



*The
Lost Book
of Salem*

A FAMILY SECRET
A CENTURIES-OLD CURSE

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The Lost Book of Salem
by
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PART I

The Key and Bible

Prologue

Marblehead, Massachusetts
Late December
1681

Peter Petford slipped a long wooden spoon into the simmering iron pot of lentils hanging over the fire and tried to push the worry from his stomach. He edged his low stool nearer to the hearth and leaned forward, one elbow propped on his knee, breathing in the aroma of stewed split peas mixed with burning apple wood. The smell comforted him a little, persuading him that this night was a normal night, and his belly released an impatient gurgle as he withdrew the spoon to see if the peas were soft enough to eat. Not a reflective man, Peter assured himself that nothing was amiss with his stomach that a bowlful of peas would not cure. *Yon woman comes enow, too*, he thought, face grim. He had never had use for cunning folk, but Goody Oliver had insisted. Said this woman's tinctures cured most anything. Heard she'd conjured to find a lost child once. Peter grunted to himself. He would try her. Just the once.

From the corner of the narrow, dark room issued a tiny whimper, and Peter looked up from the steaming pot, furrows of anxiety deepening between his eyes. He nudged one of the fire logs with a poker, loosing a

crackling flutter of sparks and a grey column of fresh smoke, then drew himself up from the stool.

‘Martha?’ he whispered. ‘Ye awake?’

No further sound issued from the shadows, and Peter moved softly towards the bed where his daughter had lain for the better part of a week. He pulled aside the heavy woollen curtain that hung from the bedposts, and lowered himself on to the edge of the lumpy feather mattress, careful not to jostle it. The lapping light of the fire brushed over the woollen blankets, illuminating a wan little face framed by tangles of flax-coloured hair. The eyes in the face were half open, but glassy and unseeing. Peter smoothed the hair where it lay scattered across the hard bolster. The tiny girl exhaled a faint sigh.

‘Stew’s nearly done,’ he said. ‘I’ll fetch ye some.’

As he ladled the hot food into a shallow earthenware trencher, Peter felt a flame of impotent anger rise in his chest. He gritted his teeth against the feeling, but it lingered behind his breastbone, making his breathing fast and shallow. *What knew he of ministering to the girl*, he thought. *Every tincture he tried only made her poorly*. The last word she had spoken was some three days earlier, when she had cried out in the night for Sarah.

He settled again on the side of the bed and spooned a little of the warm beans into the child’s mouth. She slurped it weakly, a thin brown stream slipping down the corner of her mouth to her chin. Peter wiped it away with his thumb, still blackened from the soot of the kitchen fire. Thinking about Sarah always made his chest tight in this way.

He gazed down at the little girl in his bed, watching

closely as her eyelids closed. Since she fell ill, he had been sleeping on the wide-planked pine floor, on mildewed straw pallets. The bed was warmer, nearer the hearth, and draped in woollen hangings that had been carried all the way over from East Anglia by his father. A dark frown crossed Peter's face. Illness, he knew, was a sign of the Lord's ill favour. *Whatsoever happen to the girl is God's will*, he reasoned. So to be angry at her suffering must be sinful, for that is to be angry at God. Sarah would have urged him to pray for the salvation of Martha's soul, that she might be redeemed. But Peter was more accustomed to putting his mind to farming problems than godly ones. Perhaps he was not as good as Sarah had been. He could not fathom what sin Martha could have committed in her five years to bring this fit upon her, and in his prayers he caught himself demanding an explanation. He did not ask for his daughter's redemption. He just begged for her to be well.

Confronting this spectacle of his own selfishness filled Peter with anger and shame.

He worked his fingers together, watching her sleeping face.

'There are certain sins that make us devils,' the minister had said at meeting that week. Peter pinched the bridge of his nose, squinting his eyes together as he tried to remember what they were.

To be a liar or murderer, that was one. Martha had once been caught hiding a filthy kitten in the family's cupboard, and when questioned by Sarah had claimed no knowledge of any kittens. But that could hardly be a lie the way the minister meant it.

To be a slanderer or accuser of the godly was another. To be a tempter to sin. To be an opposer of godliness. To feel envy. To be a drunkard. To be proud.

Peter gazed down on the fragile, almost transparent skin of his daughter's cheeks. He clenched one of his hands into a tight fist, pressing its knuckles into the palm of his other hand. How could God visit such torments upon an innocent? Why had He turned away His face from him?

Perhaps it was not Martha's soul that was in danger. Perhaps the child was being punished for Peter's own prideful lack of faith.

As this unwelcome fear bloomed in his chest, Peter heard muddy hoofbeats approach down the lane and come to a stop outside his house. Muffled voices, a man's and a young woman's, exchanged words, saddle leather creaked, and then a dull splash. *That'll be Jonas Oliver with you woman*, thought Peter. He rose from the bedside just as a light knuckle rapped on his door.

On his stoop, draped in a hooded woollen cloak glistening from the evening's fog, stood a young woman with a soft, open face. She carried a small leather bag in her hands, and her face was framed by a crisp white coif that belied the miles-long journey she had had. Behind her in the shadows stood the familiar bulk of Jonas Oliver, fellow yeoman and Peter's neighbour.

'Goodman Petford?' announced the young woman, looking quickly up into Peter's face. He nodded. She flashed him an encouraging smile as she briskly flapped the water droplets off her cloak and pulled it over her head. She hung the cloak on a peg by the door hinge,

smoothed her rumpled skirts with both hands, and then hurried across the stark little room and knelt by the girl in the bed. Peter watched her for a moment, then turned to Jonas, who stood in the doorway similarly wet, blowing his nose mightily into a handkerchief.

‘Dismal night,’ said Peter by way of welcome. Jonas grunted in reply. He tucked the handkerchief back up his sleeve and stamped his feet to loosen the mud from his boots, but he did not venture into the house.

‘Some victual before ye go?’ Peter offered, rubbing a hand absentmindedly across the back of his head. He was not sure if he wanted Jonas to accept his offer. The company would distract him, but his neighbour was even less inclined to idle chatter than he was. Sarah had always allowed that a wagon could crush Jonas Oliver’s foot and he would not so much as grimace.

‘Goody Oliver’ll be waiting.’ Jonas declined with a shrug. He glanced across the room to where the young woman perched, whispering to the girl in the bed. At her knees sat an attentive, dishevelled-looking little dog, some dingy colour between brown and tan, surrounded by muddy paw marks on the floor planking. Vaguely Jonas wondered where she might have carried the animal on their long ride; he had not noticed it, and her leather bag seemed hardly big enough. *Mangy cur*, he thought. *It must belong to little Marther.*

‘Come by upon the morn then,’ said Peter. Jonas nodded, touched the brim of his heavy felt hat, and withdrew into the night.

Peter settled again on the low stool near the dying hearth fire, the cooling trencher of stew on the table at his

elbow. Propping his chin on his fist, he watched the strange young woman stroke his daughter's forehead with a white hand and heard the soft, indistinct murmur of her voice. He knew that he should feel relieved that she was there. She was widely spoken of in the village. He grasped at these thoughts, wringing what little assurance he could from them. Still, as his eyes started to blur with fatigue and worry, and his head grew heavy on his arm, the vision of his tiny daughter huddled in the bed, darkness pressing in around her, filled him with dread.

I

Cambridge, Massachusetts
Late April
1991

‘It would appear that we are nearly out of time,’ announced Manning Chilton, one glittering eye fixed on the thin pocket watch chained to his vest. He surveyed the other four faces that ringed the conference table. ‘But we are not quite done with you yet, Miss Goodwin.’

Whenever Chilton felt especially pleased with himself his voice became ironic, bantering: an incongruous affectation that grated on his graduate students. Connie picked up on the shift in his voice immediately, and she knew then that her qualifying examination was finally drawing to a close. A sour hint of nausea bubbled up in the back of her throat, and she swallowed. The other professors on the panel smiled back at Chilton.

Through her anxiety, Connie Goodwin felt a flutter of satisfaction tingle somewhere in her chest, and she permitted herself to bask in the sensation for a moment. If she had to guess, she would have said that the exam was going adequately. But only just. A nervous smile fought to break across her face, but she quickly smothered it under the smooth, neutral expression of detached competence that she knew was more appropriate for a young woman

in her position. This expression did not come naturally to her, and the resulting effort rather comically resembled someone who had just bitten into a lime.

There was still one more question coming. One more chance to be ruined. Connie shifted in her seat. In the months leading up to the qualifying exam, her weight had dropped, inexorably at first, and then precipitously. Now, her bones lacked cushioning against the chair, and her Fair Isle sweater hung loosely on her shoulders. Her cheeks, usually flush and pink, formed hollows under her sloping cheekbones, making her pale-blue eyes appear larger in her face, framed by soft, short brown lashes. Dark-brown brows swept down over her eyes, screwed together in thought. The smooth planes of her cheeks and high forehead were an icy white, dotted by the shadowy hint of freckles, and offset by a sharp chin and well-made, if rather prominent, nose. Her lips, thin and pale pink, grew paler as she pressed them together. One hand crept up to finger the tail end of a long, bark-coloured braid that draped over her shoulder, but she caught herself and returned the hand to her lap.

‘I can’t believe how *calm* you are,’ her thesis student, a lanky young undergraduate whose junior paper Connie was advising, had exclaimed over lunch earlier that afternoon. ‘How can you even eat! If I were about to sit for my orals I would probably be nauseous.’

‘Thomas, you get nauseous over our tutorial meetings,’ Connie had reminded him gently, though it was true that her appetite had almost vanished. If pressed, she would have admitted that she enjoyed intimidating Thomas a little. Connie justified this minor cruelty on the grounds

that an intimidated thesis student would be more likely to meet the deadlines that she set for him, might put more effort into his work. But if she were honest, she might acknowledge a less honourable motive. His eyes shone upon her in trepidation, and she felt bolstered by his regard.

‘Besides, it’s not as big a deal as people make it out to be. You just have to be prepared to answer any question on any of the four hundred books you’ve read so far in graduate school. And if you get it wrong, they kick you out,’ she said. He fixed her with a look of barely contained awe while she stirred the salad around her plate with the tines of her fork. She smiled at him. Part of learning to be a professor was learning to behave in a professorial way. Thomas could not be permitted to see how afraid she was.

The oral qualifying exam is usually a turning point – a moment when the professoriate welcomes you as a colleague rather than as an apprentice. More infamously, the exam can also be the scene of spectacular intellectual carnage, as the unprepared student – conscious but powerless – witnesses her own professional vivisection. Either way, she will be forced to face her inadequacies. Connie was a careful, precise young woman, not given to leaving anything to chance. As she pushed the half-eaten salad across the table away from the worshipful Thomas, she told herself that she was as prepared as it was possible to be. In her mind ranged whole shelvesful of books, annotated and bookmarked, and as she set aside her luncheon fork she roamed through the shelves of her acquired knowledge, quizzing herself. Where are

the economics books? Here. And the books on costume and material culture? One shelf over, on the left.

A shadow of doubt crossed her face. But what if she was not prepared enough? The first wave of nausea contorted her stomach, and her face grew paler. Every year, it happened to someone. For years she had heard the whispers about students who had cracked, run sobbing from the examination room, their academic careers over before they had even begun. There were really only two ways that this could go. Her performance today could, in theory, raise her significantly in departmental regard. Today, if she handled herself correctly, she would be one step closer to becoming a professor.

Or she would look in the shelves in her mind and find them empty. All the history books would be gone, replaced only with a lone binder full of the plots of late-1970s television programmes and Pearl Jam lyrics. She would open her mouth, and nothing would come out. And then she would pack her bags to go home.

Now, four hours after her lunch with Thomas, she sat on one side of a polished mahogany conference table in a dark, intimate corner of the Harvard University history building, having already endured three solid hours of questioning from a panel of four professors. She was tired but had a heightened awareness from adrenaline. Connie recalled feeling the same strange blending of exhaustion and intellectual intensity when she pulled an all-nighter to polish off the last chapter of her senior thesis in college. All her sensations felt ratcheted up, intrusive, and distracting – the scratch of the masking tape with which she had provisionally hemmed her wool

skirt, the gummy taste in her mouth of sugared coffee. Her attention took in all of these details, and then set them aside. Only the fear remained, unwilling to be put away. She settled her eyes on Chilton, waiting.

The modest room in which she sat featured little more than the pitted conference table and chairs facing a blackboard stained pale grey with the ghostly scrawls of decades of chalk. Behind her hung a forgotten portrait of a white-whiskered old man, blackened by time and inattention. At the end of the room a grimy window stood shuttered against the late-afternoon sunlight. Motes of dust hung almost motionless in the lone sunbeam that lit the room, illuminating the committee's faces from nose to chin. Outside, she heard young voices, undergraduates, hail one another and disappear, laughing.

'Miss Goodwin,' Chilton said, 'we have one final question for you this afternoon.' Her advisor leaned into the empty centre of the table, sunlight moving over his silver hair, stirring the dust into a glittering corona around his head. On the table before him, his fingers sat knotted as carefully as the club tie at his throat. 'Would you please provide the committee with a succinct and considered history of witchcraft in North America?'

The historian of American colonial life, as Connie was, must be able to illustrate long-dead social, religious and economic systems down to the slightest detail. In preparation for this exam, she had memorized, among other things, methods for preparing salt pork, the fertilizer uses of bat guano, and the trade relationship between molasses and rum. Her roommate, Liz Dowers, a tall,

bespectacled student of medieval Latin, blonde and slender, one evening had come upon her studying the Bible verses that commonly appeared in eighteenth-century needlepoint samplers. 'We have finally specialized beyond our ability to understand each other,' Liz had remarked, shaking her head.

For a last question, Connie knew Chilton had really given her a gift. Some of the earlier ones had been considerably more arcane, even beyond what she had been led to expect. Describe the production, if she would, of the different major exports of the British colonies in the 1840s, from the Caribbean to Ireland. Did she think that history was more a story of great men acting in extraordinary circumstances, or of large populations of people constrained by economic systems? What role, would she say, did codfish play in the growth of New England trade and society? As her gaze roamed around the conference table to each professor's face in turn, she saw mirrored in their watching eyes the special area of expertise in which each had made his or her name.

Connie's advisor, Professor Manning Chilton, looked at her across the table, a small smile flickering at the edge of his mouth. His face, framed with a fringe of brushed-cotton hair, was seamed at the forehead, creased by folds from the corners of his nose to his jaw, which the low sunlight in the conference room cast in deep shadow. He carried himself with the easy assurance of the vanishing breed of academic who has spent his entire career under Harvard's crimson umbrella, and whose specialization in the history of science in the colonial period was fuelled by a childhood spent shooed away from the drawing room

of a stately Back Bay townhouse. He bore the distinguished smell of old leather and pipe tobacco, masculine but not yet grandfatherly.

Chilton was flanked around the conference table by three other respected American historians. To his left perched Professor Larry Smith, a tight-lipped, tweedy junior faculty economist, who asked knotty questions designed to indicate to the senior professors his authority and expertise. Connie glowered at him; twice already in the exam he had asked questions probing where he knew her knowledge was scanty. She supposed that that was his job, but he was the only committee member likely to recall his own qualifying exams. Perhaps she had been naïve to expect solidarity from him; oftentimes professors of his rank were the hardest on grad students, as if to make up for the indignities they felt themselves to have suffered. He smiled back at her primly.

To Chilton's right, her chin on one jewelled hand, sat Professor Janine Silva, a blowsy, recently tenured gender-studies specialist who favoured topics in feminist theory. Her hair was wilder and wavier today than usual, with a burgundy sheen that was patently false. Connie enjoyed Janine's wilful denial of the Harvard aesthetic; long floral scarves were her trademark. One of Janine's favourite rants concerned Harvard's relative hostility to women academics; her interest in Connie's career sometimes bordered on the motherly, and as a result Connie consciously had to work to control the pseudo-parental transference that many students develop towards their mentors. While Chilton held more power over her career, Connie dreaded disappointing Janine the most. As if

sensing this momentary flicker of anxiety, Janine sent Connie a thumbs-up, partly concealed behind one of her arms.

Finally, to Janine's right hunched Professor Harold Beaumont, Civil War historian and staunch conservative, known for his occasional grumpy forays on to the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. Connie had never worked closely with him and had only placed him on her committee because she suspected that he would have very little personally invested in her performance. Between Janine and Chilton she thought she had enough expectations to manage. As these thoughts travelled through her mind, she felt Beaumont's dark eyes burning a tight round hole in the shoulder of her sweater.

Connie gazed down at the surface of the table and traced the outline of the initials that had been carved there, darkened by decades of waxy polish. She roamed through the filing cabinets in her brain, looking for the answer that they wanted. Where was it? She knew it was there somewhere. Was it under *W*, for 'Witchcraft'? No. Or was it listed under *G*, for 'Gender Issues'? She opened each mental drawer in turn, pulling out index cards by the handful, shuffling through them and then tossing them aside. The bubble of nausea rose again in her throat. The card was gone. She could not find it. Those whispered stories about students failing, they were going to be about *her*. She had been given the simplest question possible, and she could not produce an answer.

She was going to fail.

A haze of panic began to cloud her vision, and Connie fought to keep her breath steady. The facts were there, she

must just focus enough to see them. Facts would never abandon her. She repeated the word to herself – *facts*. But wait – she had not looked under *F*, for ‘Folk Religion, Colonial Era’. She pulled the mental drawer open, and there it was! The haze cleared. Connie straightened herself against the hard chair, and smiled.

‘Of course,’ Connie began, shoving her anxiety aside. ‘The temptation is to begin a discussion of witchcraft in New England with the Salem panic of 1692, in which nineteen townspeople were executed by hanging. But the careful historian will recognize that panic as an anomaly, and will instead want to consider the relatively mainstream position of witchcraft in colonial society at the beginning of the seventeenth century.’ Connie watched the four faces nodding around the table, planning the structure of her answer according to their responses.

‘Most cases of witchcraft occurred sporadically,’ she continued. ‘The average witch was a middle-aged woman who was isolated in the community, either economically or through lack of family, and so was lacking in social and political power. Interestingly, research into the kinds of *maleficium*’ – her tongue tangled on the Latin word, sending it out with one or two extra syllables, and she cursed inwardly for giving in to pretension – ‘which witches were usually accused of reveals how narrow the colonial world really was for average people. Whereas the modern person might assume that someone who could control nature, or stop time, or tell the future, would naturally use those powers for large-scale, dramatic change, colonial witches were usually blamed for more mundane catastrophes, such as making cows sick, or milk

go sour, or for the loss of personal property. This micro-cosmic sphere of influence makes more sense in the context of early colonial religion, in which individuals were held to be completely powerless in the face of God's omnipotence.' Connie paused for breath. She yearned to stretch but restrained herself. Not yet.

'Further,' she continued, 'the Puritans held that nothing could reliably indicate whether or not one's soul was saved – doing good works wouldn't cut it. So negative occurrences, such as a serious illness or economic reversal, were often interpreted as signs of God's disapproval. For most people, it was preferable to blame witchcraft, an explanation out of one's own control, and embodied in a woman on the margins of society, than to consider the possibility of one's own spiritual risk. In effect, witchcraft played an important role in the New England colonies – as both an explanation for things not yet elucidated by science, and as a scapegoat.'

'And the Salem panic?' prodded Professor Silva.

'The Salem witch trials have been explained in numerous ways,' Connie said. 'Some historians have argued that the trials were caused by tension between competing religious populations in Salem, the more urban port city on the one hand and the rural farm region on the other. Some have pointed to long-standing envy between family groups, with particular attention paid to the monetary demands made by an unpopular minister, Reverend Samuel Parris. And some historians have even claimed that the possessed girls were hallucinating after having eaten mouldy bread, which can cause effects similar to those of LSD. But I see it as the last gasp of Calvinist

religiosity. By the early eighteenth century, Salem had moved from being a predominantly religious community to being more diverse, more dependent on shipbuilding, fishing, and trade. The Protestant zealots who had originally settled the region were being supplanted by recent immigrants from England who were more interested in the business opportunities in the new colonies than in religion. I think that the trials were a symptom of this dynamic shift. They were also the last major outbreak of witchcraft hysteria in all of North America. In effect, the Salem panic signalled the end of an era that had had its roots in the Middle Ages.'

'A very insightful analysis,' commented Professor Chilton, still in his bemused, bantering tone. 'But haven't you overlooked one other significant interpretation?'

Connie smiled at him, the nervous grimace of an animal fending off an attacker. 'I am not sure, Professor Chilton,' she answered. He was toying with her now. Connie silently begged for time to accelerate past Chilton's teasing, to catapult her instantly to Abner's Pub, where Liz and Thomas would be waiting, and where she could finally stop talking for the day. When she was tired, Connie's words sometimes ran together, tumbling out in an order not fully under her control. As she watched Chilton's crafty smile she worried that she was reaching that level of fatigue. Her stupid blunder over *maleficium* was a hint. If only he would just let her pass . . .

Chilton leaned forward. 'Have you not considered the distinct possibility that the accused were simply *guilty* of witchcraft?' he asked. He arched his eyebrows at her, fingers pointed in a small temple on the tabletop.

She watched him for a moment. A rush of irritation, even anger, sped through her. What a preposterous question! Certainly, the participants in colonial witch trials believed that witches were real. But no contemporary scholars had ever entertained that possibility. Connie could not understand why Chilton would tease her like this. Was this just his way of reinforcing how lowly she ranked in the hierarchy of academia? No matter how ludicrous it was, she had to answer because it was Chilton doing the asking. Clearly he was too far away from his own graduate student experience to remember how dreadful this exam was. If he could remember, he would never joke with her today.

Would he?

She cleared her throat, tamping down her aggravation. Connie did not yet rank high enough in the scholarly universe to be permitted to voice her exasperation. She read not only sympathy and commiseration in Janine's narrowed eyes, but also registered her almost imperceptible nod that Connie should continue. *Jump through the hoop*, the nod said. *You and I both know that's what it is, but you have to do it anyway.*

'Well, Professor Chilton,' she began, 'none of the recent secondary-source literature that I have read considered that to be a real possibility. The only exception that I can think of is Cotton Mather. In 1705 he wrote a now-famous defence of the judgements and executions at Salem, firmly believing that the courts had acted rightly to rid the town of actual, practising witches. This was about the time that one of the judges, Samuel Sewall, published a public apology for his part in the trials. Of course,

Cotton Mather, a renowned theologian, had himself officiated at the trials. Against the wishes of his equally famous theologian father, Increase Mather, I might add, who publicly condemned the Salem trials as being based on unreliable evidence. So Cotton Mather may have argued that the witchcraft at Salem was real, and that the killing of twenty people was completely justified, but he had rather a lot invested in not being wrong. Sir.’

As Connie concluded her treatise she observed Chilton grinning mischievously at her across the table. In that moment she knew that the exam was over. Through the hoop she had gone, and now it was behind her. Of course she would have to go outside to await their official verdict. But at least she had come up with an answer. Now, there was nothing more that she could do. She felt helpless, exhausted. What little colour remained in her face ebbed, her lips fading to white.

The four professors exchanged looks in a rapid volley around their side of the table before turning their attention back to Connie.

‘Very well,’ said Professor Chilton. ‘If you would just step outside for a moment, please, Miss Goodwin, we will discuss your performance. Don’t go far.’

Withdrawing from the examination room, Connie moved through the history building shadows, her footfalls echoing off the marble floor. She settled on to an institutional lavender sofa in the central reception area, enjoying the blissful sound of quiet. She let herself sink into the cushions, twiddling the tail end of her braid under her nose like a moustache.

From inside the conference room several doors away,

she heard murmured comments, too muffled for her to distinguish who was saying what. She clicked her thumb-nails together, waiting.

The early-evening sun slanted across the floor, splashing warmth on to her lap. Across the room she glimpsed a flash of movement as a tiny mouse disappeared into the darkness behind a drowsy potted plant. Connie smiled wanly, thinking about the unseen generations of warm life living somewhere in the history department walls, worried about nothing more momentous than leftover water crackers and careless feet. She could almost envy a life that simple and straightforward. Silence descended over the waiting area, and Connie heard only her shallow breath.

At length she heard the door open.

‘Connie? We are ready for you.’ It was Professor Silva. Connie sat up. For a split second she faced the certainty that the exam had gone horribly, she had failed, she would have to leave school. But then Connie saw Janine’s kind face, framed with ruddy tangles of hair, break into a delighted grin. She threaded an arm around Connie’s waist and whispered, ‘We’re celebrating at Abner’s after this!’ And she knew that it was really about to be over.

Connie resumed her seat in the examination room. The single sunbeam was lower now, barely gracing the four pairs of folded hands that ringed the table.

She arranged her features into a close approximation of professional coolness and detachment. *No one likes a woman academic who is emotional*, she reminded herself.

‘After much discussion and debate,’ began Professor Chilton, face serious, ‘we would like to congratulate you

on the strongest doctoral qualifying examination that we have seen in recent memory. Your responses were complete, thorough and articulate, and we feel that you are eminently qualified to be advanced to candidacy for the PhD. You are more than ready to write your dissertation.’

He paused for a beat while Connie processed what he had just said, the verdict working its way down through all her layers of worry.

All at once she felt the breath rush out of her in an excited hiss, and she clenched her fingers around the chair seat in an effort to channel her palpable glee into something safe, something that would not give her away. ‘Really?’ she said aloud, looking around the table before she could stop herself.

‘Of course!’ piped Professor Silva, interrupting Professor Smith, who had started to say, ‘Really excellent work, Connie.’

‘Most competent,’ concurred Professor Beaumont, and Connie smiled privately to herself. Thomas would doubt he had even said that much. Already Connie’s mind was skipping ahead to the evening, when her thesis student would interrogate her about the questions that each of the professors had asked.

As the committee continued to praise her performance, Connie felt a sweet mixture of relief and fatigue rush through her arms and legs. The voices of her mentors muffled and drifted farther away as a fog of sleepiness rolled across her mind. She was about to crash. She found herself struggling to get to her feet, to spirit herself away to the safety of her friends.

‘Well,’ she said, standing, ‘I can’t thank you all enough. Really. This is a great way to end the semester.’ They all stood with her, each shaking her hand in turn and gathering up their things to leave. She nodded automatic thanks, and her hands began to scrabble for her coat. Professors Smith and Beaumont scuttled out together.

Professor Silva hoisted her satchel over her head. ‘C’mon, kiddo,’ she said, knocking Connie on the shoulder. ‘You need a drink.’

Connie laughed, doubting that she would be able to withstand more than one of Abner’s notorious old-fashioned. ‘I should call Thomas and Liz. They demanded an immediate report,’ she said. ‘I’ll meet you there?’

Professor Silva – Janine, now, for she insisted that her graduate students call her by her first name once they had advanced to candidacy – nodded appreciatively. ‘I’ll bet they did,’ she said. ‘Manning, we’ll talk next week.’ Then with a wave she was gone, the heavy panelled door closing in her wake.

Connie began to wind her scarf around her neck.

‘Connie, wait a moment,’ said Chilton. It was more a command than a suggestion, Connie noticed with some surprise. She stopped, lowering herself back to the table.

Chilton dropped into the armchair across from Connie, beaming at her. He did not speak. Connie, unsure what he was up to, hazarded a glance as far as the polished leather elbow patch that rested in the remnant of the shard of sunlight on the table.

‘I have to say that this was an incredible performance, even for you,’ began Chilton. As always, Connie was

momentarily distracted by Chilton's clipped Brahmin accent, in which the *r* wanders in and out of words unpredictably. *Pebfobmance*. It was an accent that one barely heard any more, that of the first families of Boston who claimed descent from the English Protestants who founded the city, almost unrelated to the Boston accent caricatured on television. *Babston* versus *Behstun*. Chilton himself often struck her as a sort of relic, a scarab beetle preserved in amber not knowing that it is frozen and that time has left it behind.

'Thank you, Professor Chilton,' she said.

'I knew when we admitted you to this programme that you would excel. Your undergraduate work at Mount Holyoke was exemplary, of course. Your coursework and teaching have both been well remarked upon.' *Rehmabked*, thought Connie, then immediately chastised herself. *Pay attention! This is important!*

He paused, gazing at her, index fingers pressed over his lips. 'I wonder if you have started putting any thought to your dissertation topic,' he said. She hesitated, caught off guard. Of course she had expected to bring him a proposal shortly after her exam, assuming she passed, but she had counted on having weeks ahead of her to think things over. However, his attention signalled to Connie that her performance had guaranteed her new status within the department. Connie's ears buzzed, like antennae that have picked up a vital piece of information written in a code that has been only half transcribed.

Academia, in many respects, forms the last bastion of medieval apprenticeship. She and Liz had discussed this idea before. The master takes the student in, educates her

in his craft, shares with her the esoteric secrets of his field. The apprentice is a kind of initiate, admitted by gradual degrees into ever higher levels of mysticism. Not that most academic subjects were very mystical any more, of course. But, by extension, the apprentice's skill reflects on the master's own ability. Connie realized that Chilton now viewed her as a particular asset to him, and that this new level of regard came with heavier responsibility. Chilton had plans for her.

'I have a few ideas percolating, of course,' she began, 'but nothing set in stone. Did you have something in mind?'

He regarded her for a moment, and she could see something indistinct, almost serpentine, glimmering behind his careful, veiled eyes. Then just as suddenly the glimmer disappeared, replaced with the bemused detachment that he habitually wore in place of an expression. He sat back in his chair, propping the top of a bony knee on the edge of the table, and waved one wrinkled hand dismissively. 'Nothing as such. Only, I urge you to look vigorously for new source bases. We need to think strategically about your career, my girl, and we can't do that if you are just revisiting the same old archives. A really marvellous, newly uncovered primary source can make you in this field, Connie,' he said, looking sharply at her. '*New. New* shall be your watchword.'

Watchword, thought Connie. *If I don't get out of here this instant I am going to say something that will truly embarrass myself.* Though why he would bother to tell her to look for new source bases she could not fully understand. Perhaps later he would tell her what exactly he had in mind. 'I

understand, Professor Chilton. I will give this some serious thought. Thank you.'

Connie stood, easing her arms into her pea coat, pulling the scarf over her nose and tucking her braid up under a knitted pom-pom hat. Chilton nodded appreciatively. 'So you're off to celebrate then,' he said, and Connie fixed him with a thin smile.

'Abner's,' she confirmed, silently begging him not to come along.

'You deserve it. Enjoy yourself,' he said. 'We shall continue this discussion more concretely at our next meeting.' He made no move to rise and follow her, instead watching as she assembled herself to reenter the crisp spring world outside. As the door closed behind her, the last narrow stripe of sunlight vanished from the window, and the conference room went dark.

Since arriving at Harvard, three years ago, Connie had shared three dark, wood-panelled rooms in a building that had, a century before, been a private dormitory for clubbable young Harvard men. It now held desultory pairs of grad students who shuttled, heads down, between library and home. Over the decades, Saltonstall Court's Gilded Age splendour had faded behind successive layers of tobacco smoke, city grime and plaster patching.

Sometimes Connie thought she could feel the building's palpable disdain for its sliding fortunes. Dark oak shelves now crowded with Connie's history books and Liz's Latin classics had held generation after generation of uncracked Greek textbooks and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Even the brick fireplace evinced its contempt, belching forth smoke and ash on the rare occasions when the women attempted to kindle a fire. Connie tried to picture the anonymous, long-dead boys who had once lived in their rooms, buttoned into woollen suits, experimenting with pipes as an affectation, shuffling cards for bridge. Some of these boys had brought valets with them to college, and Connie wondered which room had been the servants' room: hers or Liz's.

As she weaved her way alone down Mount Auburn Street, after a blurry evening spent celebrating at Abner's, she reflected: probably hers. It had the smaller window.

The campus clock tower bonged once in the distance, and Connie's tired hand fell on the dormitory apartment's brass doorknob. The whiteboard nailed to her front door bore a scrawled note from the two chemistry students down the hall wishing her luck on her qualifying exam, along with a cartoon version of her with a giant lightbulb illuminated over her head. Connie sighed and smiled.

She could not remember the last time she felt unambiguously pleased with herself. Maybe when she had graduated from Mount Holyoke – that was a pretty satisfying day. She had not even known she was getting magna cum laude until she read her name in the class day programme. Perhaps once more, when she was accepted to Harvard for graduate school a year after that. But nothing since then. For the first time, really, since beginning her PhD programme, Connie felt secure. Validated.

She slid her key into the lock and turned it silently, not wanting to disturb the sleeping Liz, who had stumbled home alone an hour earlier. As she slipped through the door and into the panelled hallway, two excited paws appeared, scrabbling at her feet.

'Hi, Arlo,' she whispered, crouching down to enfold the wiggling animal in her arms. Something warm and damp lapped at her cheek. 'Aren't you a grody little guy,' she murmured. Connie scratched him behind the ears, and then she hoisted him up to her hip. She tiptoed with him into the galley kitchen off the study, groping for the light switch.

The kitchen flickered, filling with buzzing fluorescent light, and Connie squinted her eyes miserably. She placed the dog on the floor and leaned on the counter by the

sink, gazing down at the small animal. As usual, she could not decide what precise variety of dog he was; on some days he looked more houndlike, with droopy ears and dark, wet eyes, but on other days she would resolve that he was definitely a terrier, the kind that can fit down a badger hole. His fur was an indistinct, dingy colour, something between mud and leaves, which changed and shifted depending on the sunlight and the season.

‘So what did you do today?’ she asked him, folding her arms.

He wagged twice.

‘Yeah?’ Connie said. ‘And then what?’

The dog sat down.

‘That sounds like fun.’ She sighed, turning to fill the kettle at the sink.

Connie had never had much interest in animals before Arlo; she had always found them worrisome and dependent, and the idea of keeping a pet touched a deep reservoir of anxiety within her. When she was troubled about her work back in college, as she often had been, her dreams had grown populated by identical, replicating animals – snakes and mice or birds – all of them clamouring for food and care that she felt unable to provide. She had long regarded these dreams as an allegory for her worry about research, deadlines and responsibility but nevertheless decided to take their lesson to heart. While the other women in her college cooperative dorm had brought home cat after cat, Connie held herself aloof.

A few weeks into her first semester at Harvard, however, Connie emerged from an evening class in the philosophy building to discover the little creature sitting

camouflaged under a rhododendron hedge, nearly invisible in the shadows among the leaves. He materialized from under the shrubbery and fell in step with her as she crossed Harvard Yard. At first she tried to shoo him away with one foot as he dodged and weaved in her wake. Stopping in front of the library, she told him to buzz off, pointing with her finger back towards the philosophy building. He just wagged his tail, pink tongue flopping. Halfway across the yard, she stopped again, telling him to go find his owner. But instead he followed her all the way back to Saltonstall Court, prancing through the door after her.

For the first few weeks, she had posted flyers around Harvard Square advertising FOUND DOG, to no avail. Then she tried posting a few DOG FREE TO GOOD HOME flyers, until Liz made her take them down. 'He *chose* you?' Liz insisted, and Connie smiled at her roommate's unabashed sentiment. Liz was the sort of woman who studied medieval Latin because, secretly, she passed her hours imagining the days of knights battling mythical dragons, of ladies in wimples and of courtly love. Connie appreciated Liz's fervour in part because Connie was herself a sentimental person, the kind often masked in a defensive layer of irony and cynicism. Without admitting to herself what she was doing, Connie gradually stopped looking for someone else to take the dog.

She never noticed that after Arlo entered her life her nightmares about replicating vermin disappeared.

Now, she turned from the simmering kettle and found a note taped to the refrigerator in Liz's tidy printing. *Grace called 6.00 p.m., read the note. Said call back ASAP. Late OK.*

‘Look at this, Arlo,’ said Connie, gesturing to the note. ‘Your real owner called.’

He tipped his head sideways.

‘Aw, how could I say such things?’ She chided herself for him, stooping to rub his cheek. ‘No, of course not really. It’s just my mother.’ She checked her watch – 11.20 a.m. That would make it . . . 11.20 in New Mexico. Connie smiled, pleased that her mother had remembered that today was her exam day. Of course, Connie had taken the trouble to remind her a few times, in her otherwise sterile, if dutiful, letters and on her mother’s answering machine. But for once the reminders had worked.

Connie poured the steaming water into a chipped mug, dropped a peppermint tea bag into the cup and moved into the darkened study. She pulled the chain on the lamp that stood arched over her reading chair, a chintz behemoth that she had found at a yard sale in Cambridge.

The study was simultaneously spare and cluttered, fitting for two studious women. One wall housed the fireplace, framed by oak bookshelves overflowing with paperbacks and textbooks. Near the fireplace sagged a futon, a remnant of Liz’s college life, facing a table positioned to support resting feet. Two institutional desks stood pressed to the walls on the far side of the bookshelves, Connie’s a picture of order, Liz’s a riot of papers shuffled into heaps. The fourth wall consisted of tall leaded windows sheltering a small forest of potted plants and herbs for cooking – Connie’s garden. By the plants sat her lamp and reading chair, under which she just glimpsed the disappearing rump of Arlo.

Connie pulled her knees up to her chest and balanced

the hot mug under her nose. She rarely bothered to notice this room, as she spent so much of her time in it. Before too long, the day would come when she and Liz no longer shared this warren. The thought tugged at her excitedly, but under the excitement Connie felt distant, even sad. Of course, that day was still far off. Connie sipped at her tea, allowing its astringent taste to draw her back into the present.

Even for her mother, 11.20 seemed a little late. But the note had said to call as soon as she could. In truth, Connie was so pleased that Grace had remembered her exam that she wanted to call now, even if it meant waking her mother up. In fact, she was not sure when she had last spoken to her mother. Had it been around Christmas? Connie had stayed in Cambridge to read for her exam, and they had chatted on Christmas Day. But they must have caught each other on the phone since then. Connie knew she left messages, but she could not quite recall when she had actually reached her. Was it . . .

Connie placed two fingers on her forehead with a soft groan. It was when Grace had called to wish her a happy vernal equinox, the moment in spring when daylight and night-time are exactly the same length. Of course. That was typical of Grace Goodwin.

In her more petulant moments, when she was younger and angry, Connie used the epithet ‘a victim of the 1960s’ for her mother. As she grew older, however, she began to regard her mother with a detached, almost anthropological interest. Now, the phrase that Connie produced when pressed to describe Grace was ‘a free spirit’. It was hard to know where to start, when talking about Grace.

Perhaps Connie preferred to avoid discussing her mother because her own origin characterized Grace's fundamental lack of planning. Connie had been the unanticipated result of a love affair that Grace had had her senior year at Radcliffe, in 1966. An affair that Grace had had with her graduate teaching assistant in Eastern religion, it should be said, a fact that Connie regarded with unconcealed disapproval, particularly now that she herself was in graduate school. Leonard Jacobs, called 'Leo' by Grace and her friends. Connie's eye drifted to the top shelf of her desk, where a black-and-white photograph rested, showing a sensitive, moist-eyed young man in a turtleneck, cheekbones high like Connie's own, with long sideburns and tousled hair. He gazed directly into the camera, unsmiling, a young woman with her straight hair parted down the middle leaning against his shoulder and gazing dreamily off to the side. Grace – her mother.

Leo's thoughts about Connie's imminent arrival had not been recorded for posterity, though Grace always intimated that they had made great, romantic plans. Unfortunately those plans were abbreviated by the machinations of foreign policy. Despite having drawn his research out for as long as he could, Leo finished his degree in 1966. He lost his academic draft deferral and was shipped to Southeast Asia three months before Connie's birth.

And while there, he disappeared.

Connie's sadness, yellowed with equal parts discomfort and distaste, was so great that she had never discussed it with anyone – not even Liz. When the subject of fathers came up in conversation with friends or colleagues,

Connie skated quickly over the topic. Even reflecting on it now in the privacy of her study, her dog snoring under her reading chair, Connie frowned over her tea.

Grace, meanwhile, had finished school, barely, and then established herself and her small daughter in Concord, not far from Walden Pond. An undistinguished farmhouse with a pronounced list, the collective – for that is really what it was – had stood hidden behind a few acres of woods, with two knotty apple trees tinting the air in autumn with the pungent smell of cider. Connie suspected that Grace had filled the house with people in part to push away the void that Leo’s loss had left. Whole coteries of warm, earnest young people traipsed through their house: musicians mostly, but also students, poets, women serious about pottery.

Connie’s first conscious memory was a morning image of the kitchen of this farmhouse, warmed by a woodstove and furnished with a naked picnic table and potfuls of thyme and rosemary. She was a toddler, roughly the same height as the table, and she was crying. She remembered Grace bending down until her open, young face was level with Connie’s, long straw-coloured hair falling from her shoulders, and saying, ‘Connie, you need to try to *centre* yourself.’

Grace’s means of support during Connie’s childhood had been varied and obscure, including at one point a macrobiotic bakery, which failed to appeal to the staid New England matrons of Concord. Once Connie reached adolescence, however, Grace’s interests coalesced around something that she called ‘energetic healing’. Clients would seek her out, complaining of ailments both physical

and spiritual, and Grace would effect a change in them by moving her hands through their biologic energy fields. Connie wrinkled her nose still whenever she thought about it.

As a teenager, Connie rebelled by building around herself a predictability and order in direct contrast to her mother's flexibility and freedom. Now that she was an adult herself, Connie viewed Grace with more sympathy. From the comfortable distance that stretched between her haphazard childhood and the chintz reading chair where she now sat, Connie could regard Grace's eccentricities as being sweet, or naïve, rather than irresponsible and dissolute.

When Connie left for Mount Holyoke, Grace sold off what remained of the disintegrating farmhouse and moved to Santa Fe. Grace claimed at the time that she was ready to live somewhere 'full of healing energy'. Connie scoffed whenever she thought of this phrase but then stopped herself. Her mother, after all, had a right to be happy. Connie could admit that her own life choices might seem incomprehensible to an outside observer, and doubly so to one as critical of established institutions as Grace was. Grace must have wondered how she ended up with such an alien offspring, and yet she had always supported Connie's choices in her own unorthodox way.

Grace had probably tried terribly hard to remember that today was her exam day. She had never tried to insist that Connie not study history, not be bookish, not be serious and orderly. Grace occasionally wished that Connie would 'investigate her soul truth', but Connie

always interpreted that as a hippie way of saying that Connie should just do what seemed right for her.

Connie placed her empty mug on the floor and reached for the telephone.

It rang four times and, as Connie was about to hang up, the receiver rose with a clatter and a breathless voice said, 'Hello?'

'Mom?' said Connie. 'Hi! Liz left a note that you had called. I hope it's not too late.' Her eyes lit up with a rising warmth of affection for this odd woman whom life had yoked together with her. Over the past year or so, Connie had invented more reasons to telephone, leaving messages peppered with questions; the ostensible need for answers carried a built-in need to call back. Her garden usually provided a good excuse.

'Oh, Connie!' Grace cried with relief. 'Yes! Yes, I did call. No, this is perfect. Good. How are you, my darling?'

'Great!' she said, bursting. 'I'm great, I guess. Kind of drained, obviously. I mean, today was a pretty big day.'

'Was it?' Grace said, the sound of her rummaging through a box of something noisy chinking down the telephone line.

'Well, yeah,' Connie said, her smile slipping a little. 'My qualifying exam?' she prodded. The rummaging sound continued. 'I left you messages about it. That huge exam that I had to take to be advanced to candidacy?' Still Grace said nothing, the air coming in short bursts through her nostrils as she toted the unseen box across the kitchen of her adobe house.

'The thing I have been preparing for an *entire year* to take?' Connie said, anger and hurt pinching her face.

Her brows crumpled together over her nose. Without realizing it, she got to her feet, as if standing would bring the point home to Grace more clearly. 'It was today, Grace,' she said, her voice devolving into the same stern, disappointed chill that it used to have when Connie was a teenager. She pressed her lips together, suppressing the urge to cry, to yell, or do anything else that would suggest that she needed to *centre* herself.

'Indeed,' said Grace indifferently, shuffling the phone from one ear to the other. 'Now listen, my darling. I have a very important favour to ask you.'

3

Marblehead, Massachusetts
Early June
1991

‘I still can’t believe she did it,’ spat Connie. She rolled the window down on her side of the car and chucked out a withered apple core that had been sitting on the dashboard.

‘I still can’t believe you’re letting it get to you this much,’ said Liz mildly, peering at the map accordioned across her lap. ‘You should veer right up here.’

‘How could I have let her talk me into this?’ Connie growled, the right front wheel well of her rust-speckled Volvo sedan quaking in protest as she turned.

Liz inhaled an exasperated sniff of air through her nose before saying, ‘You know, you didn’t have to agree to it. You’re trying to put all this on Grace, but I don’t see her twisting your arm —’

‘*Always,*’ continued Connie before Liz was finished. ‘It’s always like this! She has some disaster and, no matter what I happen to be doing, I have to drop everything and pick up the pieces. You’d think after twenty-five years of self-actualization she’d be able to manage her own *mess.*’ Connie changed down a gear as the Volvo hurtled into a laneless roundabout, Nahant peninsula spiralling out into

the sea on their right as they trundled northwards, the car swaying slightly under the weight of Connie's plants and belongings. In the back seat, wedged between two jars overflowing with rosemary and mint, Arlo sat, swaying with the motion of the car. A thick rope of drool swung from his mouth.

'So I suppose it's Grace's fault that you said yes,' said Liz, voice pointed. 'Really, Connie, this is your doing as well.'

'How exactly is this my doing?' Connie demanded, brushing a loose floss of hair off her brow with the back of one wrist. 'I was perfectly happy! I was just *doing* my *work*. Look at Arlo. I think he's going to be sick.'

'Then why did you let her talk you into it?' Liz pointed out.

Connie sighed. Liz was right, of course. In fact, she had been right for the past six weeks, which made it all the more difficult for Connie to maintain her self-righteous anger.

'Just because you're right doesn't mean I have to be happy about it,' Connie grumbled.

'Well, if I were you, I'd take a more pragmatic approach,' Liz said. 'You've agreed to do it, so the only thing you can do at this point is adjust your attitude. Watch out for this guy – I don't think he's giving way.' A pick-up truck peeled out of a side street, screeching on to the seawall drive just in front of them. The car rocked as Connie stamped on the brake.

They drove on for a moment in silence. The white-grey sea rolled away to the horizon, dotted in the distance by six or eight tiny sails. Liz cranked her window down

a crack and turned her face into the breeze. The briny smell of seawater crept into the car, freshening and cooling the air. They passed a boatyard crowded with masts and boat hulls propped up by rusted scaffolds. Next to the boatyard, at the base of a rotting wooden dock, stood a heap of wire-mesh lobster traps clotted with seaweed. As she watched, a fat seagull flapped leisurely down to perch atop the stacked traps, folding his wings along his back and gazing out across the shimmering water.

‘You could be looking at this in a completely different way,’ Liz ventured, turning the map over in her lap.

‘Oh?’ asked Connie. ‘And what way is that?’

Liz leaned her head back against the headrest and smiled.

‘It’s pretty here,’ she said.

After Connie and Liz had squabbled good-naturedly for half an hour about the proper orientation of the map and the incomprehensible layouts of New England towns, which follow no sort of logic, the Volvo rolled around a curve and down a narrow lane shaded with weeping willows. The lane was lined with small, boxy houses, their windows punched at uneven intervals, their wooden cladding bleached pale grey by decades of sun and salt water. Connie squinted to see the numbers nailed to each slowly passing door.

‘What number are we looking for again?’ she asked.

‘Milk Street. Number three,’ said Liz, peering through the passenger window. Next to one of the houses leaned a shed festooned with stained lobster trap buoys hung

up to dry. Another was almost completely obscured by a sailboat parked on wooden pilings in a driveway choked with weeds. Liz could just make out the lettering on the stern of the forgotten sailboat: *Wonderment, Marblehead, Mass.*

‘Wonderment,’ whispered Liz.

‘These houses are ancient,’ remarked Connie. ‘Pre-Revolution, maybe.’

Liz spread the map across the Volvo dashboard and inspected it. ‘The map does say this is Old Town.’

‘I believe it,’ said Connie dryly. ‘There’s seventeen. So it must be on this side of the street.’

Connie slowed the car down, gradually rolling to a halt near the dead end of the street. The lane petered out a few yards away, disappearing into a gravelled trail that wound into a sparse wood.

‘It should be right here,’ she said, looking out the window at a thicket abutting the stand of trees, obscured by a dense wall of brambles.

In the back seat, Arlo started wiggling and released an excited bark.

‘What’s his problem?’ asked Liz, turning back to the little animal and scratching his neck. He lapped at her wrist.

‘Maybe he’s just excited that the car has finally stopped. At least he didn’t get sick.’ Connie paused. ‘I don’t know, Liz. I don’t think there’s anything here. Are you sure this is Milk Street?’

‘You have to go to the bathroom, little guy?’ Liz cooed to the dog, whose entire hind section was vibrating with excitement. ‘I think he needs to be let out. Let’s take him

over to those trees to do his thing and then we'll take another look at the map.'

The air smelled moist and fresh, like new earth, but with a hint of brine – nothing at all like Cambridge. Connie stretched her arms overhead, feeling her spine pop in two places, and then rubbed her neck with one hand while opening the back door for the dog.

'C'mon out, mutt,' she said, but before the words were completely out of her mouth the animal had vanished, reappearing an instant later directly in front of the bramble thicket. He barked, tail cutting half-moons in the air behind him.

The two women started towards the wood at the end of the lane, expecting the dog to follow them when he lost interest in whatever vermin he had spotted in the thicket.

'So whose house is this supposed to be again?' asked Liz, picking idly at a hangnail.

'Granna's,' said Connie. 'My mother's mother.'

'But you said you'd never been here before,' Liz said.

Connie shrugged. 'I haven't. My mom and Granna – Sophia was her name – didn't get along, as you can imagine. All Grace's hippie stuff. And Granna was apparently very old-style New England. Stiff, restrained. So they were only sporadically in touch, I guess. And then she died when I was really little.'

'Sophia,' Liz mused. 'That's a Greek root, you know. It means "wisdom". Did you ever meet her?'

'Mom says that I did. She came to our house in Concord pretty often, but it always drove Mom crazy. Apparently Granna didn't approve of Mom's raising me

in “such an environment”.’ Connie waved her fingers in mock quotes on either side of her head.

‘Sounds like you would have got along with her pretty well, actually. At least you and she would have agreed about Grace. Do you remember any of this?’ Liz asked.

‘Not really,’ said Connie. ‘I think I maybe remember when she died. Mom being sad. Her holding me and saying something about “universal life energy”, and me asking if that meant heaven and her saying yes. I must have been about three or four.’

‘But if she died over twenty years ago, what’s been happening with the house this whole time?’

Connie rolled her eyes before she could stop herself. ‘Well, apparently it has just been *sitting* here. How typical is that? Mom never even told me.’ She shook her head.

‘So why would she ask you to deal with the house now?’ asked Liz. ‘And, more importantly,’ she said, joking, ‘why have we been paying to live in the dorm all this time if there was an empty house less than an hour away that might as well belong to you?’

Connie laughed. ‘I think the answer to that question will be clear when we find the house. Mom says it’s a total dump. And as for why she’s asked me to deal with it now, it would seem that my very responsible and attentive mother has neglected to pay the property taxes on the house since Granna died.’ Liz gasped in disbelief. ‘Oh, yes,’ Connie continued before she could say anything, ‘it’s been adding up, but until recently the rate was so low that the town didn’t really care. Then last year they changed the law. And this spring the town sent her notice that the

house will be seized in six months if she doesn't make restitution.'

'Wow,' said Liz. 'How much?'

'I don't know the exact figure,' Connie said, tugging on the end of her braid. 'Grace was being pretty coy. I'm supposed to sort through all the junk that's in there, throw everything out, and arrange to have the house sold, if anyone cares to buy it. And whatever proceeds it raises will be used to pay off the town.'

Liz whistled. 'At least it's just for the summer. Then you can come back to Cambridge and have all this out of the way.'

By this time they had reached the wood, and the women stopped at the base of the trail where the gravel thinned to beaten earth. Connie gazed down at the wild angelica plant bursting forth in the clearing between trees. The fragile white flower clusters nodded in the early-summer air, weedy and lush, and insects hummed unseen in the hollows under the trees. Connie stared at the flowers dappled by the sunlight, her eyes widening. As she watched the flashes of light play upon the surface of the petals, her mind loosened, grew soft, moving into a daydream, and she thought that she perceived the image of an older man, dressed in muddy work clothes, stooped under the weight of a canvas bag stuffed with firewood and kindling, trudging through the shadows. *Lemuel?* A voice called out, audible only in Connie's mind. *Comin', Sophier!* The image called back before it pulled apart, the details of the daydream dissolving out of her reach. She was brought back to herself by the sound of Liz asking a question.

The image had felt startlingly immediate, tangible. She reached a hand up to massage her temple, which ached gently where it had been fine a moment ago. Liz was watching her, waiting for her to respond to something she had just said, but Connie had no idea what it was. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, confused. ‘I zoned out for a second.’

‘I said, where’s Arlo?’ repeated Liz.

The pain in Connie’s head had begun to clear. She looked around, but the dog had not followed them. ‘That’s odd,’ Connie said.

She started back down the gravel path to the lane. When she emerged from the wood she discovered the dog sitting at attention, still facing the dense thicket across from the car.

‘Hey, mutt,’ she said, squatting next to the animal. ‘What are you watching?’ He gazed up at her, wagging, and then looked back into the thicket. ‘Is it a squirrel?’ Connie turned her face towards the spot in the dense thornbushes where the dog was gazing and gasped. To her astonishment, under the tightly wound bramble branches was the outline of a rotted iron gate.

By the time that Liz arrived, Connie had already pulled aside a significant heap of dead vines and weeds. As soon as a gap opened between two of the gate’s rusted bars, Arlo wriggled his way through and disappeared into the shadows. Liz jogged to a stop behind her friend, out of breath with what she had seen.

‘Connie!’ Liz puffed. ‘I think that we might have found the house!’

‘Yeah! Arlo spotted the gate,’ she grunted, hauling aside another armload of undergrowth.

‘No, look,’ Liz said, tapping Connie on the shoulder. Connie stood, wiping her dirty hands on the seat of her jeans. Liz pointed up.

Connie stepped back into the lane, tightening the flannel shirt that was knotted around her waist, and craned her neck. Following Liz’s extended finger, she traced a towering elder tree draped with vines upward, upward, upward, and then at the very top of the thicket, Connie made out the unmistakable outline of a cedar-shingled rooftop emerging from underneath the leaves and branches. In the centre of the outline she could just glimpse the hulking rubble of a brick chimney. She caught her breath.

‘I can’t believe it,’ she whispered.

‘I told you this was Milk Street,’ said Liz, poking her. Connie arched one eyebrow at Liz.

‘There is almost no way to tell that there is a house in there,’ Connie remarked, running a soiled hand through her hair as she surveyed the thicket. Now that she knew what to look for, she imagined that she could make out the faint tracery of the iron fence underlying the dense shrubbery. Rising farther from the riot of leaves, she thought she might also see the blurred shape of windowsills.

‘Well, you said that no one has been here since Sophia died,’ Liz said.

‘Yeah, but this looks like it has been abandoned a lot longer than twenty years,’ said Connie.

The two friends stood in silence, arms folded, gazing at

the house clad in its layers of vegetation and neglect. Finally Liz broke the quiet.

‘Here,’ she said, ‘let me help you clear off the gate.’

The vines and ivy gave way easily, and within half an hour they had made a soft pile of branches and roots to one side of the gate. As they worked, from time to time they heard rustling and barking from inside the garden.

‘At least Arlo’s having a good time,’ Connie muttered, brushing her hair aside and leaving a streak of mud on her forehead.

‘I think we almost have it,’ said Liz.

After a few more minutes spent yanking on the last stubborn vines, Connie sat back on her heels and regarded the revealed gate. Its iron was so pitted with rust and age that she feared it might dissolve at her touch. Gently, she reached forward and lifted the latch that held the gate to the fence. It whined with the sound of metal long frozen in place, but yielded. Slowly, carefully, she pushed the gate in until it was open about two feet wide, creating a doorway in the dense hedge. ‘Well?’ she said, turning back to Liz. Liz shrugged.

Connie got to her feet and edged through the gate.

The garden was not nearly as dense as the hedge implied. She stood on the outline of a flagstone path leading up to the mouldering front door of the house, the entire surface of which was overgrown with several different varieties of vine. Over the front door draped a blooming purple-green wisteria, its thick, syrupy smell puddling in the air. Several tall, slender trees – the elder that she had seen from the street, as well as an alder and a hawthorn – dotted the garden, forming pillars that

supported the tented superstructure of vines stretching from the hedge to the house. Under the trees and vines, the garden was shady without being dark. It felt private – secret.

Connie became aware of a displaced, intrusive ache in her stomach, a creeping sorrow that she had never seen this hidden realm. Sophia, her grandmother, had made this garden. But she would never know her. The finality of this realization felt leaden and inescapable. Connie superimposed her long-stored mental image of Sophia over the garden scene before her, seeing her grandmother kneeling by the corner of the house with a trowel. Connie relaxed, allowing herself to move deeper into the fantasy, and to her surprise the stooped man from her daydream in the woods – she now recognized him from old photographs as Lemuel, her grandfather, who died while Grace was in college – appeared from around the corner of the house, still carrying his load of kindling. *That'll do*, her imagined form of Granna said to the man. *Just put it in the hall.*

Connie pressed her fingertips to her eyelids, splotches of blue and inky black spreading behind her eyes. When she dropped her hands and opened her eyes again the scene had melted into the ground, vanished. Of course, her sleep had been erratic in the days leading up to the move – even more so than was usual for her. Last night she had barely slept at all, instead lying awake with Arlo in her arms, staring into the darkness. She must be overtired.

Instead of a lawn, riots of wild herbs and plants overran one another in an incoherent mass. Connie recognized

most of the herbs standard in a home kitchen garden: thyme, rosemary, sage, parsley, a few different mints, fat turnip greens, dandelion leaves, dense, soft dill blossoms, short tufts of chives that had not been harvested for years. Connie's eyes moved over the plants along the far side of the garden, alighting on some obscure flowers that she knew only from horticulture books: monkshood, henbane, foxglove, moonwort. A thick, ropey belladonna clung to the left corner of the house, sinking its roots deep into the wooden framework. Connie frowned. Hadn't Granna known that a lot of those flowers were poisonous? She would have to be careful with Arlo.

Beyond the herbs and flowers, the garden on the near side of the house seemed overrun with vegetables. Fuzzy green leaves as wide as dinner plates shaded the nascent blobs of summer squash, musk-melons and pumpkin. To the right, under a wide gap in the vine growth overhead, a tangle of plants clung to the opposite corner of the house, heavy fruits as big as Connie's fist dangling under the leaves. Connie looked closer, and to her surprise saw that they were tomatoes. But not grocery-store tomatoes – these were queerly multicoloured, deep purple-reds, striped green, glowing yellow, and their shapes were globular and alien. The base of the tomato plants was as dense and wide as a small tree trunk, as if this tomato plant alone in the world did not die at the end of every summer. Arlo was digging in the shade under one of its leaves.

Liz appeared next to Connie, her footsteps silent on the mossy stone pathway. 'This garden is crazy. Look at those tomatoes!' she exclaimed. 'They're enormous.' Liz

paused, sensing Connie's quiet, and glanced sidelong at her, touching Connie's shoulder. 'Are you okay?'

Connie turned to Liz, still feeling off kilter and fogged from her vivid daydream. Her friend's face shone with excitement at their discovery, and Connie hesitated to share her own strangely reflective mood. 'I'm fine,' she said, producing a smile for Liz's benefit. 'Just a little tired. You see that endive? We can have salad for dinner!'

Grace had mentioned that the house was old, but she had never suggested *how* old: it was practically antediluvian, handmade by a craftsman using the same techniques carried over from late medieval England. Its windows were small, with lozenge-shaped panes held together with lead. Her eyes widened in wonder as she gazed upward at the façade, never so much as glimpsed by a preservationist. The silent house stared back at her, wizened and aloof.

She brushed aside the curtain of wisteria flowers and traced her fingertips over the door. The wood had probably once been painted white, but now it carried a dark greenish tint from mildew and time. Connie tried to imagine her mother as a small child living here, and the image jarred, incongruous. Grace and Sophia and Lemuel, her grandfather, a taciturn Marbleheader whom Grace never mentioned, all of them moving around one another in little bubbles of subjectivity, intersecting in this house. Grace was too lively, too active, to belong here.

Perhaps that was why she had left.

The garden and the house seemed to belong to their own abandoned world so completely that the presence of any person, lively or otherwise, felt like a grave mistake.

Connie dug in her jeans pocket for the key that her mother had mailed and brushed aside the crust of dirt in the keyhole with one thumb. The key slid in, and after some resistance turned, emitting the grinding squeak of long-locked metal. With one gentle press of her shoulder, Connie nudged the door open.

The jamb reluctantly released its hold, billowing forth a cloud of dust. Connie coughed and gagged, waving the dingy haze away from her face. As the door wrenched open, she heard a metallic *ker-chunk* from just overhead, and something small and fragile clattered to the stones at her feet.

Nailed to the threshold overhead, almost completely obscured by the wisteria, Connie discovered a dented horseshoe rusted almost to a shadow. One of the square nails holding it to the suppurating wood had come loose, leaving the shoe dangling at a dangerous angle. Connie pocketed the tiny handmade nail and stepped into the waiting house.

The house contained exactly the kind of air that Connie would have expected to find in a sealed sea chest retrieved from the bottom of the ocean: woody, salty and stale. Most of the afternoon light was screened out by the dense layers of leaves twined across the windows. Connie paused, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. The interior assembled around her out of the gloom, a perfect simulacrum of a first-period, pre-1700 house, with furnishings of subsequent generations added gradually over the centuries. Except that the house was not a simulacrum.

‘My God,’ she breathed, disbelieving. ‘How long has this been here?’ The silent interior felt so timeless, so untouched by the outside world as to seem unreal.

The front door opened into a tiny entrance hall across from a spiral wooden staircase so narrow and steep as almost to qualify as a ladder. In its original orientation, in the seventeenth century, the household would have done most of its living – eating, cooking, sleeping, sewing, praying – on the ground floor, using the attic loft overhead for extra sleeping space and storage. Each slat in the stair was of polished Ipswich pine, with deep depressions worn away by generations of passing feet. The remainder of the entryway consisted of a rickety Queen Anne table weighted down with several months’ worth of unopened post, yellowed and brittle. Over the table hung a simple Greek Revival mirror, its glass misted with clinging dust and cobwebs, the gilding peeling and faded. A gnarled, long-dead plant sat in the corner under the stair, in a China-export porcelain pot split down the middle by a dry brown crack. The floor of the hallway bore a rotted soft spot, and Connie cringed to see a thick mushroom pushing up from between the boards. Her eye detected a flash of movement on the periphery of her vision, and she jumped, glimpsing the vanishing tail of a garden snake slipping into the shadows behind the potted plant.

To the left of the front hallway was what looked like a little sitting room; Connie could just make out shelves stuffed with leather-bound books and a couple of mismatched armchairs grouped around a shallow fireplace. The threadbare needlepoint upholstery promised dampness, mildew, and mice, filling the air with a faint, humid

miasma. The obstinate bulk of a Chippendale writing desk crouched in the corner, its carved paw-feet gripping the floor. More skeletal plant remnants hung motionless in the windows. The floorboards were of the same heavy yellow pine as the staircase, some of the boards almost two feet wide, stretching along the entire length of the house and studded with more square-headed nails.

To the right of the entryway Connie found an austere dining room, furnished with a Queen Anne table surrounded by shield-back side chairs – mid-eighteenth century, she marvelled and, judging from their silhouettes, carved in Salem. The room had clearly not been used for dining, even when Granna was alive; in every available corner stood stacks of newspapers, a chest or two, some blackened, sealed jars. The dining room also held a fireplace, but this one was older; it was wide and deep, bristling with iron hooks and pots of varying size, and had a beehive-shaped brick cavern for baking bread. Connie suspected that the dining room had originally been the hall, which was the early term for the main living room and workroom, the functional heart of the house. To the left of the fireplace stood built-in shelves crowded with plates, mugs and bottles so encased with filth that she could not tell what colour they were. A few framed paintings dotted the walls, but the shadows kept their images veiled. To the right of the fireplace, a narrow door leaned, closed with an iron latch.

Connie reached one arm into the dining room, groping for a light switch near the doorjamb but finding nothing. The air was silent and still, implicitly unwelcoming, as if the house had settled into its own decay and did not wish

to be disturbed. She started to tiptoe across the dining room, each footfall leaving a dark circle in the coating of dust on the floor.

'I don't know why I should be tiptoeing,' she said aloud, irritated at her own trepidation. For the rest of the summer, this was *her* house. She lowered her heel on to the floor, striding with purpose over to the latched doorway. It yielded to her touch after slight persuasion, and opened with a creak.

Behind the door, instead of the cupboard that she was expecting, Connie found a cramped kitchen, unceremoniously tacked on to the house some time within the last hundred years. On the right side of the kitchen stood a deep porcelain sink watched over by another window, clogged with leaves and overgrowth. The room featured an iron woodstove, a low, ancient icebox, a floor covered in curling linoleum, and a cheap wooden door leading into the garden behind the house.

What Connie noticed in the room, however, were not these archaic appliances, but the shelves upon shelves of glass bottles and jars ranging over the walls, all of them containing unidentifiable powders, leaves and syrups. Some of the jars bore illegible labels stained with dried paste. In the corner stood propped an old-fashioned broom made of bunches of dried twigs fastened with twine to a long ash branch. The broom seemed roped in place by skeins of spiderweb.

Connie stood in the kitchen gaping at the bizarre assortment lining the shelves. Grace had always insisted that Granna was not one for cooking, and so Connie could not account for the bottles and jars. Maybe she had

a canning phase at the end of her life, and they were all dried out and blackened because they were not sealed properly. Like Grace, Granna had been prone to phases, in her own way. The only Christmas with Granna that Connie could remember, just before she died, Granna appeared at the Concord farmhouse with hand-knitted sweaters for her and Grace, the same fisherman's pattern in three different colours. Unfortunately, Sophia's command of shoulder-to-arm proportion had been idiosyncratic, the sleeves stopping halfway down the arm on the left and well over the knuckles on the right. Connie chuckled with affection at the memory.

The air in the kitchen was close and dry, with a palpable scent of decay, and the jars were all coated in a thick drapery of grime. As Connie stood, hands on her hips, her excitement at the undiscovered house tempered by vague disquiet, soft footsteps approached behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder, startled. She was met with the beaming face of Liz, who was carrying a sweatshirt fashioned into a makeshift sack, bulging with tomatoes and endives. At her feet sat Arlo, smug, a root protruding from his mouth. His tail brushed aside thick layers of dust on the floor behind him.

'We've been scavenging for dinner,' Liz announced. 'Is this the kitchen?' She pushed around Connie, dumping the vegetables in the sink. She twisted the brass tap handle, and the pipes released an echoing groan, shuddering and coughing dryly before spewing forth a brownish trickle of water. 'I'm glad you packed Palmolive. Grace was right – this house is a pit.'

Liz rinsed the dust out of the kitchen sink and

scrubbed the vegetables she had taken from the garden. ‘So I was thinking we start the cleaning in the kitchen, since that’s where you’ll have to eat, and then we do the bedrooms after dinner, so we have a clean place to sleep. Also, how long do you think it’ll take us to reach the train station tomorrow? Twenty minutes? I just want to know when we need to get up in the morning. I think we can make some real headway tonight so you’re at least kind of sane for the coming week.’

Liz’s bright, efficient chatter shook Connie out of her reverie, reminding her that Granna’s house might feel like a gap, a stitch dropped in the fabric of time, but it was really just a house like any other – older, perhaps, in much worse shape, but still just a house. Connie rubbed her hands along her upper arms, turning over in her mind the embodiments of normality that she had brought with her, like talismans: Liz, her plants, her books, her dog. This would be an unusual summer, to be sure, but really not that different from any other. A lot more cleaning than she was used to, that’s all. Reassured by these thoughts, Connie squatted down next to Arlo to disengage the root from his mouth.

‘What’s this, little man?’ she asked, reaching gingerly between his teeth. ‘Did you find a wild carrot?’ The animal obediently dropped the root into her hand, then looked up at her, waiting for praise.

When Connie saw what she was holding she let out a scream, recoiling in horror and dropping the root on the floor. Without thinking, she immediately wiped her hand across the seat of her jeans, rubbing away any residue that it might have left on her skin.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Liz. ‘Does it have bugs?’

‘Oh, my God,’ Connie panted. The pulse at her throat beat heavy and fast, and she forced herself to inhale slowly to calm her breathing. ‘No, it’s not that. Don’t touch it!’ She knelt on the kitchen floor, peering at the inert vegetable where it lay in a spatter of mud.

‘Why?’ asked Liz, looking over Connie’s shoulder. She wrinkled her nose at its malformed hideousness. ‘Ew. What *is* that?’

Connie shoved away the dog, who was starting to realize that the burst of praise that he had expected was not forthcoming. She swallowed, eyes searching the kitchen for a tool that she could use to pick up the root.

‘I am reasonably certain that our friend here has brought us a mandrake,’ she said. Using two fingers and a dense wad of paper towel, she picked up the plant by one leaf and held it at arm’s length for Liz to see. ‘I’ve only ever seen drawings of them in gardening books, but their roots are supposed to be shaped kind of like a person. See?’ She indicated the leglike shape of the bifurcated root, with two fat protuberances where arms might go.

‘So?’ asked Liz.

‘So, they’re among the most poisonous plants known to man,’ said Connie. ‘So poisonous, in fact, that legend had it that anyone who tried to dig one up himself would die on the spot. As a result, anyone who wanted one needed a dog to dig it up for him.’ She glanced down at Arlo. Surely, she told herself, that legend spoke more to the fact that dogs will dig up anything, poisonous or not, than that men could not collect mandrakes safely. The creature wagged at her. ‘Also,’ she added, ‘some

early modern horticulture books claimed that when the mandrake is uprooted, it screams.’

‘Freaky,’ whispered Liz, peering at the plant. ‘What would your grandmother be doing with something so dangerous growing in her yard?’

‘Beats me. She has some other crazy stuff outside, too.’ Connie said. ‘Did you see the belladonna vine?’ She shook her head, still holding up the homunculus root. ‘Maybe it’s a volunteer plant that just showed up on its own. Like a weed. I can’t imagine that anyone in her right mind would want something like this hanging around the house.’

‘What are you going to do with it?’ Liz asked, voice worried.

Connie sighed, suddenly overwhelmed by the prospect of the tasks that lay ahead of her. She did not want to have to worry about poisonous plants in the kitchen, garden snakes in the living room, tax liens on the house. All she really wanted to do was eat some dinner and pretend as if the summer were not about to happen.

‘We’ll just put this up here for now, where no dogs can eat it,’ she said, tucking the root on to a shelf between two blackened jars.

Connie jerked awake, her heart lurching in her chest. For a long minute she could not identify where she was, and she was not sure if she was awake or still asleep. Gradually the shapes in the room swam into focus: the needlepoint armchair across from her, the Chippendale desk lurking in the shadows behind it. She wiped a hand over her face, crisscrossed by pale red marks where it had

been pressed against the back of the chair. The details of the dream receded, leaving their emotional content but not their substance. Vague, terrifying shapes bending over her, long ropes reaching down, chasing after her . . . or perhaps they had been snakes? She peered around the small sitting room, its benign forms seeming like skins draped over something else, something menacing. As her mind struggled for focus, the borderland between dream and reality felt slippery and imprecise. She must have dozed off in the chair in the sitting room.

Before retiring to one of the four-poster beds they had discovered upstairs, Liz had managed to crank open one of the windows in the sitting room, so the room's overpowering mustiness was now tempered somewhat by the soft breath of summer. Outside, Connie heard only the occasional sawing of crickets. After her years in Harvard Square, she found the quiet strangely foreboding. It roared in her ears, demanding her attention, where sirens would have passed by unheeded. She was accustomed to being kept awake by the whispering of her anxieties, but here the whispers sounded even louder in the pervasive, disquieting silence.

Now completely awake, she shifted her weight in the chair, toying with the oil lamp that glowed on the table at her elbow. Connie could not fathom why her grandmother had never had the house wired for electricity. It seemed impossible that there could be a house in America at the end of the twentieth century that did not have electric light, but a concerted search had revealed no switches, no lamps, no power cords of any kind. And no telephone! God knew how her mother expected to sell it

this way. *I'll be going to bed pretty early this summer, looks like*, Connie reflected, sullen. At least someone had thought to add running water somewhere along the line. The makeshift kitchen was echoed on the second floor by a simple lavatory, accessible through another modified cupboard in one of the two attic bedrooms. It contained a deep claw-footed bathtub with no shower, a pull-chain toilet with a wooden seat, and a tiny sink. Liz, as was her wont, had remarked as they brushed their teeth that the tub held out the possibility of long, romantic baths by lamplight. When Liz had said this, Connie blushed, embarrassed. Connie was uneasy around men; she disliked this aspect of herself, for it seemed materially different from Liz's sweet, self-conscious silliness. So yes, the tub would be great, if there were anyone to share it with. Which, of course, there was not.

She frowned, feeling the possibility of sleep grow increasingly remote. Liz had collapsed over an hour ago. Connie told herself that she was probably anxious about the next day, when Liz would take the train back to Cambridge. Liz was scheduled to start teaching in Harvard's summer school on Monday – Latin declensions for overachieving teenagers. Soon the house would have her all to itself. Connie felt like she was being abandoned on a high plank, extended out over a dark lake that she could not see. Liz was right. She should never have agreed to this.

Connie rose from her seat by the empty fireplace, carrying the little brass lamp with her towards the bookshelf, craving distraction. Maybe an old temperance novel, or a book of bridge strategy. She smiled at herself.

Just thinking about reading those things would send her to sleep.

Her fingers ran gently over the cracked spines of the books, fine brown powder lifting off the untreated leather and staining her fingertips. None of the spines were legible in the dim, flickering light. She pulled a slim volume from the shelf, dirt and bits of binding raining on to the floor in its wake. She flipped to the frontispiece: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Typical. Every old New England house was guaranteed to have a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was like a calling card, announcing that *this* family was on the right side of the Civil War. She sighed and slid the book back into place on the shelf. Sometimes New Englanders could be so self-righteous.

She drew the light along the spines of the books, its yellow orb illuminating three spines at a time together with her chin and knuckles, leaving the rest of the room swathed in black. Connie moved the lamp to the bottom shelf, where the thickest, heaviest books were kept. These would be Bibles, or possibly Psalters. Puritan doctrine held that literacy was necessary – even vital – to receiving divine grace. As such, every proper New England home must have its own copy of the revealed word of God. Placing the lamp on the floor, she wrestled the largest volume from the shelf, supporting it with one slender arm while she thumbed it open. Yes, a Bible – an old one, judging from the idiosyncratic spelling and the fragility of the paper. Seventeenth century, she thought, pleased with her training. For a fleeting moment she caught herself weighing what a Bible like this might be worth. But no; Bibles were the most common printed texts, so not all

that rare, even when they were this old. And this one was rotted with mildew and water damage. The pages felt pulpy and begrimed under her hands.

As she thumbed a page midway through Exodus, Connie wondered to herself what she might hope to find as she sifted through this house. Liz had said that Connie and Sophia sounded as if they would have got along, but she had never really known Sophia. Who was this odd, stubborn woman? Whose story was hidden here?

At the moment that these idle thoughts wandered through her mind, the hand that was holding the Bible vibrated with a hot, crawling, pricking sensation – something between a limb falling asleep and the painful shock that comes from unplugging a frayed lamp wire. Connie screamed in pain and surprise, dropping the heavy book with a thud.

She rubbed her hand, the strange sensation so fleeting that after a moment she doubted she had ever really felt it. Connie knelt to see if she had damaged the antique book.

The Bible lay open on the floor, raked by the glowing light from the oil lamp, surrounded by a rising cloud of dust stirred by its fall to the carpet. Kneeling on the floor, Connie reached forward to gather up the Bible when she noticed something small and bright protruding from between its leaves. Nudging the lamp nearer, Connie traced her fingertip down the edge of the pages until she found the little glimmering object, and then slowly withdrew it from its hiding place.

It was a key. Antique, about three inches long, with an ornate handle and hollow shaft, probably designed for a

door or a substantial chest. She turned the key over in the soft light from the lamp, wondering why it had been hidden in the Bible. It seemed too bulky for a bookmark. As she warmed the small metal object in her hands, puzzling about what it could mean, she noticed the tiniest shred of paper protruding from the end of the hollow shaft. She knitted her brows together in concentration.

Carefully, delicately, she caught the end of the paper with her thumbnail and withdrew it slowly from the shaft. It looked like a miniature parchment, tightly rolled into a tube. She laid the key in her lap and held the parchment up to the lamp, unrolling the crisp, brittle slip one millimetre at a time. It was brown and stained, barely as long as her thumb.

On it, in a watery ink barely legible in the flickering light, were written the words *Deliverance Dane*.