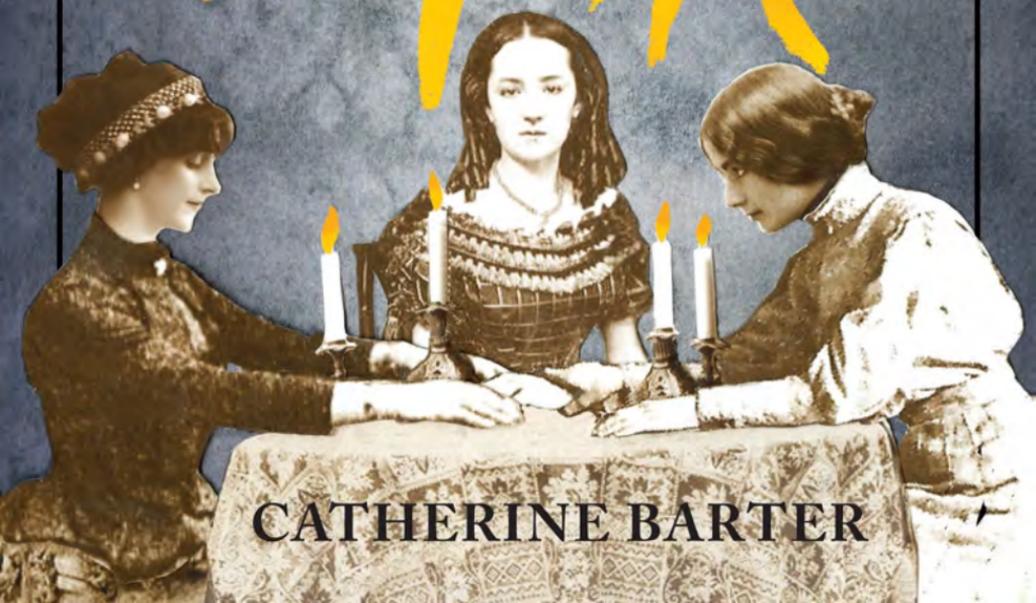




THE
SPIRIT-TALKING
FOX SISTERS
AWAIT YOU

WE PLAYED WITH FIRE



CATHERINE BARTER

WE
PLAYED
WITH FIRE

Also by Catherine Barter

Troublemakers

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realistic main character'
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so much on family and politics'
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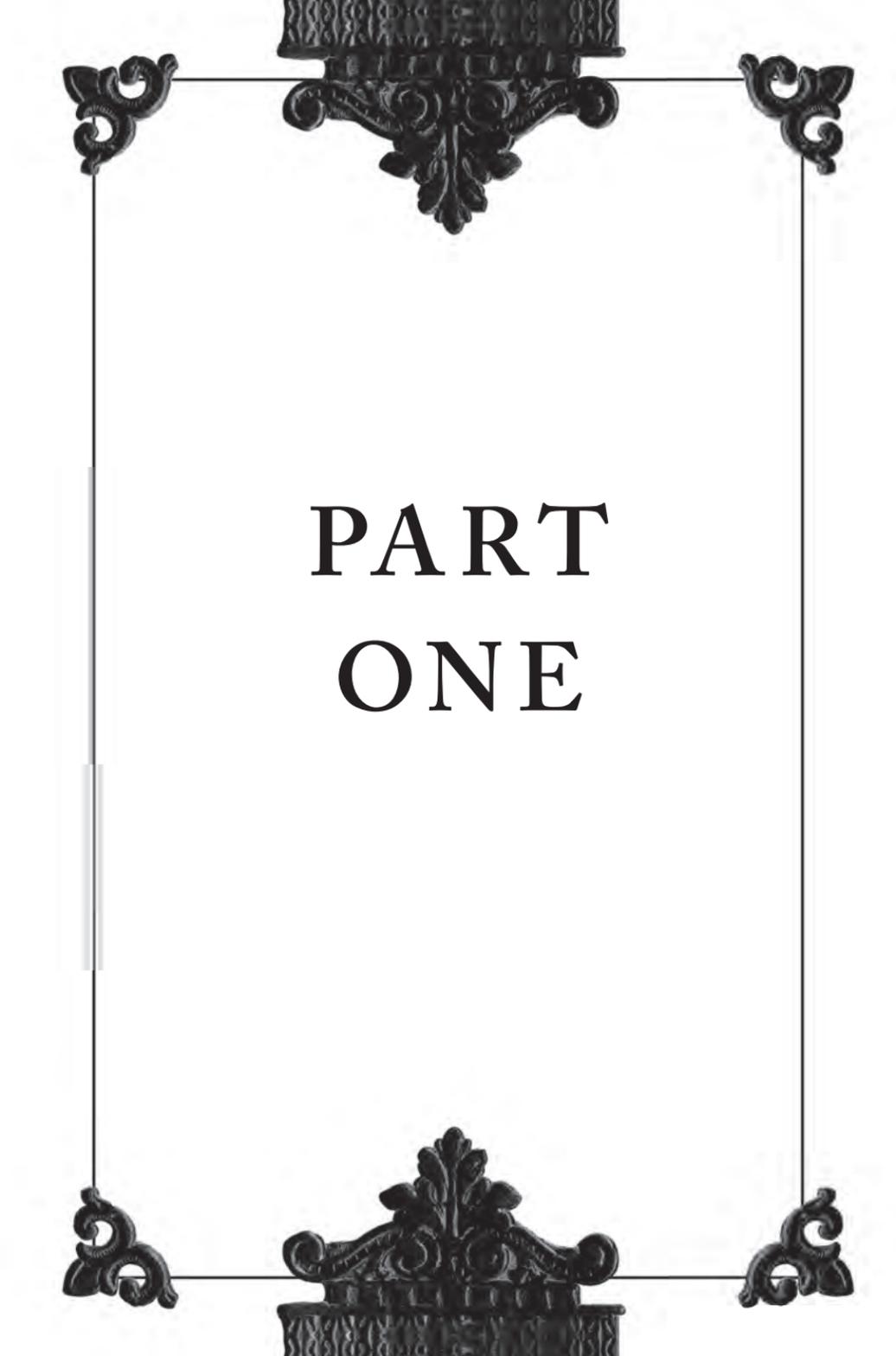
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PART
ONE

ONE

HYDESVILLE

MARCH 1848

They weren't allowed in the cellar.

It was dark and earthy, directly below the kitchen, with a dirt floor, and if you stood still down there, ignoring the sounds from the rooms above, you could feel some kind of movement beneath the ground. Their older brother David had said that it was probably water, running below the house.

Maggie and Kate had left the door at the top of the stairs open. It threw a rectangle of natural light on to the floor.

Kate was holding something. She was standing in the middle of the cellar, her skirt trailing on the ground, getting filthy. There was a narrow slit of light between the ceiling and the far wall. It was bitterly cold.

'What's this?' she said.

'Let me see.'

Kate came forward, holding something out, dirty and yellow, the length of her forearm.

Maggie took it for a moment, felt its weight, and then handed it back. 'It's a human bone.'

Kate frowned, turned it over, looked at Maggie and then back at the bone.

Upstairs, Maggie could hear her mother humming softly as she sat sewing in the parlor.

'A what?' Kate said.

'I think it's a leg bone.'

Some girls might have dropped it then, but Kate held it

up in the light and squinted. 'Whose is it?' A typical Katie question, that nobody could possibly know the answer to.

'Where did you find it?'

'Over there.' She pointed to a cluttered corner of the basement. Rotting bits of wood and an old bucket. 'On the ground.'

Maggie had no idea what it was, except that it was a bone for certain. And something about it was suggestive of some part of a human leg, perhaps. She'd seen sketches of the human skeleton before.

'I know whose it could be,' Maggie said. 'There was a woman who was murdered out here. They hanged her from one of the trees in the woods.'

She could see the war in Kate's head, the way her brow creased: her instinct that she was being lied to against her desire to believe it.

'When?'

'A few years ago. Fifty years ago.'

Kate waited.

'They hanged her because they thought she was possessed by the Devil.'

'They didn't.'

'They did. And when she was dead they cut her down, and they cut her body into parts and scattered them all over the woods so that if the Devil tried to bring her back, she'd be in pieces.'

Upstairs, their mother stopped humming. In a few moments she would probably call their names.

'They didn't,' said Kate.

'But they say that the Devil is still searching for all the pieces, and if you find one of the bones, the Devil will find you too.'

Kate blinked slowly. 'I don't believe you. And you're not supposed to tell stories like that anymore.'

'It's not a story. It's true.'

'I don't believe you,' Kate said again, but Maggie could see that she did.

It was possible to believe and not believe something at the same time. It was easy.

TWO

David visited on Thursday afternoon, with Calvin. Maggie heard them coming, and waited on the porch. Pale sunlight was scattered through the trees, and the ground was hard, snow cleared on the main paths but lingering in shaded places where the sun hadn't reached. As David and Calvin climbed down from the horses, they were flushed with cold, breath clouding in front of their faces. Calvin gave her a lazy salute as he walked up to the house. Maggie hit his arm gently as he passed her.

They brought a basket of apples that David had picked up from a neighboring farm, and David presented it to their mother with a kiss. Then they gathered in the kitchen while their mother made coffee and their father examined the apples silently.

'We can't stay long,' said David. 'Have to pick up some supplies from the Taylors' before it gets dark.'

'Can I come back with you?' Maggie said.

Kate elbowed in. 'Can *we* come back with you?'

'I'm not sure—' David began.

'Absolutely not,' their mother said. 'I have a hundred things I need help with.'

'Can I help you with anything, Mrs. Fox?' said Calvin. He'd hung his coat over the back of his chair and pushed his shirtsleeves up to his elbows as if it was a summer day.

'You have your work, Calvin,' she said, with an affectionate

smile. She gave Maggie a pointed look. 'And my dear *daughters* need to learn their household duties.'

Calvin still called their mother *Mrs. Fox*, although Maggie wondered why he didn't call her Margaret or even Ma by now. He'd lived with them since he was a boy, fourteen or fifteen, since his parents died. Mr. and Mrs. Fox had taken him in so he could help with the farm work, but he was close in age to David and Leah and so he'd gotten mixed in with them, the oldest Fox children. He'd become part of the family, even if his light hair and blue eyes made him different. Maggie and Kate were just little girls then, but Calvin had been their favourite. He was kinder than Leah, and more fun than David.

When their father had eventually abandoned farming for blacksmithing, and they had moved from town to town while he looked for good work, Calvin came with them.

He'd lived with David the last few months, working on the farm, and Maggie was brutally jealous of them – two men, grown, with work to do, proper work, outdoor work, laughing together. If she'd been born a boy she might be out there too by now.

'All come on Saturday,' said David. 'Snow might've cleared by then.'

'There'll be floods if it has,' their father said dourly. He had begun peeling an apple with a knife. 'These are half rotten,' he added.

'If you want apples in March you'll have to take what you can get,' said David.

'They're lovely,' their mother said. 'Thank you, boys.'

'We saw Mary Redfield on our way here,' said David.

'Did you, how nice,' said their mother, without conviction.

'She was asking about the girls.' David looked at Maggie. 'Said she saw them running around the woods yesterday.'

'We weren't running around,' said Maggie.

'We weren't running around,' Kate echoed.

'What were you doing?'

'Picking flowers,' said Maggie, which seemed like the kind of thing Mary Redfield would expect girls to do.

'Find many?' David raised an eyebrow. It had been a brutal winter and spring had not yet stirred any wild flowers out of the dirt.

'Plenty.'

'Oh, why shouldn't they run around in the woods if they want to?' said their mother.

'Maybe they should be careful, is all,' said David. 'You don't know these woods. You could get lost.'

'Somebody was murdered out there,' said Kate. 'Fifty years ago. They thought she was possessed by the Devil so they hanged her from one of the trees. And then they cut her body—'

'Enough of that,' said their father, putting down the apple and the knife.

'—into pieces, so that—' She hesitated, glanced at Maggie. 'So that – if the Devil found her again – something happens. I can't remember.'

'They cut her into pieces so that the Devil couldn't bring her back to life,' Maggie said.

Scarcely before she'd finished the sentence, their father pounded the table with his fist. '*Enough*,' he said.

A short, cool silence. Sunlight dappled the table.

'Well, of course,' said Calvin lightly. 'You would, wouldn't you?'

'And they say the Devil is still looking for all the pieces,' Maggie said, 'so if you find one of the dead woman's bones—'

Their father stood. His chair scraped the floor. He raised

a hand as if to strike somebody, but then pressed it, shaking, to his forehead instead. *'Enough.'* His face was a knot of anger.

Maggie folded her arms, felt her heart fluttering. She had gone too far.

David cleared his throat. 'It's not the Devil you need to be afraid of out here,' he said. 'It's animals. Wild animals. That's what'll tear you to pieces.'

Their father turned away, to the window. 'There's nothing in these woods.'

Nobody replied.

'You shouldn't tell these stories, Maggie,' said their mother quietly.

David and Calvin exchanged a glance. 'I'm passing along the message that Mary Redfield saw the girls running around the woods, is all,' said David. 'She seemed to think you'd want to know.'

'I don't need to be told what my own children are doing, thank you.'

'I'll be sure to let her know next time.'

'I'm not a child,' Maggie said.

She followed David out to the wagon as Calvin said his goodbyes. 'I could come back to the farm with you,' she said. 'I could. I could help with the children—' David and Maria had so many children she could hardly remember them all sometimes. It had been five, but was it six, now? David wasn't yet thirty but already looked permanently exhausted.

'Come on Saturday.' He adjusted a saddle strap as the horse huffed in the cold and stamped a foot. 'You heard what Ma said. There's work for you to do here.' He looked at her. 'And stop telling stories.'

She scowled at him, and wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. 'You don't know what it's like here, David.'

'Plenty worse places you could be.'

'I doubt that.'

'Just do as you're told, Maggie,' he said. 'You won't be here long. Just try and – try and be *quiet*.' He bent to remove a branch that was lodged beneath the front wheel of the wagon. Then he broke it in half over his knee. The crack echoed in the quiet and sent a startled bird flying from a tree.

Kate was pale today. She'd said that she'd woken up with a headache. They both got headaches sometimes, sickening ones. When Maggie came back into the kitchen, Kate was leaning into their mother's side, asking if she could go and lie down.

Fragile as a spring flower, Maggie thought. One of those phrases she'd tried to come up with in Rochester when the teacher tried to get her to write poetry, which Maggie was no good at. *Pale as the moon*. *Cold as* – something else.

As Kate slipped out of the room, Maggie picked up her shawl and started to wind it around her shoulders. But when she went to fasten it, the silver pin was missing. A silver bird pin that David's wife had given her at Christmas.

She searched the kitchen, the front room, the little room downstairs where her parents slept, the bedroom upstairs, furious with herself at the thought of having lost it. She hardly owned anything nice.

And then she was at the door to the cellar. Their father had gone out again, their mother wasn't paying attention, so she crept back down the steps.

The sound and light and smell of the cellar was as abruptly different as entering a church. Cool and damp and dark.

Their mother had been afraid of the cellar ever since they came here.

She couldn't see her bird pin. She couldn't see the leg bone either, or whatever it was.

If you find one of the bones then the Devil will find you too.

The story already had the quality of a memory. She could see it all – the hanging woman, the creak of the tree, a man with an ax. She could imagine it.

Her imagination. Such a dangerous thing, supposedly. A kind of disease.

Perhaps it wasn't a human leg bone, anyway. Perhaps it was from a horse, or something else, a wolf, a cat. Perhaps it had never been there at all.

Down here alone, she felt something different in the air from before, a sense that the shape of the cellar had shifted a little, that something had moved. There was a pressure around her head, a warning that a headache of her own was on its way. A dark shape at the edge of her vision; a feeling like something was knocking on her brain, wanting to be let in.

Maggie wasn't sure how old the house was. It felt old. It felt used and lived-in, and sometimes it felt as though it was full of scratches and whispers, sounds that made their mother jump and press her hand over her heart.

They would all say it was the wind.

The bird pin wasn't there. Perhaps Kate had stolen it, hidden it under the bedclothes. A thoughtless little crime, just to have something to do. Maggie went back up the stairs, closed the door and locked it. She heard a muffled sound on the other side, like footsteps, following her up.

THREE

At night, in bed, was when she most missed Rochester. The silence of the woods was terrible. Then the dark of the house as the lamps were put out. It was a kind of darkness you would never find in a real place, a city. On nights when there was no moon, their bedroom lost all its shape; there were no corners or walls, only darkness. No sound but the howl of wind and the creak of snow on the roof.

In Rochester there was noise all night. Arguments on the sidewalk outside and stagecoaches rumbling by. There were lights that never stopped burning. And the house had been always full of visitors, guests who came from all over New York State and even further. Political meetings in the kitchen, and shared suppers that lasted for hours. Maggie had never seen such mixtures of people talking in one room. Men and women and young and old and black and white, sharing bread and potatoes and corned beef and talking through the night until it got light outside.

The Foxes – John and Margaret – had only been renting the two front rooms upstairs and didn't mean to stay there long. Amy and Isaac Post said they were welcome as long as they wished, but John repeated every day that he had a piece of land in Arcadia near his son, and would soon be building his own house there, and leaving. In the evening he would close his door against the noise and commotion of the Posts' house, and read his Bible privately.

But Kate and Maggie stayed up as late as they could, and Amy was glad to have them there.

Amy. She wore her hair pinned back, with a serious expression, but there were laughter lines around her eyes. When you spoke she gave you her complete attention. She woke before anybody else, and went to bed later, and everyone marveled at her energy, but what Maggie loved was her stillness. The way she listened. The way she stood in a busy room, and let it move around her.

Amy *wanted* them there. She wanted them to learn. Amy and Isaac were Quakers, and Amy invited her to Quaker meetings where all kinds of ideas were discussed, things Maggie had never thought about before. She gave Maggie books and pamphlets and would ask about them a few days later, hoping that she would have read them.

Maggie tried. She read Frederick Douglass's book, that everybody talked about, and other books about ending slavery, and articles and letters that Amy clipped from *The Liberator*, the abolitionist paper. She read pamphlets about women's rights, and the notes Amy was making in preparation for a convention in the summer, where they would talk about the condition of women and whether they ought to be allowed to vote.

Maggie strained her eyes in the candlelight trying to understand it all, until she was exhausted and disappointed in herself for not knowing enough about anything. Then she would sit with Kate in the corner of the kitchen and watch everybody talk. Kate kept falling in love with all the young men who visited, but Maggie was more interested in the women. Which ones spoke and which ones didn't.

There were two sisters, Elizabeth and Della Reid, from one of the most prominent black families in Rochester, and

they often visited. Della was twenty-five or twenty-six, but Elizabeth was younger, maybe not much older than Maggie even, but distant and elegant, and Maggie hardly spoke with her. One evening she saw Elizabeth argue with James Crane, the only time she had ever seen a black woman argue with a white man.

James Crane was important in the Rochester antislavery movement, Amy told her, and raised a lot of money, and helped build new schools and spread progressive ideas. But Elizabeth argued with him as if he was no different than anybody, no different than a woman, until he left the house in a rage.

He had organized an abolition meeting at the Unitarian hall, but no black women were allowed to speak; in fact, it was almost all white people, and Elizabeth objected.

‘If we have a hundred voices on a hundred issues we won’t accomplish anything,’ he said. Maggie remembered that. And Elizabeth saying, ‘The only voice you want to hear on *any* issue is your own.’ And Mr. Crane slamming the door as he left.

‘He’d like our race to be free from slavery so long as he doesn’t have to talk to any of us,’ Elizabeth said afterward, to hesitant laughter. Her voice was perfectly calm and steady, although Maggie could see that she had her hands pressed flat against the table as if to keep them from shaking.

Della left Rochester. She went away and gave lectures, and even went to Europe. But Elizabeth stayed. She was part of a black church a few blocks from Amy and Isaac’s house, the African Methodist Church, a new one-story wooden church where they helped shelter runaway slaves. Maggie wasn’t supposed to know that.

She found herself writing their names sometimes, when

she was practicing her handwriting. *Elizabeth Reid. Della Reid.*

They were women Maggie thought she could learn from. She could make herself better, braver and more principled. Any day, she thought, she might have something to say herself, and she might find the courage to say it.

That was Rochester. Anyway, it had all been ruined.

It got dark after David and Calvin left. Night crept into the house from the corners. Their father read his Bible and got ready for bed. Their mother sat sewing for a little while, then followed him. It was barely nine o'clock. There was nothing left to do. Maggie sat by the stove for a while, until her father came out of his room to tell her the light was disturbing him, and to go to bed.

She took the candle from the kitchen table up to their room, where Kate was lying across the bed with her head hanging over the edge, her dark hair undone, spooling out on to the floor.

'I can't sleep,' she said.

Maggie set the candle by the bed. 'If you lie like that, all your blood will run up into your brain,' she said, 'and you'll die.'

Upside down, Kate made some sort of face at Maggie, and then bent her arms back over her head, put her hands flat on the floor, and somehow rolled herself off the bed, backward, until she was sitting on the floor, her nightdress tangled around her legs. She looked up, smiling, as if she expected applause.

Kate was twelve. She was strange. She was in a shifting place, like two people in the same body. A sweet child's face turned toward you, and then a few minutes later there would

be a turn to her mouth and she was somebody different, somebody Maggie didn't know.

There was a sudden bang on the floor from the room below, and their father's voice— 'Quiet up there!' – which startled them both, and then sent Kate into helpless floods of laughter. She got like this sometimes, at bedtime. Maggie used to laugh with her, but lately she only felt a flat, heavy sensation at night, a desire to be asleep and not have to think anymore.

She dressed for bed in the flickering light, and then got beneath the covers, thrusting her bare feet under the extra blankets that they'd piled on top of the sheets. Kate crawled in next to her and blew out the candle.

She waited until Kate had settled, and then kicked her.

'Ow.'

'I can't find my silver bird pin,' Maggie whispered. 'Did you take it?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'I didn't take it.'

'I don't believe you.'

'I didn't.'

'You're a liar.'

'*You're* a liar.' Kate wriggled around on to her side and propped her head up on her hand. 'Maybe the Devil took it when he came to find you.'

Maggie rolled away from her and faced the wall. 'He'll be coming to find *you*, Katie. It was you that found the bone.'

'I'll send him to you.'

'I'll send him back.'

Kate was silent for a moment, then whispered, 'He could be coming up the stairs right now.'

They shouldn't talk like this. Maggie twisted on to her back. 'Katie—'

'If you say the Devil's name in the darkness, he hears you.'

'Then don't say his name,' Maggie said.

'I already did.'

She couldn't help herself. 'Then he'll come for you.'

'I'll send him—'

'I think he's here already.' She made her body rigid, grabbed Kate's arm. '*He's under the bed, he's reaching up—*'

'No.' Katie's voice rose to a frantic whisper. She had always been scared of things under the bed. 'That's not fun. Stop it.'

'He's reaching out from underneath right now with his claws—'

'No!' Katie scrambled to sit up and shoved Maggie so hard that the bed rocked, and knocked against the table, where Kate had left an apple. It fell to the floor and hit the bare floorboards and rolled.

In the quiet of the house at night they may as well have hit two pans together.

When it finally stopped rolling, the house was silent again for a tiny moment, before they both heard the thud of feet downstairs – somebody getting out of bed – a shuffling, the downstairs bedroom door opening, and somebody thumping upstairs. Maggie half fell from the bed to pick up the apple and shove it under the covers. Katie grabbed Maggie's arm, and Maggie grabbed hers, so that when their father flung open the door they were clinging to each other, eyes wide, ready for the flare of his temper. Their mother was a few steps behind him, holding a lamp.

'It's night-time,' he began, 'and I will not have—'

'It wasn't us,' said Maggie, without thinking, then

regretted it. It would only remind him of her sobbing on the Posts' kitchen floor. *It wasn't me, I didn't do it—*

But Kate obediently echoed, 'It wasn't.'

His face was hard. 'This is my house,' he said.

'John!' said their mother. 'John, the girls! They're terrified. Look at them.'

Given this unexpected cue, they both rearranged their faces into expressions of terror.

In a trembling voice, Katie said, 'We heard it too. It came from the attic.'

Maggie didn't look at her. 'Yes. The attic.'

Even their father, Maggie suspected, was fearful about the attic. They had never lived in a house with an attic before. Nobody had been up there since the day they arrived.

She could see him struggling to understand. 'What's this, now?'

'Ma,' Kate said, almost tearful. 'Something was pounding on the ceiling.'

That was too much. Maggie squeezed Kate's arm harder.

'We felt the bed shaking!' said Kate, and Maggie tightened her grip so that she'd almost certainly leave a bruise.

'My God,' said their mother. 'John.'

'I won't have this,' said John. 'I won't – everybody will go to sleep.'

'They're frightened,' said their mother, and he narrowed his eyes and said, 'They're not.'

When their parents had returned to bed, their father's anger left a trace, like smoke, and they waited for it to fade before they spoke again. The wind moaned outside.

Eventually Kate said softly, 'Will you look under the bed?'

‘No.’

‘Please.’

‘Why?’

‘I just have a bad feeling.’

‘You have a bad feeling from all the lies you’ve been telling.’

‘I heard something.’

‘The Devil isn’t under the bed,’ Maggie said. Then, with daring: ‘The Devil isn’t real.’

Katie paused, and then whispered, ‘Of course he is.’

So Maggie looked. She ought to act like a big sister and be reassuring. She hung her head over the edge of the bed, and let her eyes adjust to the gloom. There was an old wooden trunk, and a pair of shoes, but nothing else, only the dusty surface of the floor and the crooked line where it met the wall.

FOUR

The Devil isn't real.

It wasn't quite what Amy had said. Maggie had been toiling over some dreary bit of writing about sin and temptation, plucking a few scraps from the Bible and throwing in a few half-formed ideas about Satan that she thought her teacher would like.

Amy liked to help her with schoolwork. Not in the dismal, correct-your-spelling way that their father helped. She liked to talk about ideas. She would say things like: 'That's what your teacher thinks. What do *you* think?' Or, more revolutionary: 'That's what the Bible says. What would *you* say?'

She looked at Maggie's essay, smiled, and said, 'Is this how you see the Devil?'

'I suppose.'

'With hooves and a tail?'

'That's what he looks like in pictures.'

'Seducing us into sin?'

'I suppose.'

'I wonder if sin could be a little more complicated than that.'

'Should I change it?'

'When we're thinking about sin, I wonder if we should worry less about a man with a pitchfork, and more about ourselves and the way we choose to live in the world.'

Amy often began sentences like this, with *I wonder*, when she spoke to Maggie. As if she didn't want to tell Maggie what to think – she only wanted to shake an idea gently, to see if it would come loose.

Maggie had begun to change while she was in Rochester. It wasn't just the energy of the city, or the meetings, or Amy's books and pamphlets. It was something inside her. Some kind of movement, some new, dangerous kind of energy in her body.

She would feel it start in her joints, a sparkling, painful feeling, then spread through her body and up her throat. Till she'd press her face to the pillow at night sometimes, wanting to scream, or she'd bite the back of her hand, or she'd feel that she could throw a chair across the room, and she'd feel it rising in her, the strength to do it. *I hate you*, she'd think, about nobody in particular, just an all-over sensation, rising up and then pouring out of her.

Then she'd think: *I am a bad person*. And turn the hate back in on herself. She'd stand out on the porch of Amy and Isaac's house till her father dragged her back inside.

And sometimes she'd think she might cry, at the sight of a bird, or the sound of rain on leaves, or with a sudden powerful love for her mother, sitting at the table with a book of some kind, one of Amy's. And then she tipped over into fury again, at all of them, for being themselves, for not knowing her, but imagining they did. And then calm; she'd lean into her mother's side, look at whatever she was reading, hold a candle closer to the page so her mother could see it.

And then Amy would ask her: 'Is this how you see the Devil?'

Not a man with a pitchfork, perhaps, but she couldn't help feeling he was a man of some kind, or that he took a

man's form. Perhaps just an ordinary man, a thin white man, wearing a suit. That was how she began to think of him. She drew a picture, in the corner of her writing book, a man in formal clothes with a long face and flat, glinting eyes like coins. Then the picture frightened her, and she scribbled it out.

The next day, her father was nailing a board across the cellar door. Maggie halted at the kitchen table. His spine was bent as he held the board in place with his shoulder, hit a nail cleanly five times into the top left corner. He held another nail in his mouth, took it out and started carefully on the lower corner.

'What are you doing?'

He straightened up, rapped his knuckles against the board as if to test its stability, and gave her a brief look that suggested he thought this was a foolish question.

Maggie revised it. 'Why are you doing that?'

'Your mother,' he said.

'She's down there?'

'She's hearing things. Thinks there's an animal. Something coming up the stairs.'

'There's nothing down there. We were both down—' She stopped herself. 'I mean – *is* there anything down there?'

He frowned. 'If there is then it's not getting out.'

She felt a thrum of anxiety at the thought of the door being sealed permanently. What if her bird pin was still down there? She might have missed it last time.

And besides, it was a forbidden place. A shame to lose it.

'But if something gets trapped, won't it die?'

'It will.'

This fact clearly meant little to him, so Maggie said tentatively, 'Won't it smell?'

‘It’ll likely freeze in this temperature.’

‘But when it gets warm.’

‘We’ll be leaving when it gets warm.’

‘Oh.’

‘Not too long now, I expect.’

He smiled at her. He was happy when he thought about the house they were building, out near David’s farm. Kept promising he’d be back to work on it within weeks, they’d be moving before summer. It would be the first house they lived in that was their own.

He looked back at the door. ‘In the meantime, that should put a stop to it.’

Maggie looked at the sealed-off door. The board was scratched and dented, a piece of wood he had salvaged from somewhere. ‘I hear things too,’ she said. ‘Down there. And Katie too. This house—’

‘None of that.’ He turned away and bent down to place his hammer back in the bag of tools at his feet. ‘This is a fine house.’

He didn’t want to be here anymore than the rest of them, she knew, but it had been his decision to come, and he was determined to defend it. Defend it with blunt tools and planks of wood, if necessary.

‘Won’t the next family who live here be angry that you’ve boarded up the cellar?’

‘That’s up to them.’

‘Couldn’t you have asked us what *we* thought?’

The kitchen door rattled slightly at a gust of wind. Outside, Maggie could hear the door to the small barn swinging back and forth, slamming shut and creaking open again. It was built on the north corner of the house where the wind was the worst.

‘What who thought?’

‘Me. Katie.’

‘Your thoughts aren’t required. On this or any other matter.’

That sparkling feeling in her joints was back: it sent tingles to her hands, made them shake. ‘We live here too,’ she said.

‘You live with me, under my roof. You all do.’

‘But—’

‘That’s enough, Margareta.’ He didn’t look at her, but began wrapping a leather cord back around his tool bag. ‘I won’t have every decision I make questioned. Do you understand?’

There was a faint tremor in the air, as there always was when he gave a command: a moment of doubt as to whether it would be obeyed.

Kate was still in bed. She claimed to have another headache. Maggie came into the room, sat next to her and placed a hand on her forehead. Kate pushed her away. She was very pale, and blue under the eyes. But she often looked that way. They were all pale, the Fox sisters, Kate, Maggie and Leah too. Sickly-looking. Amazing they had all survived. Some women’s faces reddened as they got older, with sun or exertion, but Leah was over thirty now and pale as ever.

‘Go away,’ Kate said.

Maggie looked out of the small window at a gray sky and the sharp branches of the tree nearest the house. It was an old birch that had been nearly torn from its roots during a storm and now leaned sideways. It was surely, their mother said, going to fall and kill one of them soon.

‘He’s boarded up the cellar,’ she said.

Kate scrunched her face. 'Why?'

'He said Mother was hearing things down there.'

'There is something down there.'

Something prickled across Maggie's skin. Kate's eyes were blank and glassy, like the surface of dark water. 'There's not.'

'There is. We shouldn't have gone down there.'

'Well, we did,' said Maggie.

'We shouldn't have.'

'But we did.'

'I don't want to go down there again.'

'Just as well, because now you can't.'

With a lot of effort, Kate wriggled her way out of a tangle of bedsheets and sat up. 'What did she hear?'

'She thought something was coming up the stairs.'

'Did he believe her?'

'Of course he didn't. He thinks we're all just silly women. Silly girls. Hearing things.'

Kate blinked. Her braids had come loose and hair curled at her forehead.

Kate was easily turned against their father. His lack of interest in Maggie's opinions was nothing compared to his lack of interest in Kate's. She may as well have been garbling nonsense for all the attention their father ever paid to her. In Rochester, her tearful proclamations that Maggie was telling the truth, she had to be – they hadn't even warranted their father's anger. He simply ignored her.

'He doesn't know anything,' Kate said.

Maggie stood up and went to the window, pressed her forehead against the glass. She felt a passing urge to pick up a lamp or a candlestick or something, and smash it, and then smash all the windows in the house and run out into the

forest screaming. That would give Mary Redfield something to talk about.

'I'm so tired of him,' Kate said.

Tired. Yes, there was something exhausting about him – talking to him was like throwing yourself against a wall over and over, hoping it would break. But tiredness had its own strange energy. When they were little girls they used to try and stay up all night together, just to see what it was like. Deep into the night, long past midnight, they'd tip out of exhaustion into a wild, stupid wakefulness.

They had played all kinds of games, as children, as if they found trouble irresistible. Hiding under the bed. Impressions of their teachers. Moving their father's tools so that he couldn't find them. It was satisfying and thrilling and frightening to break his silence into anger, to see what he might do.

Maggie scuffed her foot against one of the uneven wooden floorboards. They were all uneven, she saw, when she looked carefully, and the floor sloped downwards to the east corner, where a tiny gap between the floor and the wall showed a sliver of light from the kitchen. It must be all the crooked floors and loose boards that filled the house with those strange sounds, creaks and bangs that came from nowhere.

What would it take to scare him?

What would it take? What would he look like, if he was afraid? What would he look like if he believed her?

She heard him cough, downstairs, and a chair scrape the kitchen floor. He would sit and look at the cellar door now, considering his work.

Why stop at the cellar? Why not board up the windows, their bedrooms, the front door? A closed-up space could be controlled.

She thought of that apple, hitting the floor and rolling. Such a simple thing.

‘We could play a game,’ she said. ‘Which one of us can make him think there’s a ghost in the house.’

‘That would be fun.’ Kate lifted her head. A little color came back to her cheeks. ‘Let’s do that.’

Their voices were lowered. She couldn’t hear him, downstairs, but she could sense him there, sitting at the table, breathing.

‘Whichever one of us can do it—’

‘No,’ said Kate. ‘I want to do it together. I don’t want to do it on my own.’

She didn’t want to get caught on her own, get in trouble on her own.

‘Fine.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Kate, smiling. ‘Fun.’

‘Good.’ Maggie looked back out at the jagged outlines of the branches against the sky. ‘I have some ideas.’

If she could make him only *doubt* himself for a moment.

Their mother went to bed first that night, and they lay upstairs together in the dark waiting for their father to leave the kitchen, where he sat, as always, reading his Bible.

When they heard him go to the bedroom, they waited until he would be in bed. They waited until the dark and quiet had settled completely.

Then Kate darted barefoot across the floor to the other side of the room and struck a candlestick five times against a loose floorboard. They’d tried it earlier, while nobody was paying attention. A strike on this particular floorboard produced a strange effect, a hollow sound that seemed to come from the kitchen.

At Kate's fifth strike, Maggie leaned over the bed and tapped on a floorboard beneath it with a candlestick of her own. Another five taps: and when she finished, Kate had already flown back across the room and into bed.

Neither of their parents could have been asleep, because the thud of footsteps and murmur of voices downstairs was almost instant. They both closed their eyes, leveled out their breathing, and when they heard the door open and their father whisper back downstairs, 'They're both asleep,' they didn't move. Maggie could feel him still standing there, his body in the doorway, the dark shape of him. She could imagine his expression, the set of his jaw.

When he went back downstairs, Kate pressed her hand over her mouth to stop herself laughing, and then whispered, 'Let's do it again,' but Maggie told her no. Not yet. It was worth a little patience.

Downstairs, their parents' voices rose and fell, in and out of earshot.

'— kind of *bird* could possibly—'

'— an old house, plenty of ways—'

'— the girls are only—'

'— the girls might even have—'

'— the girls' room, we should—'

The girls, the girls, the girls.

The next day their father came into their room with his tools, prized up floorboards, moved their bed, knocked on the walls with a hammer. They pretended to have heard nothing.

'You should sleep downstairs with us tonight,' their mother told them, fretting, but enjoying herself a little too. 'It was pounding on the walls. *Pounding.*'

'Pounding is hardly the word I'd use,' said their father.

'You ought to look in the attic.'

Their father paused, inspected the hammer he was holding. 'I will, then.'

'You ought to.'

'I said I will.'

'I'm going to ask the Weekmans about this,' said their mother.

'Perhaps if the Weekmans had done a few repairs from time to time on this place,' he said, 'we might be able to have a peaceful night's sleep.'

Their mother tutted. 'Oh, James Weekman can't tell a hammer from his own—'

'Enough,' said their father. 'There's no need to talk to anybody about a few noises in an old house.'

'I'll talk to whomever I please.'

John looked at his wife, and then his daughters. Maggie met his eye and held it. 'Let's not get the girls excited,' he said.

The next night, they tried ten strikes each, hitting the floorboards harder this time. The following night, a door slammed and a chair knocked over. Early in the morning, a slower, softer tap on the floor, with a piece of wood they'd found in the forest.

The following night, they lay in bed and wondered whether to do it again, the candlesticks perhaps.

'Just three knocks,' Kate said. 'That's all. I'll do three knocks on the corner floorboard, just before they go to sleep, and then I'll come to bed and they'll never—'

'I don't know.' Maggie rolled over on her side, looked at the outline of Kate's face in the moonlight. 'If we just do

the same thing over and over it gets dull. An actual ghost wouldn't do the same thing over and over, would it?'

'It would. That's what ghosts *do*. They walk the same path over and over, in the house where they died or something.'

The room was cold. Maggie had been in bed long enough that her body was warm, beneath the piles of sheets and blankets, but her head was cold, her scalp, the tip of her nose. It was tempting to go downstairs and stoke the fire, sit in front of it for a while. 'Who told you that?' she said to Kate.

'I don't know. I thought everybody knew. You should know, after you saw—'

'No.' Maggie rolled on to her back and looked at the ceiling, where she could see the shifting shadows of the trees outside. 'Not tonight. It gets dull.'

Kate complained a bit but it had never taken much for her to fall asleep once she closed her eyes, and soon Maggie was listening to the slow, even sound of her breathing.

She was half asleep herself when she heard, or thought she heard, three gentle taps in the corner of the room, and she mumbled, 'Katie, stop,' before she reached out and found her sister's body, still and warm and sleeping. Something was wrong, she thought, something didn't make sense, but her mind was already closing and she couldn't hold on to the thought, until it came back to her when she woke in the morning and her eyes fell on the empty corner. She had woken earlier than anybody else, and the house was silent. Kate was asleep. But she did not feel alone.

'Hello?' she whispered into the quiet room, but of course there was no reply.

She slipped out of bed, the cold floor painful against her bare feet, and stood at the top of the stairs. Nobody awake. The house was all hers. She tapped her fingers gently against

the door frame, and then pressed her ear to the wood, half expecting a response.

It was like holding a seashell to your ear, but instead of hearing the sea, she heard the house: creaks and groans deep in the frame, cold timbers rattling in the wind. The weight of the snow and the tiny creatures in the earth beneath them.

It occurred to her that it had always felt alive, this house, or something close to alive. Felt as if it was listening to them. She tapped her fingers again, then heard footsteps downstairs, coughing. Her father was awake.

He had taken to roaming the house each morning, pressing his own ear to the walls and looking beneath Maggie and Kate's bed. Behind their closet. He was quiet, listening to Maggie and Kate and their mother catalog each strange noise and movement excitedly. Quiet with the anger of a man for whom something had slipped beyond his control.