

Grace Chetwin

ON ALL HALLOWS' EVE



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But there is no
road through the woods.

Rudyard Kipling





One



The two girls trudged along Horse Hollow Road in their Halloween costumes, the cold from Long Island Sound at their backs.

Meg scuffed the dying, drying leaves along the way, flicking them to her left across her sister's path, waiting . . .

Under the yellow streetlight, their breath made little round clouds, teasing clouds that danced ahead of them, then dissolved like will-o'-the-wisps. Meg opened her mouth and blew out hard, watching the little puff of vapor curl away. Yes, she thought, like will-o'-the-wisps—or speech balloons in a comic strip. A comic strip called *Red Riding*

Hood Bugs the Baby Witch. All she needed were words for Sue's balloons—words that should be coming any minute now . . .

She flicked the leaves again and, at last, her trick paid off.

"Meg! Cut it out!" Holding onto her witch's hat, Sue pushed past Meg and crossed the road. "Just because *you* don't want to go to the party, there's no need to take it out on me!"

Meg laughed in triumph. She saw her sister's words, peppered with asterisks and exclamation points, dancing in front of Sue's baby face. How easy it was to get Sue's goat!

Still, Meg was glad of an excuse to cross the road for there was something about that part of Horse Hollow that gave her the creeps.

She looked back over her shoulder and shivered, as though cold fingers had touched the nape of her neck. She always shivered when she saw that broken-down fence and the ruined cottage behind it. She could not say why but they filled her with a strong sense of foreboding. A cold came from that place, even in warm sunlight—and it had been really warm when they had come to Locust Valley early in September, a month or so before.

Of course, she had not wanted to leave England.

"You'll like it in the States, you'll see," Father had told her.

"But school's only just started!"

"Believe it or not, they have schools over there too," Father had replied. "And since when did you like the one you're at now? Come on, Meg, face it. Wherever you've gone, you've been unhappy and fighting inside a week!"

"That's not true! I've just started Latin classes with Mrs. Drew, and she says I'm off to a good start."

Father had laughed then, the laugh that said that Meg

would not get her way this time.

"I won't go, I won't!" she had told herself over and over every night in bed. She had even tried to make a pact with Sue to run away, but baby Sue had refused. "Oh, well. I shall just go off to Wales by myself until they've all gone, and then Gran and Grandad Jenkins will have to take care of me."

But she hadn't gone off, and here she was, in glorious Locust Valley, on Long Island, U.S.A. She thought about the kids she'd left behind in England. Even the ones she'd really disliked were better than the ones here. She hated the way they stared at her, and the way they laughed at how she spoke. The only thing worse was the way the grown-ups gushed.

"What a cute accent," they said, every time she opened her mouth. Oh, she could *spit!*

She kicked savagely at a fallen branch and ran up behind Sue.

How Sue waddles when she is mad, Meg thought. Like Donald Duck! And how crazy her hair looks, flying out like that around the rim of her pointy hat. It flared to bright yellow under the streetlight. Like a halo—or an undercooked doughnut! Meg laughed aloud.

Sue had Father's silky blonde hair, of course, not the wiry black thatch she'd gotten from Mother. Like brambles, it was, especially under the brush.

Sue had Father's round pink English face too while she herself had a dark thin Welsh face—a Celtic face, so Mother said.

"Remember you're a Celt, and a Jenkins, like me. And that is why you are called Myfanwy, after Gran Jenkins, and Gwyneth, for Great-Aunt Jones." *Myfanwy* meant "my fine

one", as Mother told her again and again.

But even in kindergarten, her name had brought her nothing but trouble. "They won't say it right," she told her mother. "They call me 'Miffie' and laugh when I get mad." Day after day she came home crying, until Mother went into school to tell the teacher to call her by a new name: *Meg*, taking the *M* from Myfanwy and the *G* from Gwyneth. Even then it was a long time before the children changed from "Miffie" to "Meg."

"Never mind," Mother had consoled her. "One day you won't be in school any longer, and then you'll be proud of your names." And Mother would tell Meg wonderful stories about old Wales to cheer her up, especially about Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's witch sister.

"Do you think her blood is in us, Mother?" Meg would ask.

"Perhaps," Mother always said. "Perhaps."

Not that anybody in Locust Valley could care about Meg's Celtic blood, or Morgan le Fay. At least the kids back in England had asked her to tell them stories sometimes, in the lunch line or out on the playground, and for a while she would feel all warm, and part of things. But these kids thought her strange to be talking about such matters—especially that big bully Kenny Stover.

From the first, he had mocked her accent loudly in front of the others. And when he had overheard her trying to tell about how Morgan le Fay had given King Arthur his sword, Excalibur, Kenny really had shown his dislike. "Hey, come off it, you guys," he'd said. "Quit listening to that stuff. That Wilson kid's too weird!"

Wilson! Meg sighed. Well, at least he'd never heard of any

Miffie! She had watched him swagger off down the hall, longing to pay him back. But she hadn't—yet. If she ever heard him coming down the corridor, she would dodge around the corner and not come out until he had gone.

Now to make things worse, he'd found out about her violin.

It was all Mother's fault.

In spite of Meg's protests, Mother had stormed the principal's office on the first day and got her extra time off from school to practice. As a consequence she had had to play for the whole school in assembly last week. Since then, there had been no holding Kenny Stover.

Now whenever he saw her, he would swing an imaginary fiddle up onto his shoulder and make the strangest whining noises somewhere up his nose. Of course, everybody laughed and avoided her now as if she had the plague. Oh, bother Kenny Stover and her violin.

"But it's not Kenny really," Sue told her. "And it's not the violin, either. It's you. You act so stuck up. Sallie Carpenter leaves to practice ice-skating four days a week, and no one minds her."

Meg sighed again. Even her own sister turned against her when the chips were down. More than ever she wanted to run away somehow, back to Gran and Grandad Jenkins.

"Hey—Sue! Mother told us to stick together!" Shifting her Red Riding Hood basket onto one arm, Meg snatched at Sue's black witch's shawl—Mother's favorite evening shawl, actually.

But Sue shook her off in a rare fit of independence. "She also said a lot of other things—not that they'll make much difference to you."

"Oh, just listen to her: differrrrrence, differrrrrence." Meg rolled the r's to the point of absurdity. "You should just hear yourself." She drew alongside Sue. "You don't sound American at all. And you don't sound English anymore, either. You don't sound like anything."

"I do so," Sue cried, forced at last to slow her pace. Too many crisps and toffees, Father said. *Potato chips* and *candy* they called them here. Meg made a face. Would she ever get it straight? Sue had already. She always managed to land on her little pink feet. Why, she had even wormed her way into the fifth grade instead of the fourth where she belonged. If Sue could have gotten into Meg's sixth grade class, she would have, Meg was sure. And friends! Sue had so many friends already!

But she doesn't have everything, Meg comforted herself. She doesn't have my long skinny legs, and she can't even *squeeze* into my jeans. And she can't run for miles and miles without getting out of breath as I can.

The girls went on in silence. The malicious amusement faded slowly from Meg's face, leaving her features pinched and sullen under the bright red hood.

They reached the T-junction with Bayville Road.

Meg had not wanted to go to this stupid party thing, but Mother, doing a real Mother this time, had literally pushed her through the front door.

"Go on out," she'd said. "Mix, make friends. And don't come home until at least half past eight!"

"Let *her* go!" Meg had yelled back. "She's the one that's so popular! She's the one with all the friends!" But Mother had already closed the front door in her face.

"Mix, my eye," Meg grumbled to herself. "It's all right for her, staying at home all the time, writing, with editors'

deadlines as an excuse. How many friends has *she* made? She should try practicing what she preaches, for a change. How would she like having to sit on her own in the schoolyard, or having to run the risk of meeting Kenny Stover at any minute?"

A brisk wind along Bayville Road caught the rim of Sue's hat. It was so cold. But it was only ordinary cold, not like the cold by the ruined cottage fence. Just the thought of it made Meg shudder.

Strung across the Bayville Road by the school gate, a sagging banner dripped mist beads down onto the street. Meg could not read the letters clearly in the darkness, but she knew what they said:

Halloween Party
Mystery Barrel Bobbing for Apples.
Bazaar. Costume Parade.
&
Hayrides
October 31. from 7 to 10 P.M.

As Meg and Sue drew closer, they could see the arc lights flooding the playing field and clusters of silhouetted figures hurrying towards it.

Faint canned music throbbed on the air.

Catching the excitement in spite of herself, Meg quickened her pace. Maybe out of the regular school routine, things would be better. Maybe in all the fun, someone would talk to her. And maybe, maybe Kenny Stover might not be there—or if he were, he might not make her look foolish in front of everyone.

Yes, it might be all right, she told herself. It might not be so bad after all. . . .