where’s Papa?” Aurora asked as the sisters made their way across the mudflats and into the marsh.

“Papa’s gone,” Freya said, swatting at cattails, scattering their velvety seeds into the air.

A dense fog had rolled in from the sea. It shrouded Misery Shoal in a coat of gray, and brought with it the smell of winter.

“Where’s he gone to?” Aurora asked.

“Never mind. He’s just gone.” Freya’s red hair shined like a flame against the brittle landscape. She was the middle child, and the most beautiful of the sisters.

Somewhere a ship’s horn belched through the stillness, and this made the girls alert, for they were unaccustomed to the sounds of Commoners at the shoal.

The oldest sister, Wilhemena, lifted the cauldron with both hands, tucking her elbows into her sides for leverage. It reminded Freya of the way she’d seen her father lift the cod and haddock to measure at the Derby Street Pier. Those fish could weigh up to fifty pounds and stand as tall as Freya herself. Even a strong man like her father had a hard time raising the hand scale high enough to clear the tails off the ground. His biceps, the tendons in his forearms, straining under the weight, his face pinched in anticipation while the fishmonger read the scale.

“When’s he coming back?” Aurora asked.

“He ain’t,” Freya said.

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Hush now. That’s just more of your nonsense,” Wilhemena said.

Aurora frowned. Although Papa was often at sea, she couldn’t imagine never seeing him *ever* again. She turned to Wilhemena’s wisdom on the matter. “Is it true? Is Papa never comin’ home?”

“Of course it isn’t true,” Wilhemena said. She braced the cauldron against her

stomach to keep the water from spilling out. “Let’s hurry on home. Before the tide turns.”

Misery Shoal was a spit of land shaped like a crow’s claw, formed by centuries of longshore waves dragging sand and sediment southward. At high tide the neck of the shoal slunk underwater, making it impassable. Nautical maps warned sailors of its shifting nature with a black “XXX.” Only the Ellylydan family called it home.

Freya and Aurora skipped after Wilhemena, stopping now and then to inspect a mud crab or pry open a clam in search of pearls. Aurora had heard stories of the pearl divers in Japan and found exquisite possibilities in an unopened mollusk.

“Freya, hurry up,” Wilhemena called. “Come along now, Aurora.”

Freya ignored her. She had captured a pickerel frog and was teasing it with a thatch of goldenrod. She shoved the frog into the pocket of her apron and squeezed, the poor creature clambering up the thin cotton, only to be squashed by Freya’s fingers each time.

Up ahead, Wilhemena slowed her pace and clucked her tongue. There was work to be done. And even though her sisters were younger and more easily distracted by childish things, she expected them to at least *try* and work as hard as she.

Wilhemena yelled to Freya, who was crouching by a rock, “Watch the baby for me. I’m going up ahead.”

“She ain’t a baby anymore,” Freya said. “Why are you always treating her like a little baby?”

“Mind your tongue,” Wilhemena snapped. “Just watch after her.”

Freya rolled her eyes and went back to torturing her frog.

As Wilhemena disappeared through the reeds, Aurora, who at four really wasn’t a baby anymore and felt no more like a baby than her sisters, tromped barefoot into the spongy grass to get a better look at a water beetle.

“There’s snakes in there,” Freya called out. “Look. There’s some moving the grass.”

Aurora feared nothing of earthly creatures. Hexes, yes. Enchantments, definitely. For those were real. Snakes were far too interesting to be feared. She watched the reeds part and snap back to their vertical postures. “Just a muskrat,” Aurora said, to which Freya replied, “It’ll eat you up with its big fangs.”

Aurora stopped to consider that scenario. She wasn’t sure if Freya, being a whole year older and wiser to the world, might know something about muskrats that she had yet to discover. As far as she had seen, muskrats ate marsh plants and mussels and left little girls alone.

“You sure?” Aurora asked.

“Oh yes,” Freya answered. “They start with your nose and work down. A girl was eaten by a muskrat just last week. All’s they found left was her skull.”

Aurora decided to resolve the matter with Wilhemena, who at eight, was even wiser to the world than Freya. She started walking, but as the thought of the little-girl-eating muskrat took shape in her mind, she quickened her pace until she was running as fast as she could through the marsh. By the time she made it to the creek, her doom seemed inevitable and she didn’t notice the thistle patch until she ran right through it, taking a whipping against bare legs. She cried out.

Wilhemena ran to her, scooping Aurora into her arms. “It’s okay, little one. I’ll fix

you up.” Wilhemena pulled the burrs out of Aurora’s skin. She found some bright green ribwort and chewed it into a pulp, then applied the salve onto Aurora’s leg. Later that night she would make a poultice of soaked burdock leaves to draw out any infection.

When Freya caught up to them, she crossed her arms, a smile on her lips.

“Can a muskrat eat me up?” Aurora asked.

“Nonsense,” Wilhemena said. There was no doubt about who would put such a thought in a little girl’s head. “Freya, don’t be so hateful.”

When Wilhemena turned around to lift the cauldron, Freya took the opportunity to pinch Aurora on the arm. Aurora screeched, thinking at first that the muskrat had bitten her, but it was only Freya. Crying, she knew, would invite more punishment.

Rather, she pulled out the heavy artillery. “I’ll tell Papa on you.”

“Papa will wring your neck if he hears that you’re scaring your little sister,” Wilhemena said.

“You needn’t worry about Papa,” Freya replied, a look of contempt crossing her face.

Wilhemena opened her mouth to argue but there was work to be done. “Follow me,” she said and led her sisters along the creek bed to the beach where they could find firewood.

The three girls gathered driftwood, fragments of lobster traps, boards from battered ships. Tucked behind a washed-up slab of concrete they spotted a patch of wild raspberries still clinging to thorny branches, miraculously undetected by birds. They dropped their wood and feasted on the last of the season’s berries. When they had picked the bush bare, Wilhemena broke off a few branches and bundled them up with the wood. Red raspberry was known to aid in digestion and to keep malevolent spirits at bay.

The whole excursion had taken close to an hour and in the fog and ebbing light, the line between sky and sea had all but disappeared.

* * *

When the girls returned to the ridge, their mother, Elizabeth, was preparing the lye. It was the waxing crescent of the hunter’s moon—the time to make soap. Carefully, she poured water into an ash hopper. A thin, brown trail dripped out of the bottom of the hopper and into a bucket. This was the potash lye for the soap. You could buy lye at the general store in town, you could even buy soap, but Elizabeth said the devil made work for idle hands. She made her own lye from the ashes collected in their fires. “Just like in the Old Ways,” she’d say.

The wind shifted and sent smoke in Freya’s direction. She fanned it away. Freya understood the Old Ways as something tangible, not just a time and place, but a way of being that involved herbs and stories and the potions that bound the two together.

The Old Ways meant toil.

Making their own candles and spinning their own wool were part of the Old Ways. Seasons revolved around such tasks: spring for planting, summer for picking and pickling, and then there was the fall.

Fall was for slaughtering.

Fattened pigs were slaughtered, their meat cured, their fat rendered: lard from the pigs, tallow from the cattle. The purified fat was stored in barrels for cooking throughout the year, and for making soap.

Elizabeth finished the lye, and sat her girls down, youngest to oldest, on a semicircle of tree stumps. She stoked the fire with driftwood and shagbark, watching the flames rise higher and higher, changing the substance of the wood from earth to fire. Element to element.

Damp and sticky with marsh water, the girls held their hands up to the fire to warm.

Freya opened the pocket of her apron and peeked at the frog that now sat limp and lifeless.

“You’ve worked hard today,” Elizabeth said. “We shan’t go cold this winter.” She opened a picnic basket she had brought from the house and laid out a dinner of rolls and jars of homemade jams and butter.

The girls ate while Elizabeth set up the tools for making soap. She hung the cauldron from a metal tripod over the flames and organized the supplies—salt, lavender, and the fat for rendering. Then she began the day’s Lesson.

“Who can tell me: What’s the fattest part of an animal? The belly? The buttocks? The haunches?”

Freya thought back to her father lifting the cods on the hand scales at the Derby Street Pier. She thought of the massive biceps and the sun on his skin, the sweat running down to his shirt, leaving wet marks under his armpits. “The arms,” she said, certain of her answer.

Elizabeth smiled.

Wilhemena ventured a guess. “The thighs?”

“Tummy?” asked Aurora.

“Very good, my little witches,” Elizabeth said. “Those are all correct. We use all the parts. Waste not, want not, my dear little witches. Waste not, want not.”

Elizabeth unwrapped the fat from butcher paper smeared with grease and blood. With Papa’s fillet knife, she sliced the substance into chunks and dropped a piece into the cauldron.

She handed a chunk of the substance to Freya, but Freya refused it.

“Do what must be done, Freya,” Elizabeth said.

“My turn, my turn,” Aurora said, grabbing for the gristle.

“No,” Elizabeth said, pulling it away. “This is Freya’s job.”

“Why don’t I ever get to do nothing?” Aurora whined.

“Because you are the youngest. And the most special,” Elizabeth said. This didn’t bother Wilhemena. She was old enough to know that little white lies were a mother’s way.

Elizabeth turned her attention back to Freya, her expression shifting as severely as the north wind. “You must make the best of what you’ve done. The job must be finished.”

Freya sneered. She crossed her arms. Then, slowly, she reached for the substance and dropped it in the cauldron. It entered the water with a plop and splattered bits of meat and oil onto Freya’s apron. She brushed at her apron, her face contorted in disgust.

“All of it,” Elizabeth said sternly.

Freya added the rest of the substance to the water, lump by lump.

As the water boiled, the fat melted and an oily sheen formed on the surface. Rendering was a slow process. It required heat and patience and know-how.

Eventually, Aurora grew tired. Rubbing her eyes, she crawled onto Wilhemena’s lap and fell asleep.

A bitter cold settled in as the night wore on, so Wilhemena walked Aurora back down the ridge to the house and through the kitchen where bundles of drying herbs hung from the ceiling. In the pantry, jars of tonics and extractions lined the shelves: pokeweed in wine, borage in honey, great fluffy leaves of mullein in alcohol.

She tucked Aurora into her warm feather bed and went back to the kitchen to fetch a bundle of dried rosemary. Rosemary was known to the Ellylydan women to soothe the mind and stir the memory. Wilhemena swished the rosemary over her sleeping sister and sang,

“Good night,
Sleep tight,
Wake up bright
In the morning light,
To do what’s right
With all your might.”

With her little sister sound asleep, Wilhemena left the house and walked back up the doe path in darkness toward the ridge. Melting fat overtook all the other smells of the shoal, the wet clay, the salt air, the coming winter.

All at once, Wilhemena stopped. She sensed something. Fear? Danger? She wasn’t sure. She could feel it prickling her skin the way you feel yourself falling in a dream without being able to stop. Up ahead, Freya and Elizabeth peered into the cauldron, their faces lit up by the flames. They were whispering.

It was the clandestine way in which her mother and sister now spoke that frightened Wilhemena. As far as she knew, there were no secrets in her family. They all learned the same Lessons; they all worked together and played together, ate the same meals, practiced the same spells. She tiptoed closer to the fire until she was in hearing distance.

“All the impurities sink to the bottom. All the evil is washed away,” Elizabeth said. “And we’ll take that impure water and throw it back into the swamp, to settle with the cress and hawthorns. It will sink into the sludge where the gadflies lay their eggs. All we’re left with is the purity. Tomorrow we’ll mix in the lye and make our soap. To wash away your sins. To make you magic again. To make you whole.”

“Will the soap make me pure, Mama?” Freya asked.

“The soap will hide what you don’t want others to see. The soap will cast glamour over the eye. Do you know what glamour is, Freya?”

“No.”

“Glamour is an enchantment. It’s a way of making people see things that aren’t so.”

“Like a lie?”

“Not exactly a lie.”

“A tall tale, then?”

“More like a deception. It’s something that isn’t all the way true, and it isn’t all the way untrue. Just as the times in between times are neither past nor future. The *not times*, we call them. The *in-between time*. Dusk, dawn, midnight, new moon, full moon. These are the not times when doors to the other worlds are open, and when the magic is most potent. These are the times when you must become whole.”

“Aren’t I whole all the time, Mama?”

“We are all made up of darkness and light. Your darkness is more powerful. You are out of balance. You must transform from the dark to the light. Do you understand?”

Freya wiggled her heel into the moist ground. “I reckon so.”

“Always remember this: There is no greater magic than to transform one thing into another.”

“I understand,” said Freya.

Elizabeth stood to gather more wood. Wilhemena got up from her hiding spot and joined Freya at the fire.

She wanted to ask what the conversation was about. Why had Mama taught Freya about glamour and not her? And why was it a secret? As her mind tackled the questions, Wilhemena noticed a bulge in the pocket of Freya’s apron.

“What have you got in your pocket?”

“Nothing,” Freya said.

“I can see you got something in there.”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“Freya, you show me what you’ve got hiding in there right now, or I’ll give you a spanking myself before Mama does.”

Freya was about to argue, when Wilhemena reached into the pocket, as quick as a flash, and pulled the dead pickerel frog out.

“Hey, that’s mine,” Freya said.

“How long has this frog been dead?”

“It’s not dead.”

“Is so.”

“Is not.”

Wilhemena held it out by its motionless front legs to prove her point.

“You shouldn’t kill innocent creatures, Freya. It’s wasteful. Now go put this frog in the icebox so we can use it for bait. Waste not, want not.” She tossed the frog to her sister.

Freya thought a moment, her anger veiled behind calm eyes. Then she tossed the frog back. “*You* go put it in the icebox. You’re the one wants to keep it so bad.”

Wilhemena wrapped the frog in a leaf and carried it back down the doe path to the house, where she climbed the splintered steps to the porch. She lifted the top of the icebox, which was filled, as always, with packages of meat wrapped in butcher paper. She put the frog on top of a package and lowered the lid. Something caught her eye. She opened the lid again.

There was a hand poking out of a package at the bottom. She was sure it was a hand. The hand of a man. The wedding band glistening in the hazy moonlight.

CHAPTER 2

Birds of feather flock together,
And so will pigs and swine;
Rats and mice will have their choice,
And so will I have mine.

Monrovia, Massachusetts • 2015

Sophie is begging me to take her to the petting zoo to see the baby pigs. Pigs are pink and pink is absolutely, positively her most favorite color in the whole wide world. As if I need to be reminded.

I brush the black tangle of curls from her face and kiss her forehead. “In a few minutes,” I lie. I could be honest and say it’ll be a couple hours, but time is inconsequential to a three-year-old. There is only NOW.

“Pleeeeeeeaaaasse,” she whines. “Piggies.”

“As soon as I’m done. I promise.” For now, I’ve been volunteered. Everyone has to do her part, you know.

Kevin lifts Sophie onto his shoulders and grips her ankles by their pink ruffled socks. Suddenly she’s the tallest person on earth and she forgets all about the pigs. “Let’s meet up at the tractor rides,” he says to me, and then to her, “Whaddya say, Sophie?” Right as she answers he bounces up and down, which turns her voice into a comical version of itself. This delights her. “More,” she says. Kevin bounces as she sings “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” her vowels tumbling in somersaults. She breaks into hysterics. So easy for dads to play the hero.

I grab the bag with the just-in-case diapers, the wipes, the sippy cups, the Band-Aids, the all-purpose marjoram-and-black-walnut lotion, the emergency stash of Goldfish (which I put in my pocket for easy access), the favorite fleece blanket with the orange bunny rabbits. I help Henry gather the entire Justice League off the minivan floor and persuade him to only bring one along. Superman wins.

I give Gillian a ten-dollar bill to spend any way she sees fit, both of us pretending it’s not a bribe to endure a Sunday outing with her family. Her attitude lately is grim bordering on hostile, primarily because she’s “like, the only person on earth whose cruel, awful parents haven’t given her a phone yet.” But I can relate. I know a thing or two about being twelve and disappointed by family.

Henry, his six-year-old legs knowing no speed other than FAST, sprints ahead, eyes turned upward on his miniature superhero who flies through the sky to battle

villains and save the weaklings.

“Slow down, buddy,” I yell after him, but he doesn’t pay attention to me or to the bed of chrysanthemums that he tramples through, oblivious as always to his surroundings.

Petals fly. Stems are flattened. I run over to survey the damage and determine whether or not parental action is required. That’s when I notice that the flowers are planted into the shape of a raven, Monrovia’s school mascot. Purple mums for the feathers (flattened wing, thanks to Henry), yellow mums for the eye, orange impatiens for the beak. Flowering kale for the talons.

“They’ve gone all out this year,” I say to my family when they catch up with me, but no one seems to hear. “Gillian, do you see the raven?”

“Lame,” is all Gillian has to say about it. “I’m going to go find Breanna.”

She takes off to suffer in solidarity with her BFF as the rest of us walk down the Town Green and along the waterfront, its dogwoods and giant oaks bursting with red and yellow, their vibrancy matched by the blood-red roses, still in bloom, that line the boardwalk. The colors appear even brighter against the solid canvas of gray-shingled Federalists that skirt the park. The houses are new, but made to look old thanks to Monrovia’s strict zoning laws. Kevin worked on many of them, hanging Sheetrock, tiling bathrooms, helping to conceal their real ages behind wavy glass windows, period gaslight lampposts, and foundations made of antique brick.

The people milling around the Green are the opposite: old made to look young due to countless hours at the gym and thousands of dollars at the beauty salons and Dr. Yu’s Botox Clinic.

At the soccer fields a small armada of white banners flap in the breeze, announcing the Harvest Festival: PROUDLY SPONSORED BY THE MONROVIA PTO, MONROVIA SCHOOLS RANKED #1 IN STATE, GO RAVENS! A gust of wind races up the field, whipping the COMMUNITY FIRST banner upside down. Erin Hastings, the town arborist, unfurls it. The wind keeps batting at the banners, and Erin runs madly between them, pulling at corners and straightening, no platitude out of place.

“See you at the tractor rides,” I say as Kevin heads into the festival.

“You bet,” he says. He leans down to kiss me, but the bill of his Bet Your Bass Bait & Tackle cap jabs me in the forehead. He and the kids make a beeline for the snack tent with its sugar-free candied apples, faux cotton candy, hummus wraps, and organic cider. If there’s a crystal of real sugar to be found, Kevin will find it. Dad the Hero.

I turn in the direction of the games, past the bottle ring toss with giant tigers (stuffed with organic bamboo fiber) for prizes, past the duck-race pond and the dunking booth where Mrs. Honeycut, the first-grade teacher, is telling her students to take their best shot. On the makeshift stage, girls from Monrovia School of Irish Step Dance perform a jig to a row of mothers who pantomime smiles and stage directions to them.

At the end of the brick path, a dozen prams are lined up, their crisp blue canvas covers all identical except for the embroidered names. Madison. Tatum. Butterbean. Thousand-dollar prams and it’s hard to tell whether they’re for babies or Pomeranians.

The wind pushes one of the prams onto the grass, leaving two sharp tracks in the perfect green sod. A mother carrying her baby like a kangaroo in a chest harness emerges out of nowhere at full tilt. The baby bobbles along with her, smiling at the

sudden momentum, the rush of wind in his face. She pushes the stroller back in line and snaps down the brake. Our eyes meet and she gives me an apologetic look, as though I caught her in the act of breaking the pram parking rules and defiling public property. I want to say, *I don't care if your stroller ruins the grass. It's just grass.* But of course I don't. I return her look with one all the moms give each other when we meet on the playground, or in line at the supermarket. It's a look that says, *I understand you. I know your life is an unending to-do list of field trips and registration deadlines, soccer practices, diaper changes, playdates—a domino game of a million little details.*

When I get to my station, the bobbing-for-apples barrel, I'm already late and there's a mob of kids waiting for the game to start. I herd them into single file. A kid in the back inches his way toward to the front, his belly sticking out of the bottom of his Boston Red Sox sweatshirt. When I bend down to put the apples in the bucket, he creeps ahead of a freckled-nosed kid in front.

Bryson Proctor. He's in my son's first-grade class, and I happen to know he's a little scoundrel.

There's one in every class. You can always count on Bryson to make a scene. Last year at the Christmas pageant he grabbed the Baby Jesus out of the manger, tucked it under his arm, and ran across the stage like he was making a touchdown as the whole congregation sang "Silent Night." The parents tried to pretend like nothing had happened, but you can't let a thing like that go by; this was kidnapping Baby Jesus. This was sacrilege.

Luckily, they decided to use a doll last year for the Baby Jesus instead of a real baby like they usually do. Rosie O'Shea, who is perpetually pregnant and never short of babies, is always happy to volunteer one for the role of the Divine. Part of me thinks she just does it for the night of free babysitting.

Bryson worms his way to the front of the line and looks me square in the eye. "What do I get if I win?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's the prize?"

"The prize is an apple. You get an apple. That's the whole point."

"That sucks."

"Then don't play."

He ignores me and dunks his head into the barrel. Apples scatter on the surface. After a few seconds, he comes up for air, absent of apple, water dripping from his chin. When he thinks I'm not looking, he slips a hand into the water.

"No hands," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because that's cheating."

"So?"

"So, the point of the game is to pick an apple up with your teeth."

"That's too hard."

"It's supposed to be hard. But you get three tries," I say in my saccharin-sweet-this-is-how-moms-talk-to-children voice.

"This is stupid."

"That's not very nice," I say.

“That’s not very nice,” he mimics.

I look around for Bryson’s mother, Lilith Proctor. She’s manning the pie-eating table, completely unaware of what a menace her son is being. Lilith is thin. Supermodel thin. Around her it’s a storm of gaiety as she jokes with other moms and passes out slices of honey-lemon custard. She’s probably never eaten a slice of pie in her life.

“Do you want to try again?” I ask Bryson, trying with all my might to rise above the insidious insults of a six-year-old.

“Yeah, whatever.” He dunks his head in the water and again comes up empty. He rubs his eyes dry and splatters water down his sweatshirt.

“Better luck next time,” I say. I have to be nice. You’re not allowed to discipline someone else’s child. That’s a rule, just like “No white after Labor Day” or “Be always on time; too late is a crime.”

“I’m going again,” he says. His head goes under, along with his hand, the little cheat.

I look at my watch. Another hour and my shift will be over and I will have filled my quota of volunteer work for the fall. I guess it beats getting stuck on cleanup crew at the Boo Bash or decoration committee for the Winter Wonderland Festival. I can endure one more hour.

My mind leaps to all the things I need to get done today: grab milk on the way home, buy supplies for Gillian’s science fair project, reschedule Kevin’s dentist appointment, give the dog a bath, dig Henry’s winter clothes out of the attic, sew a button on Sophie’s favorite coat.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. The September sun warms my face. In the distance I hear the whirl of the cotton candy machine spinning its faux-sugar floss, the squawk of seagulls vying for scraps of gluten-free kettle corn.

And without any warning, my mother’s voice roars into my head, louder than all the other thoughts and noise rambling around inside.

*Onion’s skin very thin,
Mild winter coming in.
Onion’s skin thick and tough,
Coming winter cold and rough.*

An image of an onion pops into my mind’s eye. I can see its peeling outer skin, the dried patch of roots on the bottom. I can smell its sweetness. I can taste its pungent bite, and feel its weight in my hand, almost identical in size to an apple.

I open my eyes. And this time when Bryson lifts his head, he has a big yellow onion in his choppers.

At first I don’t think I’ve seen it right. I blink hard, look again. It’s still there.

The kid with the freckles sees it, too, because his eyes are like saucers and he instinctively curls his nose up at it.

Not again, I think to myself.

For a moment, Bryson is jubilant. He points to the prize in his mouth and does a little victory dance. But when the taste of the onion reaches his tongue, he spits it out. He rubs his tongue with the sleeves of his sweatshirt and spits and spits and spits. The

offending onion rolls to my feet and Bryson looks at me for some sort of explanation. I just shrug.

Bryson turns beet red. His hands clench into fists and he marches off toward the pie-eating table. “Mmmooooommmmm!”

When Lilith Proctor sees him, she pats his head and shoves an organic cider doughnut in his hand. He keeps pointing over at me and scrunching his face into a raisin, no doubt explaining how he got bamboozled at the bobbing-for-apples station. Lilith glances at me, then at Bryson, then at me again.

And now Lilith is walking my way.

I want to run.

She’s wearing tall leather boots and a pink cashmere cape, THE pink cashmere cape that announces her elite status in the ranks of Monrovia housewives. She wears a spray tan like protective coloration against the shame of being unpolished and drab. If I’d known I was going to have to face off against Lilith Proctor today, I would have at least brushed my hair.

“Allison, there seems to be a problem with the game. Can you tell me what’s going on?”—the affect in her voice honed on golf courses and yacht clubs.

“Nothing,” I say.

Hands on hips, she continues, “Bryson tells me there was an onion in the apple-bobbing barrel. Isn’t that right, sweetie?” Bryson scowls at me from under his mother’s arm.

My cheeks are on fire. “Is he sure it was an onion?”

“Do you think he doesn’t know the difference?”

“I’m sure he’s very bright,” I say.

“He was selected to carry the school banner at the Harvest Parade this afternoon.”

“What an honor,” I say.

“You can understand why I don’t want anything to spoil the day for him,” Lilith says.

“Of course.”

“I just want to make sure everything’s running smoothly for all the children,” Lilith says. The wind catches her cape and it flutters behind her, like a superhero on a mission, the Amazing Hovering Mother. “Everyone has to do her part, you know.”

“I know.” I know. I know. I know.

“If you need an extra hand, I’m sure I can find another PTO member to help you with your shift.”

“I can handle it. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for the onion. Maybe he got confused.”

“I hardly think so,” Lilith says.

“It was an onion. It was right there!” Bryson says and points toward my feet.

I look down at the same time as Bryson. But all that’s there is a juicy red apple with a substantial bite missing. I pick it up. I hand it to Lilith.

She turns it over in her hand and sniffs (looking for evidence of onions and wrongdoing). “Well. It certainly looks like an apple. Honey, maybe you *were* confused,” she says to Bryson.

“But I *swear* it was an onion!” Bryson says.

She eyes me suspiciously then says, “Perhaps you should ask the children if they

like apples before letting them take a turn. Not all children like apples, Allison.”

I suppress the smile that creeps up my face. “You’re right. Good luck at the parade, Bryson. Break a leg.”

Bryson kicks the apple toward a group of girls doing cartwheels and then runs off to the potato sack races.

That was a close one.

I don’t need anyone knowing that I can turn apples into onions.

Not here. Not in Monrovia.

I just want to fit in. I just want to be like the other moms and wives and worry about normal things like cellulite and the mortgage. I want to believe that in a place like this, I can be safe, and family can be forever. Even wrapped in the family-friendly, politically correct, health-conscious, yoga-minded, upper-middle-class bubble of Monrovia, it’s still impossible for me to forget what it’s like to sleep in a borrowed bed, wondering if my real family will ever come and claim me.

The next kid steps up, the sweet little boy with curly hair and freckles. He’s missing his two front teeth, which is going to make it hard to bite an apple. He hesitates. “’Scuse me, ma’am. There any more onions in there?” he asks.

“Nope, only apples,” I assure him. “I promise.”

* * *

My name is Allison Darling. I’m thirty-eight years old. I’m a wife, and mother of three. I live at 13 Purchase Street in Monrovia, Massachusetts. I’m a member of the PTO, an animal lover, a proficient baker of chocolate chip cookies.

I’m also a witch.

Until now, I thought my magic was gone. When I was very little, I could go to bed at night and dream about something, say, chocolate raspberry cupcakes, and when I awoke in the morning a dozen chocolate raspberry cupcakes would appear where there had only been a handful of turnips. Or, one time, when I was about Sophie’s age, I lay awake listening to the cantankerous croak of the bullfrogs in the marsh, pressing my hands over my ears, willing it to stop. Later on the croaking was replaced by the musical lilt of a thousand crickets. I’m sure it was my doing. When else have crickets ever overtaken bullfrogs in the amphibious warfare of the marsh?

My mother said it was a special talent. “What you think, so it becomes,” she’d say. She said I was gifted.

Then again, my mother was committed to psychiatric hospital when I was seven.

That’s when I learned that I was not normal. None of the foster families found my talent as special as my mother did. Every time a thunderstorm appeared out of blue skies in the middle of my temper tantrums, eyebrows were raised, fingers were pointed, and I was pawned off on a new family.

I quickly came to understand that being different was shameful. (Seven-year-old girls are quick studies on the rules of social acceptability.) Kids in each of my new schools snickering behind their Judy Blume books at me, whispering, “Look, she doesn’t even shave her legs.” I remember closing my eyes in the middle of the cafeteria, alone at a table, trying to imagine myself as an ant so I could crawl away unnoticed.

But I didn't become an ant. By the time I hit middle school, I had lost my ability to make things happen just by imagining them.

Until now.

* * *

Children come and go through the line, taking their three tries. For fear of transfiguring another apple, I step back and try to keep my mind off the fruit.

After a little while Rosie O'Shea rushes up to me, a crying baby in a sling around her shoulder, a toddler walking beside her eating a caramel apple, his face and hands covered in goo. Rosie has THE pink cashmere cape, too, but hers is smeared in baby drool.

"Sorry I'm late," Rosie huffs. "I was working the smoothie bar and we ran out of soy milk, so I had to dash to Nelson's General Store to grab some, then there was a problem with the raffle that I had to take care of."

"Don't worry about it," I say. And even though I don't want to stay, she looks so haggard, I tell her I don't mind taking another shift at the apple bobbing.

"I wouldn't dream of it. I look forward to this every year," she says cheerily. She looks around at the milling families. "Besides, how would it look if the president of the PTO shirked her duties on Apple Harvest?"

"No one has to know," I whisper.

It's almost imperceptible, but a dark cloud crosses her face.

"I need to take my shift," Rosie says at last. She turns to me and says, a little less brightly than before, "Go treat yourself to some sweet potato fritters. Or something from the organic dairy tent."

I nod.

"And Allison. Try to keep onions out of the apple-bobbing tank next time, okay?" She doesn't say it in a condescending tone the way Lilith did, but in a voice you use when admitting that your kid has lice or cavities, and that makes me even more nervous.

I force a smile. "Word travels fast in Monrovia," I say, wondering if there's something else she wants to tell me.

* * *

Kevin is waiting for me at the tractor rides. "How was the apple bobbing?" he says.

"Fine," I answer. "Are you ready to leave?" I want to get out of here as fast as possible.

"Already?" Kevin says. "Feels like we just got here."

Sophie runs toward me, arms in pick-me-up position, hay from the tractor ride poking at sharp angles out of her hair, her jacket, her pants. "We see the pigs now?"

"Oh right." I almost forgot about the pigs. I think about how quickly children lose their gift for finding delight in such simple things and I know that there's no way I'm going to disappoint her by not seeing the pigs.

"Henry wants to take another spin on the tractor. I'll stay with him, you take Sophie," Kevin says, always ready with a solution.

"And then we'll go home," I say, firmly.

“Sure,” Kevin says, his mind drifting to thoughts of the Patriots game and a plate of beef chili nachos awaiting him this afternoon.

At the petting zoo, Sophie runs directly for the lambs, which are so sweet and cuddly they could even turn Kevin into a vegetarian. She nestles her face into one of them as I watch from the fence.

Just as I think about how beautiful these moments of motherhood can be, I feel a hand on my shoulder and a sharp prickling sensation up the back of my neck.

I turn around. Astrid Laveau is standing behind me, her red hair shimmering in the sun, her skin so beautiful it glows. As usual, she’s perfectly decked out in pearls, Jackie-O sunglasses, designer jeans, heels, and THE pink cashmere cape. Me, in purple Crocs I got three years ago for Mother’s Day.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Astrid says, her voice like silk.

I massage my neck, which throbs. “Was I signed up for another volunteer post?” I ask.

“Just wanted to know how things were at the apple bobbing.” Her eyes are unreadable behind her Jackie-Os.

Two sheep have walked over to the fence and stand in front of me. I reach into my pocket and pull out some Goldfish. I toss them over the fence, to the right so that the sheep will chase after them, but they don’t budge.

“Fine. Things were fine.” I shoo the sheep with a hand.

Astrid looks at the sheep, then at me. “No problems, I assume.”

“None. You’ve really outdone yourself this year. Everything is amazing.”

“I can’t take all the credit. My company may have cosponsored the event, but you know what I say...”

“Everyone has to do her part.”

“Exactly.”

Two of the geese in the petting zoo waddle up to me and honk. I throw some Goldfish behind them, but they push their beaks up against my leg and honk some more. Astrid cocks her head at the sight.

“Speaking of my company, I assume you’re all set for Wednesday night. For the Glamour Party,” she says.

“Absolutely,” I say, kicking at the geese, wishing the animals would leave me alone, wishing Astrid would leave me alone. I’m sure she’s already heard about the Bryson Proctor incident.

“Excellent,” Astrid says, the apples of her cheeks glowing pink. “We don’t trust just anyone to host our home-shopping parties. We’re highly selective. Sell enough and you might even earn one of these.” She lifts the sides of her pink cape like a bat.

Sophie runs up to me holding a huge, docile rabbit against her chest, pleased as punch, her face bright red with eczema.

“I’ll be sure to have Miranda bring some Honey Skin Bath Bubbler,” Astrid says, noticing Sophie’s inflamed skin. “It’s one hundred percent natural, made with local honey. Helps children build up their immunity to allergies.”

Clearly, I’ve forgotten about Sophie’s sensitive skin, letting her pet all these animals. Feeling exposed yet again for my sloppy parenting, I dig in my bag and pull out the all-purpose marjoram-and-black-walnut lotion, made by Glamour Soap. I squeeze out a dollop and am rubbing it into Sophie’s cheek when the rabbit suddenly