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*.