HEDGEWITCH

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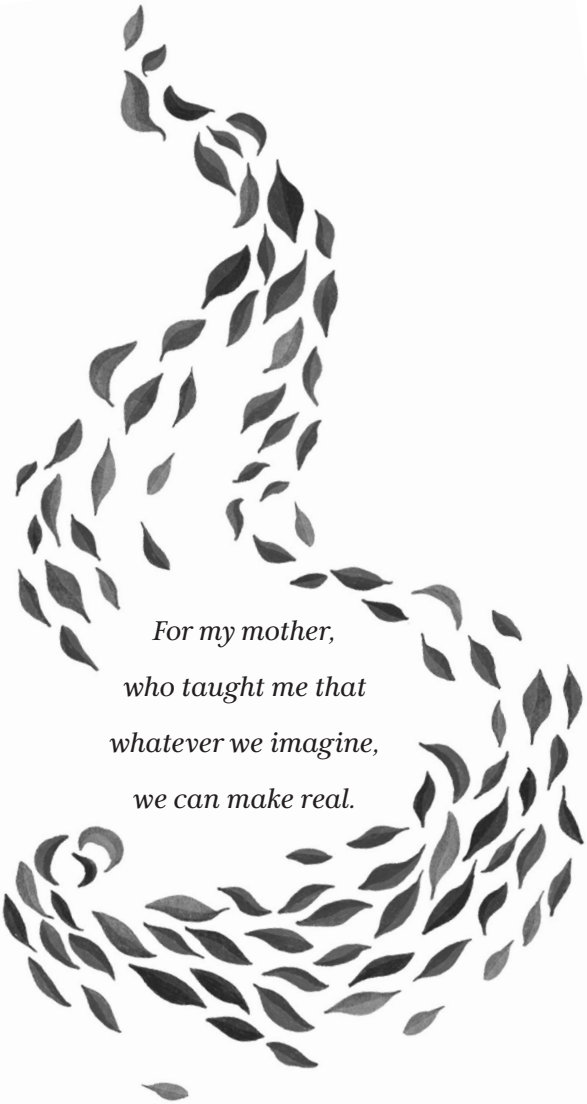
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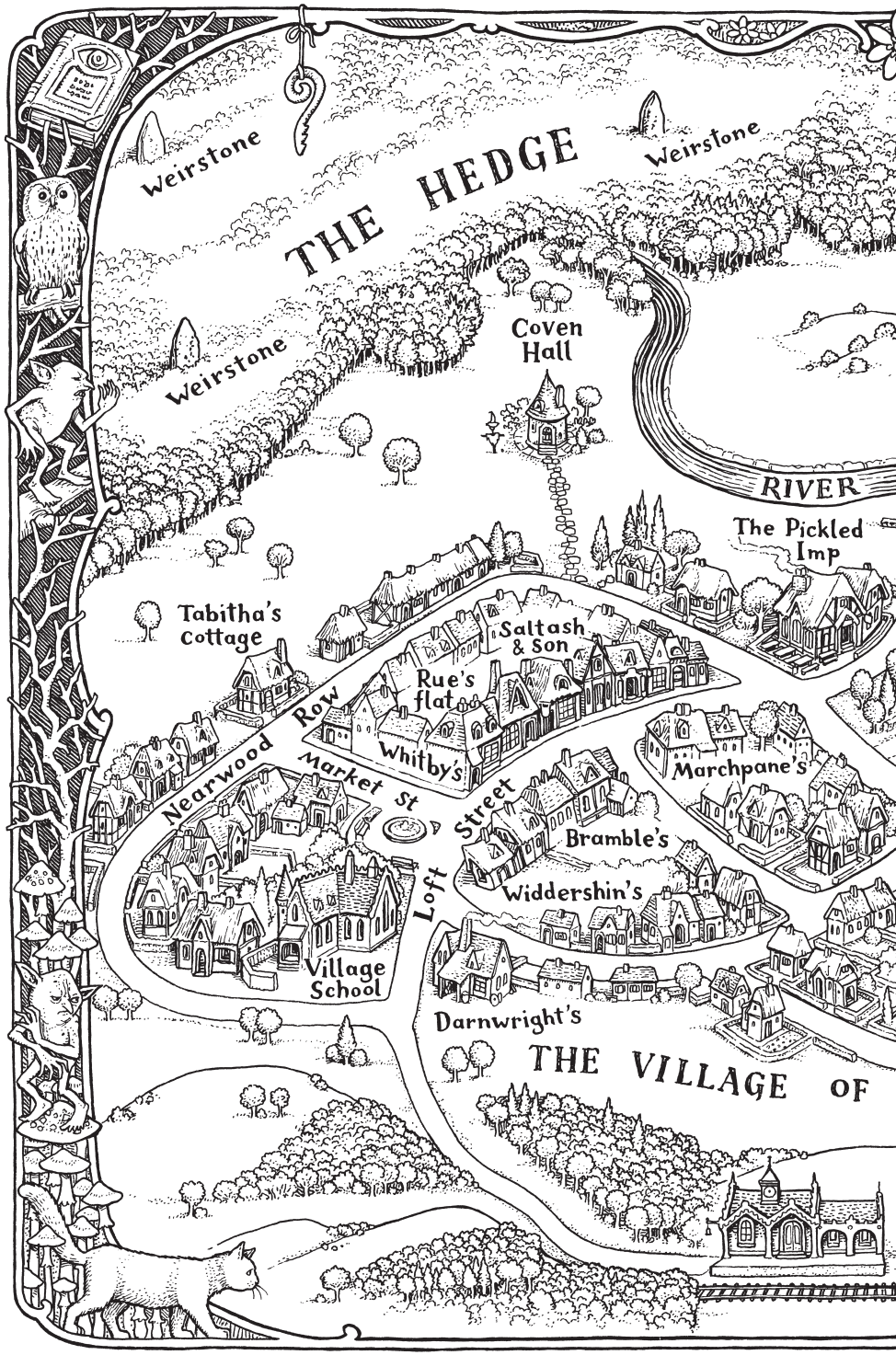


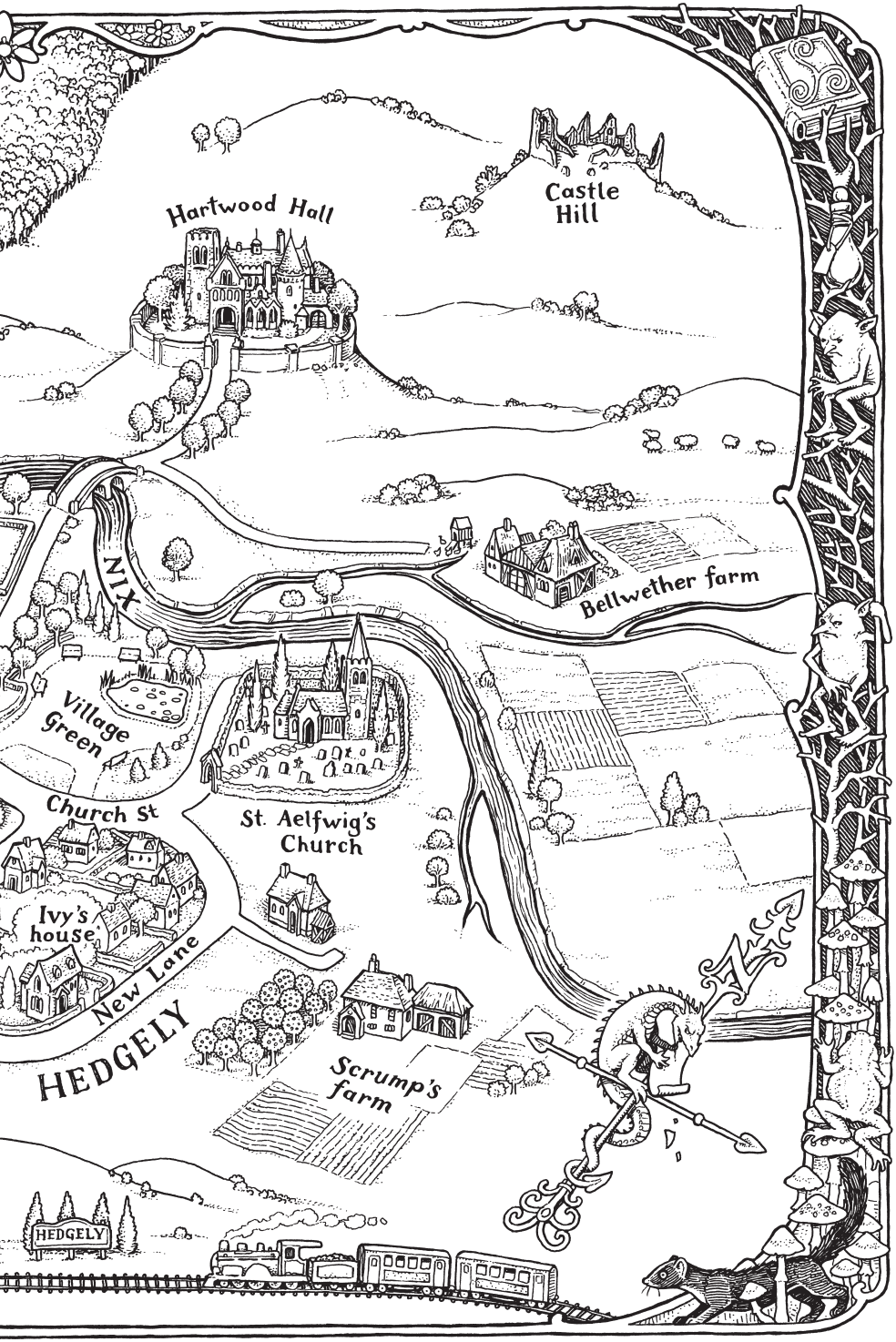
For my mother,

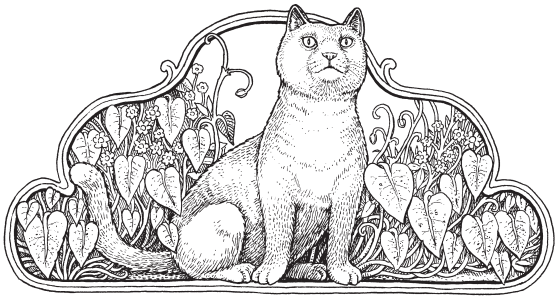
who taught me that

whatever we imagine,

we can make real.


THE HEDGE
Weirstone
Weirstone
Weirstone
Coven Hall
RIVER
The Pickled Imp
Tabitha's cottage
Saltash & Son
Rue's flat
Whitby's
Row
Nearwood
Market St
Marchpane's
Street
Bramble's
Widdershin's
Loft
Village School
Darnwright's
THE VILLAGE OF


Hartwood Hall
Castle Hill
Bellwether farm
XIN
Village Green
Church St
St. Aelfwig's Church
Ivy's house
New Lane
HEDGELY
Scrump's farm
HEDGELY



Chapter One

The Invisible Girl

Cassandra Morgan was hiding in the broom cupboard. It wasn't a bad place to hide, all things considered; a narrow window provided light to read by and an upturned bucket served well enough as a seat. If she ignored the smell of mildew and the odd inquisitive mouse, it was almost cosy.

Cassie knew all the best hiding places in the school: the dormitory roof, the hedges behind the gym, the unused classroom in the east wing. The broom cupboard had been nearest just then, when she'd heard the sound she dreaded most in the world: the horsey laughter of the hockey team, coming back from practice. She had

slipped into the cupboard just in time, the clatter of sticks and squelch of wet gym shoes passing by.

Her heartbeat returning to its regular speed, Cassie settled into a corner and pulled a book from her satchel. The dust jacket read *Intermediate Algebra*, but under the false cover the book was bound in purple cloth, with the title *Tales of Faerie* embossed in silver. The book had cost her a chocolate bar and half a bag of mint humbugs, sweets being the unofficial currency of Fowell House. Cassie had worked hard for her confectionery, doing other girls' prep for months, yet she would happily have given a hundred chocolate bars for this book. It was not at all like the other 'faery books' she'd read, full of dainty creatures prancing about on lily pads. The stories it contained were wild and strange; youths whisked away by faery queens and maidens who danced all night in toadstool circles; fiddlers who wandered into green hills where they played music for a night, only to return and find a hundred years had passed; and children who stumbled upon secret doors that led to cities of starlight.

Cassie didn't believe in faeries, not exactly, she was much too old for that. But she did wonder where the stories had come from. She had looked under **398.4 Paranatural and legendary phenomena** in the school

library and found only a single book on the shelf: *Faerie and Other Fallacies*, by A. B. Iffy. According to the author, sightings of faeries could be explained away by unusual weather phenomena or eating cheese before bed.

But it didn't really matter if the stories were true or not: for a few stolen moments each day, between classes or buried under the covers at night with a torch, Cassie could escape the hockey team, maths and tapioca pudding to walk in woodland glades beneath the moonlight.

The story she was reading just now was about a woodcutter who'd been given three wishes by a faery. Of course, he'd wished for useless things like fame and riches and to marry a princess.

If Cassie were offered three wishes, she knew exactly what she would ask for. First, she'd wish for more books. Fowell House had a library but it was full of dull textbooks and the girls weren't allowed any reading material that wasn't strictly educational. Their teachers argued that students had plenty of prep to keep them busy and ought to be improving their minds with practical, useful knowledge – not make-believe.

In spite of this, Cassie had managed to build her own secret library. There was a loose panel in the floorboards beneath her bed and under it was just enough space to

hide a few books. The only problem was that she'd read them so many times she knew the words by heart.

Cassie's second wish would be to go on an adventure, like the girls and boys in her stories. Nothing interesting ever seemed to happen at Fowell House and she was not allowed to go beyond school bounds. In class she often daydreamed about flying through the window, out over the high iron fence. Once free, she would travel the world, encountering friends and foes and saving the innocent from the wicked.

Cassie's third wish was something she rarely allowed herself to think about. It was her dearest longing, but over the years she had found it harder and harder to believe it would ever come true. The certainty she'd once felt had dwindled to a small trickle of hope. Cassie wished, more than anything, to see her mother again.

The school bell clanged. Cassie closed her book and gathered her things.

Fowell House was made up of two separate buildings: the lower school, where Cassie had lived until she turned eleven, and the upper school, where she went now. The upper school was built of red brick and had four wings extending from the main hall, like a great red beast with legs sticking out on either side. All the windows had bars

on them and rumour had it that Fowell House had once been a prison, which Cassie found all too easy to believe.

The dining hall was in the centre of the school, the belly of the great beast. Cassie made it just in time to join the queue for dinner. They were served the same thing they had every Monday: mutton stew; a grey mass of watery gravy with some lumpy bits in it, which might be meat if you were lucky. For vegetables they had potatoes, mashed without any butter so they had the consistency of wet sand, and cold peas. It was an unappetising prospect, but as Cassie had traded the last of her chocolate for the book, there was no question of skipping dinner.

She looked for a seat. The hockey team had the best spot, beside the only radiator in the hall. The other girls sat in groups or pairs, chatting about their day or playing with their food. Cassie found a seat as far from the hockey team and, unfortunately, the heating, as she could get. The two girls next to her shuffled away but Cassie was used to this and paid no notice. She loaded her fork with a lump of potato and steeled herself for the first mouthful.

As a junior, Cassie had made a few friends. They had all started together and been homesick for parents and familiar things. Yet every summer and Christmas the

other girls went home to their families, leaving Cassie behind. She couldn't invite them to stay with her during holidays and wasn't allowed to leave the school and go out to tea with them when their mothers came to visit. Thus, Cassie had never been popular and, as the years passed, she spent more and more time alone. She had managed this well enough, kept company by her books and daydreams, until she'd entered the upper school the previous year. It was then she'd made her fatal mistake – Cassie had angered the Bleacher.

Lizzie Bleacher was the most popular girl at Fowell House. She wasn't pretty, or clever, or even particularly good at Games, despite being captain of the hockey team. No, a solid girl, with arms like bolsters and a black belt in judo, Lizzie ruled the upper school with sheer terror. It was wise to stay on the Bleacher's good side if you liked the current shape of your nose.

Having your bloomers tied to the flagpole or your head flushed in the loo by Lizzie and her chums was just part of initiation into the upper school. You were supposed to put on a brave face and cry later into your pillow. You were *not* supposed to talk back and you certainly were not meant to correct the Bleacher on her use of the word 'dilemma'.

This act had cost Cassie the last poor remains of her happiness at Fowell House. Before, she'd been simply unpopular, now she was untouchable. To be seen with Cassie was to be added to the Bleacher's blacklist and she couldn't blame anyone for wanting to avoid that. The other girls would not make eye contact with her in the halls. If she asked them to pass the salt at dinner, they pretended not to hear. No one would share a book with her in class or pair up with her in Games.

If she was going to be invisible, Cassie decided, she'd make the transformation complete, so she kept her head down in the classroom, sat on her own during meals and spent most of her free time in hiding. After a while, even the teachers stopped noticing her. Sometimes she wondered what would happen if she disappeared. How long would it take before the school realised? Would they even notice?

'Girls, your attention please!' called a squeaky voice from behind her.

Every head turned towards the doorway. The woman standing there had grey hair in a poodle cut and was dressed head to toe in beige. It was Miss Pike, Cassie's least favourite teacher, although at Fowell House that was a tough competition.

It was unusual to see a teacher in the dining hall. They had their own common room upstairs where, rumour had it, they ate sausages and bacon for breakfast and sometimes had lemon drizzle cake for tea. Miss Pike stood in the doorway, looking down her long nose at them.

'I have come to inform you of that which you will no doubt hear about from your fellow students soon enough. We wish to prevent exaggerated rumours and unnecessary panic.' Miss Pike cleared her throat. 'The situation is under control and there is no cause for alarm or hysteria. All of your parents shall receive a letter from the headmistress explaining the circumstances and making it clear that the school is in no way responsible for what has happened. The police will visit us briefly tomorrow and you are not to bother them. If they speak to you, you shall give them your full cooperation. In the meantime, no student will be permitted to leave the grounds under any circumstance. Are there any questions?'

The girls exchanged wide-eyed glances. Cassie was just as curious as the others but unwilling to draw attention to herself by asking. Finally, one of the sixth-formers put up her hand.

'Please, miss, what has happened?'

'Did I not already tell you? A girl has gone missing.'