

INTO GOBLYN WOOD



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SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
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Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-3985-0383-0
eBook ISBN 978-1-3985-0384-7
eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-0385-4

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



For the Noisy Boys. Love you forever.



ARBOREANS

RUSHY BECK

THE WEALD

WESTERN EDGE

THE DEN

DITCHMOOR

School for the Wretched

GOBLYN WOOD

THE KNOLL
FAE DOMINION

WILDERMIST

WITHY HILL

MORROW RIVER

UNDERSTONE
Seely Village

RIVERTON

DRUICS HERE
(sometimes)

TO BOGGART
HILL

TO LONDON





Fairytellings

SPOONS ARE REAL; WANDS ARE NOT. SPROUTS exist; magic beans do not. That flickering shape you saw out of the corner of your eye was a beetle, or a moth, or maybe falling leaves, but definitely not a fairy. Or so people say.

But people say a lot of things and often they are wrong. In fact, that shape you saw most likely *was* a fairy. Because, unlike wands and magic beans, fairies have always been amongst us. And we would do well to remember it.

Truth is, there was a time when people and fairies were tangled up together like the roots of a tree. They didn't always get on. Fairies are an irritable bunch and people even more so. But they jostled along side by side, the people in their villages, the fairies in their hills. Sometimes they even loved each other, and children were born with one foot in each world – magical children with the powers of both kinds leaping through their veins.

Then, after many years of jostling along together, suddenly there was war. The fairies whipped up the winds, made the rivers run backwards and rotted the apples on the trees. The people marched to the hills and caved them in. And those who were neither one thing nor the other were cast out and hunted down.

By the end of it, everything was broken and everyone was worn out. So a truce was made. The fairies crept back into the hills, the people sheltered in their villages and it was agreed that each would stay out of the other's way.

And so, over many long centuries, the two worlds untangled. People stopped believing in fairies, then forgot about them altogether. Then they started telling their children that what they saw out of the corner of their eye – what they *knew* they saw – was nothing but a common garden beetle. And the children, despite their better instincts for these sorts of things, believed them.

So that's where we find ourselves. In a truce, of sorts. But if we still trusted our instincts, if we looked and listened closely, we would read strange patterns on the surface of the rivers, and we would hear the warnings on the wind.



CHAPTER ONE

The Wretched

HAZEL QUINCE'S STORY BEGAN LONG BEFORE she was born. But this book begins at ten o'clock in the morning on her eleventh birthday. It was a good day for a birthday – bright and gusty, perfect for flying kites. But Hazel didn't know how to fly a kite. In fact, she didn't even know it was her birthday. Instead, she was sitting at a workbench in the Ditchmoor School for the Wretched, peeling vegetables.

If the Ditchmoor School for the Wretched doesn't sound like a nice place, that's because it wasn't. It was an awful place, and children were very unhappy there. And if you think peeling vegetables sounds dull, well you're right about that too. But it was better than having them thrown at you. And the matrons' aim was fearfully good.

That morning, Ditchmoor was silent save for the scraping of knives, the click of matrons' heels on flagstones and the occasional bout of coughing. Fingernails clogged with dirt,

Hazel worked quickly and mechanically, peeling the skin of a potato into curling ribbons. She had secured a good spot at the end of the bench, beneath a broken windowpane. There she could sit alone in a patch of yellow sunshine and breathe the autumn air that blew in from the countryside beyond. She was just about to set her knife to a particularly mucky turnip when a sudden squall sent a tiny bird tumbling through the window and onto the tabletop. As it shook out its flustered feathers, a smile of recognition broke across Hazel's face.

'Mr Robinson!' she whispered. The robin cocked his head and looked up at her with a soft, bright eye. Hazel put down her knife and stretched out a finger. With a glad chirrup, the bird hopped on, bounced up to her shoulder and pecked affectionately at her ear. 'Ow! Stop it!' said Hazel, starting to worry that the other children would notice. She caught him gently between her hands and brought him down into her lap. But it was too late.

'Those things are dirty, you know.' It was Elsie Pocket, leaning down the table, smiling the sort of smile that precedes a bite. 'They have diseases.'

'I don't think—' Hazel began. But Elsie wasn't done.

'If Miss Fitch catches you,' she whispered, 'she'll lock you in the coal shed and put *that thing* in the Warden's pie.' Hazel knew this was true. It had only been a week since she'd last been stuffed in the coal shed and she could still taste the soot in her mouth. She smoothed the indignant robin's ruffled feathers then popped him carefully out of the window. Silently,

she returned to her peeling, hoping Elsie would lose interest. But she could sense the other children swapping glances.

‘We know about those beetles in your drawer too,’ Elsie said, wrinkling her nose.

‘And the fleas in your bed!’ sniggered Danny Huber.

Elsie tipped her head with a look of feigned concern. ‘We’re just trying to help you, Hazel.’

Hazel pressed her lips together and kept her eyes fixed on her turnip as if she couldn’t hear, or didn’t care. But she could feel her cheeks blazing. Elsie gave a snort of disgust and turned away, mouthing something to the others. There was a burst of laughter, followed by a yelp as Miss Fitch sent a cabbage whizzing overhead.

Hazel tried not to listen to what they were saying. What was the point? She’d heard it all before. They said she came from strange sorts; that she’d been born in a ditch; that she had insects, mice and birds in her drawer and pockets, even in her hair. *And, did you see her in the orchard yesterday, stock still, staring like an owl? Miss Fitch had to pull her ears to bring her round. Oh, and have you noticed her eyes? I swear, they change colour every time you look at them. So odd. So creepy. No wonder her mother dumped her here.*

No, it was nothing Hazel hadn’t heard before. And on that day, her eleventh birthday, she did what she always did: curled up like a hedgehog, waited for danger to pass and felt raw with shame.

*

Hazel had no memories of her mother, not even a flicker. All she had been told was that her mother had left her at Ditchmoor when she was two years old. She had meant to come back for her, but never did. Almost everyone at the school had the same story. Nevertheless, Miss Fitch and her matrons remembered the day Hazel arrived. There had been the usual business – the knock at the door, the child on the step – but, when Mrs Mudge took her to the washroom for a scrub-down, she discovered something strange.

Around the child's throat hung a black stone pendant on which a curious symbol was engraved. Swirled like a snail shell with a strike through the middle, it looked like a letter from some ancient alphabet – though what it meant was anybody's guess. Mrs Mudge tried to remove the peculiar necklace, but quickly discovered that it had no clasp. Scissors, cutters, pliers – nothing could break its silvery chain. Some of the matrons feared witchcraft; others sensed riches, but from that day on they all regarded Hazel with a wary eye. And so, the necklace stayed with its tiny owner and, as she grew, it grew with her. And whenever she had a bad day, whenever the other children pulled her too-large ears or made fun of her small, sturdy frame, she would hold the pendant tightly in her hand and try to imagine the person who had given it to her.

Hazel's eleventh birthday had, without a doubt, been a bad day. So as soon as she was in bed, top-to-tail with snoring Sara Pandey, she tugged her necklace from her collar and closed her

eyes. She always pictured the same scene: her and her mother by a roaring log fire, sharing a pot of rosehip tea. Hazel didn't know what a rosehip was, and Ditchmoor's fireplaces were invariably cold and black, but she had come across the scene in one of the school's rare storybooks, and it felt just right.

As she held the stone, smooth and warm in her hand, she embroidered a picture of her mother in her mind. She imagined thick, knotted hair, just like her own, the same subtly pointed features and, at the centre of each eye, a steady gleam of light, meant only for her. Usually, Hazel would follow these comforting thoughts down into the depths of sleep. Only that evening, sleep didn't come.

The night was strangely still. A chilly moon peered in through the dormitory window, illuminating the stiff ranks of bedsteads and the smooth faces of their occupants. Hazel squirmed onto her side, a vague unease weighing in her chest. She had felt it all afternoon – the faintest quivering in the air, a dim sense that the ground was less steady beneath her feet. She sighed heavily, blaming the greenish slop she'd been given for lunch. Clutching her pendant tighter, she tried to settle her tired limbs. Then, just as her muscles began to soften, she heard a sound in the courtyard outside.

Hazel's eyes flicked open. She sat up in bed, waiting, listening. The grey shapes of the sleeping children rose and fell with their breaths. Then she heard it again – a clear, three-note whistle. Anyone else would have thought it was the call of a nesting nightbird, but Hazel knew it was the sign.