



A PINCH OF MAGIC

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Prologue

THE PRISONER GAZED OUT OF HER WINDOW. IT was one of four in Crowstone Tower, the tall stone cage in which she was being held.

Here, if she kept her eyes up, she could pretend that the prison walls far below did not exist, and that she was looking upon the world from a castle, or perhaps a mountain.

But today she was done with make-believe; pretending she was in a dream, pretending someone was going to save her. The girl wrapped her arms more tightly around herself, against the cruel wind that whipped through the bare windows. It smelled of the marshes: briny with a whiff of fish. The tide was out, leaving only a vast expanse of mudflats stretching before her. In places she could see gulls pecking at stranded fish, tussocks of marsh grass, and a battered, abandoned rowing boat. A tendril of her long, tawny hair flew in between her lips. She tugged it free, tasting salt, and leaned over the cold, scratched stone sill as far as she dared.

The windows were not barred; they didn't need to be. The

height of the tower was deterrent enough. The noise of the crows circling outside was constant. At first she had thought of the birds as friends, chattering to keep her company. Sometimes, one would land on the sill. Pecking, watching, unblinking. The caws began to sound less friendly. Accusing, mocking. *Marsh witch*, the crows seemed to croak, in the voices of the villagers. *Came in off the marshes, she did, killing three of our own.*

She had never meant to hurt anyone.

The scratches in the stone stretched the length of the windowsill, one for each day she had been imprisoned. Once, she had known how many there were, but she no longer counted.

She walked a lap of the circular tower room, tracing her fingers over the stone. There were more scratches in the wall's surface: some shaped into angry words, others deep gouges where she had thrown things. Chipping away, but never breaking free.

A pale red moon had appeared in the sky yesterday, which had set all the warders' tongues wagging. The moon being visible in daylight was a bad omen at any time, but a *red* moon was worse still. A red moon was a blood moon, a sign that wrong-doing was afoot.

The girl explored the rough stones until she found the small gap in the mortar which she had discovered when she hadn't long been in the tower, assessing the walls for possible footholds. When she had still had hopes of escaping. In the

crevice she had wedged a broken chunk of stone, hidden from the prison warders. It was too small to be used as a weapon, but the warders would no doubt confiscate it if they knew about it.

She worked the stone loose and held it in her palm, hardly recognising her own hand. Her once brown skin was dirty and grey, her nails ragged. Using the stone, she scratched on the inside walls as if she were writing with chalk. She wrote out a single word: a name . . . the one who had wronged her. With each letter she focused, thinking dark thoughts, before letting the stone fall from her fingers. She didn't need it any more. This was the last thing she would write.

She stared across at Crowstone. At high noon, a boat was to take her across the water, to the crossroads. There the gallows were being prepared at this very moment. It would be her first and last journey to the mainland. Her last journey anywhere.

It was there she was to be executed.

She wondered how the warders felt about transporting a supposed witch across the marshes. She would be shackled in irons, of course, which reputedly rendered witches powerless, but even the most fearless warder would be unsettled to be near her once she was out of the tower. Especially under a blood moon.

Her eyes drifted to the marshes, where it had all begun on a little boat one stormy night. Where three lives had been lost.

'I never meant to hurt anyone,' she whispered, gripping the sill with numb fingers. It was true, she hadn't wanted to cause anyone harm *then*, but now, revenge was all she could think of.

And she would have it, even though she knew it would not save her.



Chapter One Trick or Treat

BETTY WIDDERSHINS FIRST LEARNED OF THE family curse on the night of her birthday. It was her thirteenth, a number considered unlucky by some, but Betty was too practical to believe in all that. She liked to think she was too practical to believe in most superstitious nonsense, despite having grown up surrounded by it.

It was a Saturday; always a busy night in Betty's home, which was the village inn. The Poacher's Pocket was the rowdiest place on the isle of Crowstone, and had been in the Widdershins family for generations. It now belonged to her granny, also named Betty but whom everyone called Bunny to avoid confusion. They lived there with Betty's sisters, Felicity (known as Fliss) who was the eldest, and six-year-old Charlotte who would only answer to 'Charlie'.

Betty's birthday also happened to fall on Halloween. As she and Charlie galloped downstairs, their trick or treat

costumes billowed behind them in a satisfying, villainous way. In fact, the outfit was helping Betty to feel rather daring, which she was glad of, as she and Charlie were about to break Granny's biggest rule. Only Charlie didn't know it yet.

As they threw open the door to the lounge bar, warm beer-scented air hit Betty's nostrils through the holes in her skeleton mask. She picked up Granny's favourite horseshoe which had clattered to the floor, and placed it back above the doorframe. Charlie did her best witch's cackle to announce their entrance and swished her cape. Grabbing Granny's broomstick from the corner she began dancing round the scuffed tables and mismatched chairs, chanting as her eyes sparkled in her painted green face.

'Trick or treat, trick or treat . . . the marshes are misty and sugar is sweet!' She twirled and hopped like an imp as the regulars looked on in amusement.

'Careful, Charlie!' Betty called, eyeing her sister's cape near the crackling fires. She had lit them earlier after she and Charlie had carved pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns. She adjusted her long, black cloak and motioned impatiently to Granny, who was wiping down the bar.

'We're off now, Granny,' she said, thankful her face was hidden. She had been planning this evening for weeks, feeling only excitement, but now that it had come to carrying it out she couldn't quite believe her own disobedience. She hoped her grandmother would put the tremor in her voice

down to excitement, and not the nerves that were buzzing inside her like marsh midges.

Granny stamped over. She stamped everywhere instead of walking, slammed doors instead of closing them, and mostly shouted rather than talked.

‘Off out scrounging?’ she said, blowing grey hair out of her face.

‘It’s *trick or treating*,’ Betty corrected. ‘And everyone does it.’

Granny tutted. ‘I’m well aware of what everyone does, thank you. And it looks like scrounging to me, when you could be useful here.’

‘I’ve been useful all day,’ Betty muttered snippily. Under the hot mask her bushy hair itched against her neck. ‘So much for birthdays.’

Granny snorted. Birthday or not, all the Widdershins had to help run the place, even Charlie.

‘Only go around the green,’ Granny ordered. ‘No further, do you hear? And I want you back by—’

‘Supper time,’ Betty finished. ‘I know.’

‘Well, mind you are – remember what happened last year.’ Granny’s voice softened. ‘There’s birthday cake for later.’

‘Oooh,’ said Charlie, pausing her imp dance at the mention of food.

Betty caught Fliss’s eye as Granny was called away to serve a customer.

‘Are you sure you won’t come with us?’ Betty asked, a note of pleading entering her voice. It had always been such fun,

the three of them getting into their Halloween costumes each year. 'It won't be the same without you.'

Fliss shook her head, her dark, glossy hair swishing over her shoulders. There was a faint smear of green on her perfect upturned nose, from where she had painted Charlie's face earlier. 'I'm too old for all that. Besides, I'm needed here.'

'Or maybe you don't want to miss Will Turner coming in?' Betty joked. 'Or is it Jack Humble this week? Who's getting the Fliss kiss? I can't keep up, *Flit*.'

Fliss glared. 'I've told you not to call me that!'

Betty rolled her eyes, deciding to keep quiet about the paint on her sister's nose. Since her birthday, Fliss hadn't been herself. She was quiet, even moody at times, and clammed up every time Betty asked what was troubling her.

'Betty?' Fliss said, glancing warily at Granny. 'You *will* stay by the green, won't you?'

Under her mask, Betty gulped. She crossed her fingers within the folds of her cloak, and fibbed. 'Yes. We'll stay by the green.'

Fliss's expression was unreadable as she gazed past Betty to the window. 'It's best you stay close, anyway. It's looking a bit foggy out there. Taking a ferry over the marshes could be dangerous.' She turned away to serve as a hoity-toity regular named Queenie rapped on the counter impatiently.

Betty rolled her eyes at her sister's back. 'Mustn't do this, can't do that,' she muttered under her breath. What had happened to Fliss since her birthday? True, she was as vain as

she'd always been, often staring broodily into an old mermaid mirror Granny had given her, but all her fun had been blown away with the candles on her cake. In fact, she had started sounding *exactly* like Granny.

Increasingly, Betty felt as though her life at the Poacher's Pocket was a corset tightening around her, with Granny pulling one string and now Fliss yanking the other, lacing her in so she couldn't breathe. Tonight, Betty was determined to cut those strings, if only for a little while.

She called to Charlie, who had interrupted a domino game to proudly show off the gap where her front teeth had fallen out. Together, Betty and Charlie headed for the doors, weaving past tables of familiar faces that Betty knew as well as her own. They were almost at the door when Charlie's foot tangled in Betty's cloak and she tripped, bumping into a table where a sour-faced fellow named Fingerty sat alone. He made an unfriendly noise between a grunt and a growl, scowling as his drink slopped against the side of the glass.

'Sorry,' Betty mumbled, hurrying past.

Icy air snaked round her ankles as she and Charlie squeezed past more customers who were piling inside. Then they were out into the freezing night. But, oh – what a night ... *freedom!* Or at least it would be, once they were firmly on the ferry in a few minutes' time. Betty silently cheered, shivering as much from anticipation as from the cold. She felt a flutter of anxiety, too. Fliss had been right: it *was* looking a little misty out here. As far as Betty knew

(for she had been checking) there was no fog forecast. Yet she also knew the marshes were unpredictable, and that sometimes the forecasts were wrong.

Charlie's breath came in white puffs as she ran ahead, shaking her empty cauldron, the cold not bothering her. Betty strode after her, her eyes sweeping Nestynook Green. There were a few costumed people going from door to door, and she counted five pumpkins glowing on doorsteps. Most of the houses, however, were in darkness. Many people had no wish to be disturbed by masked strangers – for good reason.

Last year, the Halloween fun had been cut short when the bell of Crowstone had started clanging. It was an alarm, and meant that across the marshes the prison beacons had been lit, signifying danger. Calls of 'Trick or treat!' had been replaced with cries of 'Prisoners on the loose! Everyone inside, lock your doors!' Betty and her sisters had raced back to the Poacher's Pocket and sat upstairs, their noses pressed up to Betty's window. While Fliss nervously chewed her nails and Charlie complained about losing out on sweets, Betty had fizzled with excitement, secretly hoping the prisoners might stay on the run for a few days just to shake Crowstone up a bit. Escapes were rare, and growing up in the prison's shadow meant they could almost forget how close it was – and how dangerous it might be. The girls had watched and waited, but apart from two prison warders searching with lanterns they saw no one. By breakfast the excitement was over, for they'd heard the felons had been caught on

the marshes. Betty had always followed any tales of escape with interest, as she sometimes felt like a prisoner herself. Unfortunately, the story of inmates on the loose had been added to Granny's collection of excuses which prevented the girls from wandering too far.

Snapping back to the present, Betty glanced back at the Poacher's Pocket. Fliss had once described it as a knackered old racing pigeon, with its loose tiles and shutters flapping like raggedy feathers. It perched at the edge of Nestynook Green, its weathered bricks a patchwork of the years gone by. Time had nudged it like an elbow, and now the whole building slumped drunkenly to the left. The light from the windows glowed amber, broken by moving figures within and a few hagstones and other lucky charms Granny had strung up. No one was outside, no one suspected.

Good. The possibility of being hauled back by an enraged Granny was both scary and humiliating. Sure, Granny had a foul temper, but it was the consequences Betty feared most. If Granny found out what Betty had planned, she would never let her take Charlie out alone again . . . and any chance of adventure would vanish. The corset laces would tighten, squeezing the life out of her.

Already Charlie had knocked at the first house, chorusing 'Trick or treat!' before sweets were popped into her cauldron. She skipped back to Betty, unwrapping a sticky-beak toffee from Hubbards', the sweet shop. 'Didn't you bring anything to put your treats in?'

‘Nah, I’ll just pinch a couple of yours,’ said Betty, poking through the cauldron until she found her favourite: a marsh-melt. A plume of powdered sugar wafted off it as she stuffed it into her mouth, crunching through the wafer shell into the whipped centre. She checked the clock on the craggy old church as they neared the lane beside it. Seven minutes. Under the mask, her temples prickled with sweat and her pulse began to race. *We can’t get caught, not now . . . not when we’re this close.* With another glance back at the inn she took Charlie’s sleeve and urged her towards the lane. ‘This way. I’ve got a surprise for you.’

‘A surprise?’ Charlie looked up at her, wide-eyed. ‘But you told Granny we were only going round the green. You said—’

‘I know what I said.’ Betty shepherded Charlie in front. ‘But you and I are about to have a little adventure, which is why I need you to keep this our secret. Can you do that?’

Charlie gave a mischievous, gappy grin between chews. She nodded, her pigtails bobbing. ‘What kind of adventure?’

‘We’re going to Marshfoot.’

‘Jumping Jackdaws!’ Charlie’s huge green eyes suddenly looked even huger. ‘*Marshfoot?* But that’s . . . that’s on the ferry!’

‘Yes, it is.’ Betty patted her pocket, feeling the weight of three coins there. It had taken her weeks to scrape together the return ferry fare, at a cost of a silver Raven each. She had managed it by saving the small amount of pocket money Granny allowed them, as well as whatever she came across

when sweeping the floor of the Poacher's Pocket. She'd hoarded every coin: Rooks and Feathers. They'd all added up, and now that Fliss wasn't coming there was money to spare.

'But Betty, we'll get caught!'

'Not this time.'

'That's what you always say before something goes wrong.'

Charlie had a point here, but Betty wasn't to be deterred. 'I've got it all figured out.' She was so confident that she had even thought up a new motto, but she was saving that.

'What if Granny finds out?' Charlie whispered, half gleeful and half afraid. 'We'd be in for it then!'

'She won't,' said Betty. 'Why do you think I chose tonight? Everyone's going to be dressed up, or wearing masks. It's perfect! If no one knows it's us, no one can rat on us to Granny.'

'What's in Marshfoot?' Charlie asked. 'Bigger houses? More sweets?'

'Better than that.' Betty shooed Charlie further down the darkened lane. 'There's a *fairground*. Bobbing apples, and soul cakes, and a prize for the best costume . . . and candyfloss!' *And adventure*, she added in silent defiance. She didn't care where they escaped to – as long as it was out of Crowstone. Marshfoot was both far enough to feel satisfyingly daring and new, and close enough to get away with it. Sneaking off to the unknown like this felt like scratching an itch that had been there all her life.

'Candyfloss!' Charlie breathed. Since she'd lost her front

teeth her sweet little voice had a slight lisp to it. She slipped a hot, sticky hand into Betty's. 'But it's so far away. What if we don't make it back in time for cake?'

'We'll easily make it back,' said Betty. 'I've got it all planned. And they're not going to eat my birthday cake without me! But hurry – we've only got a few minutes before the ferry leaves.'

They slipped further down the lane, rounding the corner. Beneath the mask, Betty grinned triumphantly, her heart racing. They were really going to do it! They would finally get to see what life beyond Crowstone was like, and all because of her.

Betty loosened the cloak round her neck and they started to run. Beside her, Charlie counted glowing jack-o'-lanterns and carved turnips in windows, pointing out one she had made yesterday which was on the school steps. They followed them along the cobbled streets like wraiths leading them to the Misty Marshes.

Soon the houses became fewer, and then the crossroads were in sight and there were no houses at all. Instead, some distance away across the marshes, rows of tiny prison-cell windows glowed yellow, like watchful eyes in the blackness. Rising even higher, another light flickered from a solitary tower that loomed over the rest of the building.

Charlie slowed to a walk, and they sidestepped to allow a couple of people, hurrying for the ferry, to pass. 'How long has Father been in there now?' she asked.

‘Charlie!’ Betty scolded, hoping those in front hadn’t heard. She lowered her voice. ‘Two years, eight months.’ She paused, rummaging through dates in her head. ‘And four days.’

‘How long till he gets out?’

Betty sighed, feeling a familiar mixture of emotions at the thought of their father: sadness, frustration, disappointment. Like their mother’s death, his absence had hit Betty and Fliss harder than it had Charlie. Even if Barney Widdershins was, in Granny’s own words, a useless toe rag, Betty couldn’t help but feel some sort of loyalty towards him. He wasn’t much of a father, but he was the only one they had. ‘Two years, three months and twenty-six days,’ she answered finally.

‘Why you whispering?’ Charlie asked. She had been only three when their father was taken away, and the lack of contact since meant she had never been close to him, merely curious. ‘You’re always telling Fliss there ain’t no point getting ’barrased about him being in there.’

‘Embarrassed,’ Betty corrected. If they lived anywhere else she *would* squirm about it, but almost everyone who lived near the prison did so because they were related to someone on the inside. ‘No, there isn’t. But don’t blab about personal stuff when we’re meant to be undercover. You never know who’s listening. Now get a move on, I can see the ferry waiting.’

‘Oh!’ Charlie grinned and pulled her witch’s hat lower on her head, clearly enjoying being up to no good.

Betty ran ahead, with Charlie scampering behind. Her

gaze fixed on the prison. Which cell was Father's? From here it was impossible to tell. Prisoners often moved. He might not even be in the same cell now, not that Betty would know. It was six months since Granny had last taken Fliss and Betty with her to visit. Apparently their father had claimed he was too miserable and ashamed to see his daughters, or even respond to their letters.

Betty glared at the prison. *He should have thought of that before he got himself pinched.* She gave the prison a last scowl before looking away, determined not to let her father ruin tonight like he ruined everything else. They reached the ferry, running the last few steps. Evidently the fog warning hadn't changed for the worse, as the ferryman appeared unconcerned about the wispy mist that was wreathing around the boat. There were a handful of costumed people on it already, who also appeared to be heading for the Halloween Fayre. Betty paid their fares then squeezed on to the narrow seat next to Charlie.

She glanced gleefully back the way they had come. Had they really got away with it? It had been so easy! Still, she tapped her toe impatiently until the ferryman pushed off, and then they were gliding over the water.

'Adventure awaits the audacious!' Betty whispered in excitement. (It was the first time she had spoken her new motto aloud, and she had been dying to say it all day.)

Charlie was unimpressed. 'What colour candyfloss do you think they'll have?'

‘Green, perhaps, or orange ...’ Betty trailed off, staring back to shore. A little way along from the ferry was the harbour. Somewhere among the other boats was their own, a ramshackle ensemble of rotting wood that their father had won in a bet and had been trying to fix up ever since, without success. Perhaps he never would. For once, Betty didn’t care. She didn’t need Father, or his boat, for adventures. Here, on the marshes by night, she wasn’t just the middle Widdershins sister: plain and blunt against Fliss’s prettiness and charm, and sensible next to Charlie’s cuteness and mischief. Here, she was Betty the Brave; Betty the Explorer! She could go anywhere, do anything!

Everything looked different, more eerie and mysterious, and in the distance she could see strange flickering lights, like magical orbs hovering above the water’s surface. People called them will-o’-the-wisps. Some said they were the souls of those who’d died on the marshes, others believed they were mischievous sprites, trying to lead travellers astray.

She stared towards the prison. They would pass this first, located on the island of Repent, which was one of three nearby craggy isles on the marshes. The second, smaller island was known as Lament, where all of Crowstone’s dead were buried. Betty had been there only twice, most recently when her mother died shortly after Charlie had been born. A pang of sadness crept over her at the memory, still raw even now.

The final island was called Torment. It was out of bounds

for those who lived on mainland Crowstone. Those on Torment had been exiled: people who had been released from the prison, but still had punishment to serve by not being allowed to return to the mainland, or those who had committed crimes not serious enough to be locked away for, but enough to warrant being banished. Collectively, the three places were still part of Crowstone and were known as the Sorrow Isles. Along with mainland Crowstone, they were all the girls had ever known – and the farthest any of them had ever travelled.

Tonight, after all Betty's longing, that was about to change. It was her birthday gift to herself, she decided. A step towards the life she wanted, one of opportunities and adventure; one where she would have golden sand crusted under her fingernails instead of coal dust.

The boat had not gone far when Betty became aware that something was happening. The Misty Marshes were living up to their name: the prison's lights had vanished. Instead, all that could be seen was thick, swirling grey mist, and it was curling around them, chilling their bones. Her scalp prickled with dread. A mother sitting opposite drew her small son closer, muttering in concern.

'Betty?' Charlie tugged at her sleeve. 'What if the boat gets lost, or we can't find our way back from Marshfoot—'

Betty swallowed. Granny had used many excuses over the years to avoid taking the girls too far, and now those warnings came flooding back. *'We could miss the return ferry . . . lost*

boats have struck rocks and sunk into the marshes . . . people say there's still slavers in these parts, just waiting to snatch people away and sell them . . . Suddenly, she didn't feel so smart or brave. She felt rather silly, and worried.

'It's getting hard to see!' the lady with the young boy called to the ferryman.

'Aye,' he grunted. 'May just be a pocket. If it don't clear in a minute we'll have to turn back.'

Charlie's bottom lip wobbled. 'B-but my candyfloss . . .'

Betty didn't answer, fighting to appear calm for her sister's sake. Perhaps Granny *hadn't* been too cautious. Perhaps she was right to be afraid . . .

The temperature plummeted as thick, freezing fog wrapped around the boat, frighteningly fast. This wasn't a pocket. It was all around them. The ferryman stopped rowing, lifting his lantern. Betty felt Charlie's small hands reaching for her. She wrapped an arm round her sister's shoulders, and lifted her free hand in front of her face. It was almost touching her nose before she could see it.

A huge bump shook the boat. There were screams and gasps as it rocked dangerously on the water.

'What's happening?' Charlie's voice was high-pitched with fear. Her fingers dug into Betty's arm painfully.

'I don't know!' Betty gasped, clutching the side of the boat. Freezing water slopped up her elbow. 'Did we hit a rock?'

I want to go home! Charlie wailed, all thoughts of candyfloss forgotten.

The boat lurched again as a familiar figure loomed over the two girls. Betty gave a squeak of surprise as someone pushed their face to hers, almost nose to nose.

‘Good!’ said Granny. ‘Because home is exactly where we’re going!’



Chapter Two Prisoners

BETTY SAT RIGID WITH SHOCK AND CONFUSION. Next to her, Charlie was also frozen, her hand clamped round Betty's arm.

Bunny hadn't been on the boat when they'd left, Betty was convinced of it – but now she had doubts. Could Granny have disguised herself? It was impossible that she could have boarded without them seeing her otherwise . . . but then why would she let the boat leave? It made no sense.

'Granny?' Betty whispered. Already, through the folds of her disbelief, she knew what this meant. Any future glimmers of freedom were in tatters; as impossible to grab as the swirling mist. 'How did you . . . *where* did you come from?'

'Never you mind.' Granny glowered down at her. She looked half-mad, with her grey hair flying loose from its bun, and her shabby coat and shawl and Wellington boots

horribly mismatched. Worse still, Granny had brought the ugly old carpet bag she insisted on carrying everywhere, though goodness knew why. Betty began to feel grateful for the fog. It was, at least, a screen against curious eyes. Clearly the only things that awaited her audaciousness were embarrassment and confusion, not adventure. She needed a new motto.

‘Return this boat!’ Granny demanded. ‘We’re getting off!’

‘That’s what I’m trying to do,’ the ferryman snapped, not looking up from the windrose he was bent over.

Other passengers squinted, their eyes flickering over what they could see of Granny’s strange appearance as though they were trying to work out what kind of Halloween costume this was. Betty cringed.

‘Hurry up, please,’ Granny repeated loudly. ‘This is no place for children!’

‘You’re the one who brought ’em!’ the ferryman said, annoyed. Then he frowned. ‘Although, come to think of it, I never saw you get on . . .’

‘Nonsense. I’ve been here all along!’

But she can’t have been! Betty thought, bewildered. Or she would have said something sooner. She bit back a frustrated growl. All that sneaking about and effort, for nothing! She didn’t feel like a big adventurer now. She felt like a silly little girl. And the worst of it was there was a tiny part of her that was relieved, because in those misty moments before Granny had appeared, Betty had been scared.

‘But, Granny,’ Charlie whispered. ‘You haven’t!’

‘Shush,’ said Granny, in a not-at-all-quiet voice.

The ferryman peered closer at Bunny. ‘I remember the girls getting on, but not you. You didn’t pay your fare!’

‘I most certainly *did*.’ Granny’s voice cooled a few degrees. ‘Or do you suppose that I swam out here fully-clothed and boarded the boat still dry, by some miracle?’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘And don’t get lippy with me, young man. I know your father!’

The ferryman looked more alarmed about this than he did about the fog.

‘He’s in for it now,’ Charlie said in a small voice.

‘No,’ Granny snapped. ‘*You* two are in for it when you get home. And this time you’ll be getting more than you bargained for.’

Betty gulped. She should have known better than to try and trick Granny – after all, she’d never managed to before. And now some other unpleasant thing was in store, to add to her already ruined birthday. ‘What’s *that* supposed to mean?’

Granny didn’t answer. Instead she said to the ferryman, in an even sterner voice, ‘Now, I suggest you stop quibbling and get these cold, damp people back to safety. I expect many of them will want to know why the ferry was permitted to leave in the first place if a fog was expected.’

‘B-but it wasn’t . . .’ the ferryman objected.

‘Then you must be terribly inexperienced,’ Granny said coldly. ‘Or too fond of money.’ She looked away pointedly.

The ferryman stopped protesting and, after consulting the windrose once more, began rowing meekly. No one said a word for the entire journey back to shore, but Betty could feel the tension building in Granny. She might be silent now, but there was no mistaking that once they were off the boat she would have plenty to say. But so did Betty. Something extraordinary had just happened, and neither Granny's temper nor her punishment was going to stop Betty asking questions.

Just *how* had Granny got on that boat? True, she had always possessed an uncanny knack for tracking the girls down. If they spent too long on an errand, or wandered further than they should while out mushroom picking, it was a running joke that Granny would pop up like a sniffer dog. But this time Betty found nothing funny – or logical – about it. Instead she felt a creeping sense of uneasiness.

When they docked, Betty and Charlie were shivering, both from the freezing air nipping at their ankles and from the shock of being caught. Granny looked the opposite: hot and cross and a bit dragon-like, with her breath coming in quick bursts that misted the air. She made them wait until everyone else had got off before they clambered ashore and headed for the lanes leading to the Poacher's Pocket. Betty looked back at the Misty Marshes. Sometimes the fog would come all the way up on to the land, wreathing its way through the streets. Tonight, however, the fog stayed at the fringes of the water, hovering like a marsh

creature protecting its lair. When she was certain the other passengers were gone and the Widdershins were alone, Betty spoke.

‘How did you do that, Granny? How did you get on that boat without us seeing you? It’s not possible.’

‘I was on it the whole time,’ Granny answered shortly. ‘But you were so caught up in your little adventure you didn’t see me.’

Betty stared, trying to read Granny’s face. All she saw there was anger, something which normally stopped her from asking too many questions or answering back . . . but tonight wasn’t normal. Her hopes and plans had all been dashed. She had nothing else to lose by saying what she really thought, even at the risk of being punished with extra chores. ‘I don’t believe you. You wouldn’t have waited all that time before saying something to us.’

‘I wanted to see if you’d actually do it,’ Granny snapped, but she still didn’t quite sound truthful. ‘Or whether you’d come to your senses and turn back.’

‘*Come to my senses?*’ Betty’s face grew hotter as her temper rose – or perhaps it was the sting from Granny’s harsh words.

‘Bringing Charlie out here like this was stupid and irresponsible. Anything could have happened!’

‘Exactly,’ Betty muttered. She ignored the prickle of shame, unable to hold her tongue now she had begun. ‘We might have even had some fun.’

Granny ignored her, pulling her shawl tighter around her.

She jabbed a finger between Betty's shoulders, prodding her along the lane. 'I thought I could count on you, Betty Widdershins. I thought you could be trusted, but it looks like I was wrong.'

'That's not fair!' Betty's voice rose, carrying through the night. 'All right, I shouldn't have gone behind your back. But, come on, Granny! Wanting a bit of freedom . . . that's not a crime, and you *know* I'd never let Charlie come to harm—'

'I know that's what you *think*,' Granny cut in. 'But you're thirteen years old! You know nothing of the world. There's plenty out there that could harm you, things you don't know about . . .'

'I never will if you don't let me.' Betty spoke quietly now, but with as much defiance as she dared. Granny's fierceness was normally enough to stop her answering back, as well as a feeling of not wanting to be a bigger burden than they already were – but enough was enough. She waited for her grandmother to protest, to make the usual promises about taking the girls on trips or holidays . . . but this time Granny didn't. She looked terribly tired, then – and even older than usual.

A guilty, worried lump rose in Betty's throat. Granny was, after all, the one who had looked out for Betty and her sisters. If she hadn't been there to take them in, the girls would have ended up in the orphanage or worse, split up and re-homed with strangers. She pushed the thought away. Being grateful shouldn't stop her from getting some answers. 'You say you

can't trust me now, but you never have – not to go out of Crowstone, anyway.'

Granny stamped over the cobbles. 'Leave it, Betty. This isn't the time or the place.' She set off at a pace, one hand clutching her shawl and the other carrying the travelling bag.

Betty grabbed Charlie's hand and hurried after Granny, determined not to be brushed off so easily. 'How did you find out?'

'The flyer,' Granny said shortly.

Betty closed her eyes in dismay. Earlier that day, Fliss had seen a hidden flyer fall out of Betty's cloak and had picked it up, frowning.

'What's this? A Halloween Fayre in Marshfoot?'

'Oh,' Betty had said, her heartbeat quickening. 'I asked if we could go, but Granny said no, of course.'

'Of course,' Fliss had echoed, holding the flyer a fraction too long before handing it back.

'Fliss snitched on us, then?' Betty fumed. 'Or did she just leave it for you to find?'

Granny avoided the question, pausing to hitch up her stocking. 'It's lucky you *didn't* cover your tracks more carefully.'

'*Lucky?*' Betty stopped in the middle of the road. Lucky was the last thing she felt after having her adventure snatched away. Why didn't Fliss want to escape the everyday drudgery, or care about Granny controlling them any more?

Granny halted up ahead. 'Stop dawdling!' she scolded.

‘Come on, Betty,’ Charlie begged. ‘I’m cold!’

Betty released her sister’s hand, her own slowly forming a fist at her side. Keeping the Halloween Fayre flyer had been careless, and now it would be harder than ever to plan any secret trips, with Granny watching her every move. But plan she would, and next time it would be flawless. Heck, next time she might not come back at all.

Footsteps cut across the silence and then Granny was in front of her.

‘Stop sulking. And I don’t want any trouble when you get back. None of this is Fliss’s fault.’

‘No.’ Betty uncurled her fists. ‘It’s *yours*.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Granny said. Her voice was dangerously low, but still Betty persisted. All her pent-up resentment and frustration, all the times she’d been told to stay close to home – the way Fliss had shut her out recently – it all came pouring out.

‘Fliss used to want to explore as much as I do,’ said Betty. She pulled the mask off, cold air hitting her cheeks. ‘She used to plan all the places she was going to visit . . . but not any more. She’s sixteen! She should be allowed to go wherever she wants. But she’s given up, because of *you*.’

All of a sudden Granny seemed to shrink in her baggy clothes as the anger went out of her. ‘That’s not fair.’

‘No, it’s not.’ Tears pricked Betty’s eyes. ‘All your stories and what ifs have stopped Fliss from trying. You’ve squashed

the adventure out of her. I won't let that happen to me, or to Charlie.'

Granny shook her head, a strand of hair unravelling like Granny herself was coming undone. 'It's not like that.'

'Then explain,' said Betty, hardly believing the words that were leaking out of her. 'Why all the broken promises and excuses? You act so tough, but maybe *you're* the one who's too scared to leave!'

Granny lowered her eyes, unable to meet Betty's. 'We've been out of Crowstone plenty of times. You were just too young to remember.'

'I don't believe you,' Betty said. Her voice hardened as she became more certain. Now she really thought about it, there had always been something odd about Granny's reluctance to let them go anywhere. And her hold only seemed to tighten as the girls got older. It felt all wrong. 'I'd remember. And wouldn't there be pictures, memories of special days out? There's nothing!'

Granny didn't answer.

'Betty,' Charlie whispered. 'Please stop it. I want to go home.'

'Why?' Betty said bitterly. 'What's the big rush? Home is all there ever is!' She jabbed a finger in the direction of the prison. 'We're no better off than the prisoners in there.' She glanced round at the crooked little streets, hating them. 'And it might not be tonight, but I'll escape this place. There's more to life than Crowstone.'

‘No, there isn’t.’ Granny’s eyes were haunted. ‘There’s no leaving this place. Not for us.’ Her words dangled in the air like sharp little needles. Charlie began to cry.

‘N-not for us?’ Betty echoed. Surely Granny was just trying to scare them again. How could they *not* be able to leave?

‘You think you’re ready for the truth?’ Granny asked sadly.

Betty stared back helplessly. She *wasn’t* sure, not now. Granny was as good as admitting that Betty had been right, all along. But all she could do was nod.

‘Very well.’ Granny nodded slowly. ‘I’ll tell you. No more secrets.’ She shuffled closer, resting her hand on Betty’s cheek. ‘But I warn you, it’s nothing good.’

Charlie huddled closer into her, crying harder. Betty’s mouth went dry. Was this linked to their rat-bag father, somehow? Were they being punished along with him, forbidden from leaving like the people on Torment? It was all she could think of.

‘What is it? Tell me!’

‘Not here.’ Granny lowered her hand, her jowls wobbling as she glanced about them.

‘This’ll only be a short journey, but I need you both to keep your wits about you. We mustn’t be seen.’

‘Not seen? Granny, I don’t . . .’

‘You don’t need to understand, just hold on.’ Granny hooked her arm through Betty’s, the carpet bag dangling from her wrist. ‘Link your arm with Charlie’s. That’s it – nice and tight. Whatever you do, don’t let go.’

Betty wondered if she had finally sent her grandmother loopy. Why else would she be acting so peculiar? ‘Granny, you’re scaring me—’

‘Yes, well. I can’t help that, and you were going to find out sooner or later.’ Granny tightened her hold on Betty’s arm. The familiar smell of her, of tobacco and beer, was warming in the chilly air. ‘Ready?’

‘For what?’ Betty asked, bewildered, as Granny opened her bag.

Her grandmother didn’t answer. Instead, she reached inside the monstrous carpet bag and turned it inside out, saying in a crisp voice: ‘Poacher’s Pocket!’

Betty’s insides gave an enormous lurch, like she had fallen from a great height. Her ears were popping and her eyes were forced closed as a huge gust of icy air rushed past her, knocking her off her feet. She heard Granny gasp and Charlie do a funny little moan, but kept hold of them both as tightly as she could. Her balance was gone, her feet finding nothing but air.

‘Granny!’ she wailed, her eyes flying open as she toppled backwards. She landed with a bump, arms still locked with her grandmother and Charlie. Hard cobbles bit into her bottom, and the whistling wind had been replaced with rowdy voices and laughter. Betty looked up in amazement to see that the three of them were sitting in the doorway outside the Poacher’s Pocket.

‘Not one of my better landings, I admit, but I’m not used

to passengers.' Granny released Betty's arm and got to her feet. 'Oof, me hips.' After dusting herself down she checked over the carpet bag and then snapped the clasp shut with a nod. 'Home.'