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CHAPTER ONE

The Way It Began

YOU CAN'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR, not even in Sidwell, Massachusetts, where every person is said to tell the truth and the apples are so sweet people come from as far as New York City during the apple festival. There are rumors that a mysterious creature lives in our town. Some people insist it's a bird bigger than an eagle; others say it's a dragon, or an oversized bat that resembles a person. Certainly this being, human or animal or something in between, exists nowhere else in this world. Children whisper that we have a monster in our midst, half man, half myth, and that fairy tales are real in

Berkshire County. At the Sidwell General Store and at the gas station tourists can buy T-shirts decorated with a red-eyed winged beast with VISIT SIDWELL printed underneath.

Every time I see one of these shirts in a shop, I casually drop it into the garbage bin.

In my opinion, people should be careful about the stories they tell.

All the same, whenever things go missing the monster is blamed. Weekends are the worst times for these odd thefts. Bread deliveries to the Starline Diner are several loaves short of the regular order. Clothes hanging on the line vanish. I know there's no such thing as a monster, but the thief has struck my family, as a matter of fact. One minute there were four pies sitting out on the kitchen counter to cool, and the next minute the back door was left open and one of the pies was missing. An old quilt left out on our porch disappeared one Saturday. There were no footprints on our lawn, but I did have a prickle of fear when I stood at the back door that morning, gazing into the woods. I thought I spied a solitary figure running through a thicket of trees, but it might have only been mist, rising from the ground.

No one knows who takes these things, whether pranks are being played, or someone—or something—is

truly in need, or if it is the creature that everyone assumes lives within the borders of our town. People in Sidwell argue as much as people do anywhere, but everyone agrees on one thing: Our monster can only be seen at night, and then only if you are standing at your window, or walking on a lane near the orchards, or if you happen to be passing our house.

We live on Old Mountain Road, in a farmhouse that is over two hundred years old, with nooks and crannies and three brick fireplaces, all big enough for me to stand in, even though I am tall for twelve. From our front door there's a sweeping view of the woods that contain some of the oldest trees in Massachusetts. Behind us are twenty acres of apple orchards. We grow a special variety called Pink. One of my ancestors planted the first Pink apple tree in Sidwell. Some people say Johnny Appleseed himself, who introduced apple trees all over our country, presented our family with a one-of-a-kind seedling when he wandered through town on his way out west. We make Pink applesauce, Pink apple cake, and two shades of Pink apple pie, light and dark. In the summer, before we have apples, we have Pink peach berry pie, and in the late spring there is Hot-Pink strawberry rhubarb pie, made from fruit grown

in the garden behind our house. Rhubarb looks like red celery; it's bitter, but when combined with strawberries it's delicious. I like the idea of something bitter and something sweet mixed together to create something incredible. Maybe that's because I come from a family in which we don't expect each other to be like anyone else. Being unusual is not unusual for the Fowlers.

My mother's piecrust is said to be the finest in New England and our Pink cider is famous all over Massachusetts. People come from as far away as Cambridge and Lowell just to try them. We bring most of our pies and cupcakes to be sold at the General Store that's run by Mr. Stern, who can sell as many as my mother can bake. I've always wished that I was more like her instead of my awkward, gawky self. As a girl my mother attended ballet lessons at Miss Ellery's Dance School in town, and she's still graceful, even when she's picking apples or hauling baskets of fruit across the lawn. But my arms and legs are too long, and I tend to stumble over my own feet. The only thing I'm good at is running. And keeping secrets. I'm excellent at that. I've had a lot of practice.

My mother has honey-colored hair that she pins up with a silver clip whenever she bakes. My hair is dark;

sometimes I don't even know what color it is, a sort of blackish brown, the color of tree bark, or a night that has no stars. It gets so tangled while I'm out in the woods that this year I cut it out of frustration, just hacked at it with a pair of nail scissors, and now it is worse than ever, even though my mother says I look like a pixie. Looking like a pixie was not what I was after. I wanted to look like my mother, who everyone says was the prettiest girl in town when she was my age, and now is the most beautiful woman in the entire county.

But she's also terribly sad. If my mother smiles it's something of a miracle, that's how rare it is. People in town are always kind to her, but they whisper about her, and refer to her as "poor Sophie Fowler." We aren't poor, though my mother has worked hard since her parents passed away and she came back to take over the orchard. All the same, I know why people feel sorry for her. I feel sorry for her, too. Despite the fact that my mother grew up in this town, she's always alone. In the evenings, she sits out on the porch, reading until the sun sinks in the sky and the light begins to fade. She reminds me of the owls in the woods that fly away whenever they see anyone. When we head down Main Street, she hurries with a walk that is more of a run, waving if one of her old high school friends calls hello but never stopping to chat.

She avoids the Starline Diner. Too sociable. Too many people she might know from the past. The last time we went in together it was my birthday and I begged for a special treat. Maybe because I've always had piles of cakes and pies and cupcakes, the dessert I yearn for is ice cream. It is perhaps my favorite food in the world, what I imagine real pixies would eat, if they ate anything at all. I love the shivery feeling eating ice cream gives you, as if you were surrounded by a cold cloud.

My mother and I sat in a corner booth and ordered ice cream sodas to celebrate my turning twelve. Twelve is a mysterious number and I'd always thought something exceptional would happen to me after that birthday, so I was feeling cheerful about the future, which is not usually my nature. I ordered chocolate, and my mother asked for strawberry. The waitress was a friendly woman named Sally Ann who'd known my mother growing up. She came over to our table, and when I blurted out that it was my birthday she told me that she and my mother had been best friends when they were twelve. She gazed sadly at my mother. "And now all these years have passed right by and I never hear a word from you, Sophie." Sally Ann seemed genuinely hurt that the friendship had ended. "Why are you hiding up there on Old Mountain Road when all your friends miss you?"

"You know me," my mother said. "I always kept to myself."

"That is not one bit true," Sally Ann insisted. She turned to me. "Don't believe her. Your mother was the most popular girl in Sidwell, but then she went off to New York City and when she came back she wasn't the same. Now she doesn't talk to anyone. Not even me!"

As soon as Sally Ann was called back to the counter, my mother whispered, "Let's go." We sneaked out the door before our ice cream sodas appeared. I don't know if my mother had tears in her eyes, but she looked sad as could be. Even sadder when Sally Ann ran after us and handed us our sodas to go in paper cups.

"I didn't mean to chase you away," Sally Ann apologized. "I was just saying I missed you. Remember when we were in ballet class together and we always went to the dance studio early so we could have the whole place to ourselves and dance ourselves silly?"

My mother smiled at the memory. I could see who she once was in the expression that crossed her face.

"I always liked Sally Ann," she said as we drove away. "But I could never be honest with her now, and how can you have a friend if you can't tell her the truth?"

I understood why my mother couldn't have friends, and why my fate was the same. I couldn't tell the truth ei-

ther, though sometimes I wanted to shout it out so much my mouth burned. I could feel the words I longed to say stinging me, as if I'd swallowed bees that were desperate to be free. *This is who I am.* That's what I'd shout. *I may not have a life like you do, but I'm Twig Fowler, and I have things to say!*

On most evenings and weekends we stayed at home and didn't venture out. That was our life and our fate and it wouldn't do any good to complain. I suppose you could call it the Fowler destiny. But I knew Sally Ann was right. It hadn't always been this way. I'd seen the photographs and the scrapbooks in a closet up in the attic. My mother used to be different. In high school she was on the track team and in the theater club. She always seemed to be surrounded by friends, ice-skating or having hot chocolate at the Starline Diner. She raised money for Sidwell Hospital's children's center by organizing a Bake-a-thon, baking one hundred pies in a single week that were sold to the highest bidders.

When she finished high school she decided she wanted to see the world. She was brave back then, and independent. She kissed her parents good-bye and left town on a Greyhound bus. She was young and headstrong and she'd dreamed of being a chef. Not someone who cooked in the Starline Diner, which she did

on weekends all through high school. A real chef in a world-class restaurant. Pastries were always her specialty. She ran off to London and then to Paris, where she lived in tiny apartments and took cooking classes with the best chefs. She walked along foggy riverbanks to farmers' markets where she bought pears that tasted like candy. At last she wound up in New York City. That was where she met my father. The most she would tell me was that a mutual acquaintance had thought they'd be perfect for each other, and as it turned out, they were. My father was waiting for her when her plane touched down, there to help her find her way in Manhattan. Before the taxi reached her new apartment, they'd fallen in love.

But they split up before my mother came back home for her parents' funeral—my grandmother and grandfather had been in a car crash in the mountains during mudslide season. It happened in the Montgomery Woods, where the trees are so old and tall it seems dark even at noontime and there are several hairpin turns that make your stomach lurch when you drive around them. It was terribly sad to lose my grandparents, even though I was just a little girl. I can remember them in bits and pieces: a hug, a song, laughter, someone reading me a fairy tale about a girl who gets lost and finds her way

home through the forest by leaving bread crumbs or following the blue-black feathers of crows.

When we came to Sidwell I was in the backseat of the old station wagon, which barely made it to Massachusetts. I was only a small child, but I remember looking out the window and seeing Sidwell for the first time. My mother changed our names back to Fowler from whatever my father's name was and she took over the farm. Every year she hires people traveling through town who need work. They pick apples and make the cider, but she does all the baking herself. If she's ever invited to a party or a town event, she writes a note politely declining. Some people say we're snobs because we once lived in New York and we expect life to race by with thrills like it does in Manhattan, and others say we think we're too good for a little town where not much ever changes. Still others wonder what happened to the husband my mother found and lost in New York.

People in Sidwell can talk all they want. They don't know the whole story. And if we're smart, they never will.

When we came home from New York I wasn't the only one in the backseat of the car.

That's why we arrived after dark.