



A TANGLE OF SPELLS



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Prologue

*Hocus pocus, hubble bubble,
Magic always leads to trouble.
Three brave sisters, one fresh start,
How long till it falls apart?*

*From Crowstone's damp and swirling fogs
To hidden rooms and hopping frogs.
A pretty village, so serene,
But something lurks beneath, unseen.*

*Shuffle-shuffle. What's that sound?
It's in the air and all around.
A pinch of magic – use it quick!
There's danger here in Pendlewick . . .*



Chapter One Blackbird Cottage

THE WIDDERSHINS LEFT CROWSTONE JUST AFTER breakfast.

Granny had popped her head in to wake the girls at sunrise, but Betty Widdershins was already up. All night she had been too excited to sleep, twisting in her sheets and staring at the cracked ceiling. The old building creaked around her, draughts whistling and pipes groaning as they always did. But on this, her last night in the Poacher's Pocket inn, the familiar sounds felt different. Like a goodbye.

Betty had dressed quickly, then stuffed her nightclothes into the bulging trunk at the foot of the bed she shared with Charlie. Her younger sister slept on, snoring softly. Betty glanced around, expecting a wave of sadness that never came. This had been her room her whole life, all thirteen and a half years of it. But it didn't feel as if it belonged to her and her two sisters any more. Not with all their things stowed in the trunk. The wardrobe and drawers were empty, picture

hooks were bare, and so were the surfaces normally covered in clutter. There were none of Betty's maps, or Charlie's toys, or Fliss's doodled poems and rose-water scent.

Fliss stirred in the smaller bed on the other side of the room, then sat up suddenly. Her short hair stuck out in dark, glossy tufts around her pretty oval face.

Betty grinned at her older sister. 'Today's the day, Fliss,' she whispered. 'We're leaving. We're really, *really* leaving!'

'I know,' Fliss whispered back, trying to smile, but sharing little of Betty's excitement. Instead, her large brown eyes filled with tears.

There were more tears later from Charlie. She had spent the morning chasing a scruffy black cat round the pub, pleading with it to no avail.

'Come on, Oi,' she coaxed, as the cat leaped on to a bar stool. Charlie bravely tried to pick him up, her small hands almost vanishing into the matted fur. Oi hissed and sank his claws deeper into the stool. 'You'll get left behind!'

'Yes, with a bit of luck,' Granny muttered, knocking back a nip of whiskey. 'I've been trying to get rid of that mangy cat for years.'

'Granny!' Fliss said reproachfully. She was arranging a handful of flowers in a beer glass of water on the bar, ready for when the new owners arrived later that day. 'Did you just have whiskey for breakfast?'

'Er ...' Granny hurriedly rinsed her empty glass under

the tap. 'No. Nope, not me.' She waved Fliss away. 'Those boxes need loading on to the wagon. And check my lucky horseshoe's been packed. Mustn't leave that behind.'

'It is packed, Granny,' said Betty, giving the counter a last wipe down. 'Checked it myself.'

A golden-haired boy, only a year or so older than her, appeared dragging the heavy trunk from upstairs.

'She did, Bunny,' the boy put in. 'Twice.' He grinned at Betty as she helped heave the trunk outside. It was now that she felt the first pangs of sorrow. The boy, an orphan known as Spit, had lived and worked with the Widdershins at the Poacher's Pocket for the past few weeks. During that short time, the girls had grown to care for him very much. Betty was going to miss him dreadfully.

'It's not too late to change your mind, you know,' she said. 'Come with us, like we planned.'

Spit's grin faded. 'Can't. Not yet, anyway. Not . . . now.'

Betty nodded. She understood Spit's reasons for staying, and knew he was torn. Especially when she saw him gazing at Fliss, even though he pretended not to whenever she caught him.

'Leave it there,' said a deep voice. Betty squinted up through the early-morning sunshine at her father's unshaven face. Barney Widdershins beamed back at her, sweat already beading his forehead as he loaded boxes on to a wagon they'd borrowed from a neighbour. 'Is that the last of it?'

'Yes.' Betty stared at the stacked boxes. It was a surprise to

see how little the family owned, even though they'd started packing everything up weeks ago. Most of the furniture and fixtures had to stay in the pub. Some of their belongings had already been shipped to their new home. The rest were so shabby that they probably wouldn't survive the journey. The Widdershins had never had much money – well, not until recently when a small windfall had unexpectedly come their way. It was this that had finally given them a chance to move away from the unappealing prison island of Crowstone, and a much-needed change in luck.

Betty had longed to leave the place all her life, but now it was happening she couldn't quite believe it. Finally, she was going to get the opportunity to see somewhere new, somewhere different.

'We'll buy new things,' Granny had announced grandly. 'Lovely new things for a lovely new start!'

One by one they clambered on to the wagon and Granny handed the keys to Spit. It had been agreed that he would stay on at the Poacher's Pocket, which was a comfort. Betty stared back at the ramshackle pub. She couldn't help feeling fond of the old building, with its flaking shutters and a slightly drunken lean to the left. It may have seen better days, but it was all Betty and her sisters had ever known. It was home.

'It really does look worn-out, doesn't it?' said Betty, turning to her sister.

'Poor old thing,' Fliss murmured, dabbing at another tear. 'I wonder if it'll miss us?'

Betty snorted. ‘Don’t be silly. It’s a building. They don’t have feelings.’

‘Maybe not feelings,’ Fliss said, ‘but they have a *feel* to them.’

‘Wonder what “feel” the new place will have?’ said Betty, keen to distract Fliss from her gloom. Granny had been annoyingly tight-lipped about the new house, and wouldn’t tell them a thing about it. She insisted she wanted it to be a surprise.

A small crowd of people had gathered in front of the Poacher’s Pocket, despite it not being open yet – and despite having been at the inn the night before. Among them were several lovestruck boys who had come for a last glimpse of Fliss before waving her off.

An older man with a leathery face and grizzled hair only had eyes for Granny, however. He blinked forlornly at her through the mizzly grey light.

‘Seamus Fingerty,’ Granny sighed. ‘We said our goodbyes last night. You should have stayed in bed – look at the state of you!’

‘Had to see yer off proper, Bunny,’ Fingerty grunted, used to Granny’s insults by now. He gave her a loyal wink. ‘Best landlady this place ever saw!’

‘Oh, stop,’ said Granny, looking secretly pleased.

Charlie was howling now, her cheeks red and blotchy. She didn’t even quieten when the sweetshop owners, Henny and Buster Hubbard, handed her an enormous paper bag stuffed with candy.

‘There, there, Charlie,’ said Henny, patting her hand. ‘This is the start of a new adventure!’

‘We don’t need any more of *those*, thank you,’ Fliss muttered under her breath, but everyone except Betty was too busy fussing over Charlie to catch it.

‘It’s n-not that,’ Charlie said. ‘Oi won’t come! What if he doesn’t like the new owners?’

‘He never liked *us*,’ Betty pointed out.

‘But what if they don’t feed him?’ Charlie’s eyes were as round as buttons. To someone as fond of food as she was, the thought of hunger was simply unbearable.

‘I’ll feed him,’ said Spit. He winked at Charlie. ‘Pirate’s honour.’

Charlie leaned over the side of the wagon and flung her arms round Spit’s neck. Then, before they knew it, the wagon was rumbling away in a cloud of dust. The girls and Granny waved frantically as Nestynook Green and the Poacher’s Pocket slowly grew smaller in the distance. Fliss was sniffing now, too, and even Granny’s eyes were suspiciously damp as she rubbed them and griped about dust. Betty didn’t cry, but there was a hard lump in her throat at the sight of Spit and everyone else they were leaving behind.

‘Goodbye!’ they called. ‘We’ll miss you!’

‘Jumping jackdaws,’ Fliss said, startled out of her tears. She pointed. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

A black blur was racing after them through the dust cloud.

Before Betty could blink, it launched itself at the wagon in a scrabble of claws and clambered in.

‘Oh, no,’ Granny said in horror.

‘Oi!’ Charlie cried, laughing through her tears. ‘I knew you’d listen!’

Granny glared at the cat. ‘Chose not to starve, more like.’

Oi stalked towards Charlie and sniffed at her interestedly, before settling down on her lap with one yellow eye firmly on her pocket.

‘Is there food in there?’ Granny asked.

‘No,’ said Charlie. ‘Only Hoppit.’

Betty nudged her hard in the ribs, sharing an exasperated glance with Fliss, but they needn’t have worried. Granny merely rolled her eyes.

‘Still got the imaginary rat, then?’

‘Yep.’ Charlie grinned, revealing a large gap where her front teeth had fallen out. She stared at Oi, overjoyed. ‘He’s never sat on my lap before.’

‘And probably never will again,’ said Betty. ‘Don’t even think about stroking him – he’s just waiting to ding you.’

‘Don’t care,’ Charlie breathed, too thrilled and terrified to move.

Betty stared back along the road until finally they rounded a corner, and the Poacher’s Pocket was lost from sight.

‘He’ll be all right,’ Fliss said softly. ‘Spit, I mean. Maybe Fingerty really *can* help him.’

Betty nodded. ‘Fingerty does know a lot of people – and

places. If anyone can trace whether Spit has any remaining family, it's him.' Her voice caught on the word 'family'. For a while, she had thought that *they* would be Spit's family.

It was a typically drizzly day. Even though it was late June, the girls were used to dampness and marsh mist all year round in Crowstone, and it rarely felt properly warm with coastal winds whipping up all the time. There were still traces of morning mist lurking about, which was bad news for Betty's wild hair. Already she could feel it frizzling on her forehead, but she was determined nothing was going to spoil her hopeful mood. The future lay ahead, and it seemed every bit as sunny as Betty felt.

Granny shuddered as they approached the crossroads.

'Hurry up, Barney,' she moaned, linking her thumbs and fanning her fingers like birds' wings over her heart to make the sign of the crow. 'We shouldn't have come this way! It's asking for trouble.'

Father said nothing, but shook his head with a bemused expression. Granny always made a fuss about avoiding the crossroads. It was here, she said, that gallows once stood that were used to carry out the island's hangings, and where people suspected of witchcraft were buried. Thankfully, those sorts of punishments took place inside the prison walls now.

Soon they reached the harbour where their own little boat was moored. It was a pretty sea-green colour, with its name painted in white letters on the side: *The Travelling Bag*. Betty

felt a bubbling thrill at the sight of it. *This was it!* A journey that would change everything!

'All aboard,' said Father, with a grin. He began loading the boxes and trunks on to the deck as the girls and Granny clambered on to the swaying boat. Oi skulked inside the wheelhouse, tucking himself under a bench, but not before exchanging hisses with Bandit, the harbour cat, perched on top of a neighbouring boat's cabin.

'Ooh,' said Fliss, clutching her tummy as she stepped aboard.

'You can't be seasick already,' Charlie snickered. 'We haven't even moved!'

'Want to bet?' Fliss said unhappily, her rosy cheeks losing colour by the minute.

'Here,' said Charlie, offering her the bag of sweets. Her own cheeks bulged with candies rattling against her teeth. 'Have a marsh-melt.'

Fliss shook her head tightly. 'Maybe later.'

Betty helped herself to a jumping jackdaw. The delicious sweetness spread over her tongue before the popping candy fizzed in her mouth. She sighed happily as Father unwound the mooring rope and steered the little boat out of the harbour. She joined him at the wheel, dodging a swipe from Oi, and peered at the map her father had spread out in front of him. As she studied it, the fizzing sensation spread to her tummy. Maps were to Betty what sweets were to Charlie. All those places just waiting to be explored! She and her sisters had hardly travelled outside Crowstone until now, which

hadn't much bothered Fliss – but seeing the world was the thing Betty craved above all else.

'Where are we going?' she asked slyly, hoping to catch Father off guard now he was concentrating on steering the boat. It was the same question she'd asked many times since the pub had been sold, but both he and Granny had remained infuriatingly silent. Even now, Father refused to tell her, his only response a cheeky wink. Betty gave up and went outside, too restless to stay in one place. There was a light breeze now they were moving. She gazed into the distance at the grey, marshy water.

Even if the sun had been shining, nothing could make the prison appear cheerful. It was a huge, squat building that dominated Repent – the closest neighbouring island to Crowstone. Hundreds of dangerous prisoners were shut inside, a mere ferry ride away. Behind it, just visible through low-hanging cloud, was the island of Lament, where Crowstone's dead were buried. The final island was Torment, a place the Widdershins sisters had never been to. Banished folk lived there, and it was forbidden for anyone to visit – or leave. Together, Crowstone and its three neighbours were called 'the Sorrow Isles'. Betty wasn't at all sorry to be leaving them behind and heading for the mainland.

As they passed the prison, the boat fell into shadow. Under her thick woollen shawl, goosebumps broke out over Betty's skin as the temperature plunged. There was one part of the jail that didn't fit with the rest – a high tower that loomed above. This was the oldest section of the prison, partly built

with ancient cairns gathered from the graves on Lament. It was here that anyone guilty of witchcraft or sorcery was imprisoned, for magic could not be performed inside its walls.

‘Crowstone Tower,’ Charlie murmured beside her, slipping a sticky hand into Betty’s. ‘I won’t miss it. Will you?’

‘No way.’ Betty stared up at the darkened windows. She had been inside the tower with her sisters only once, but she’d remember it for ever. It was a long way up . . . and an even longer way down. She gave Charlie’s hand a small, secretive squeeze. ‘I hope we never see it again.’

By the time they reached dry land, warm sunshine had broken through the cloud and Fliss had been sick three times. They climbed off the boat in a bustling harbour, where their pale skin and heavy travelling cloaks looked out of place next to the tanned, lightly dressed fishermen. Betty gazed around, thrilled with the newness of it all, and then Father revealed a rather lovely surprise. He beckoned them over to where a fellow stood by a pony and trap. Father shook his hand and then the other man left.

‘Where’s the driver going?’ Fliss asked.

‘He’s not the driver,’ Father explained, gesturing to the pony trap. ‘I am. This is ours.’

‘A pony?’ Charlie squeaked, looking like all her birthdays had arrived at once. She pulled up a handful of grass and fed it to the animal, as fearless as ever.

‘A *working* pony,’ Granny put in. ‘Not a pet. Now we’re on the mainland, we need a way to get around. There’s more

land to cover here, even though Pendlewick is only slightly larger than Crowstone—’ She stopped, clapping a hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

‘Pendlewick?’ the girls shrieked in excitement. ‘Is *that* where we’re going?’

Granny smiled, and Father roared with laughter. ‘Secret’s out now,’ he said, locking the trunks and boxes in the wheelhouse of the boat. ‘I’ll come back for those – they won’t fit on the trap with us.’

Indeed, it was a squeeze, but none of the girls minded.

‘We’re still a good hour away from the new house,’ said Granny, passing round jam sandwiches that were both squashed and delicious. Afterwards, they shared the last of the sweets, and even Fliss was in a cheerful mood.

‘I wonder what our new home is like?’ she said, sucking happily on a marsh-melt. ‘I’m on tenterhooks!’

‘What’s that mean?’ Charlie asked.

‘It means when you’re in suspense about something,’ Betty explained.

‘Oh, yes,’ Charlie agreed. ‘I’m on tentacles, too!’

For once, Betty didn’t correct her. She was too busy thinking about where they were going and imagining what they’d find there. ‘Pendlewick,’ she whispered, liking the taste of it. It made her think of fairy tales, of ticking clocks and flickering candles. It sounded familiar, as if she’d seen it on one of her many maps as a dot or a scribbled word. Never a place she would have thought she’d visit, let alone live.

'Pendlewick, Pendlewick,' Charlie sang. 'Take us there and make it quick!' She winced as the trap went over a bump and Oi, who was on her lap, yowled and sank his claws into her arms.

'The beast!' Betty exclaimed, seeing rows of red pinpricks on Charlie's skin. 'Look what he's done to you.'

'I don't mind,' Charlie said bravely, but her eyes watered every time they hit a pothole.

Betty leaned over the side of the trap, eager to see as much as possible. The pony's hooves clip-clopped ever closer to their new home, taking them over tiny stone bridges and past farms and fields and towns and villages. Even the air was different here: heavy and sweet with summer and hope. Floss seemed enchanted by it all, exclaiming at the variety of wildflowers and birds nesting in the hedgerows.

'Whoa,' said Father to the pony, slowing the trap as they began to go down a steep hill. 'Slow there ... no, *slow*. Not stop!'

But the pony *had* stopped, and was refusing to budge.

Granny woke from a long doze and sat up. 'Oh, we're here.'

'Are we?' asked Floss doubtfully, looking around. The only thing visible among the hedgerows and fields was a church spire in the distance. 'Where's the house?'

'You go ahead and take the girls,' said Father to Granny. 'I'll follow when I can get this stubborn creature to move.'

'This way,' said Granny, joints clicking as she set off down the lane. 'First place on the right—'

But the girls had already raced past her, laughing and elbowing, each wanting to be the first to see their new home. The gate came almost without warning, tucked in a leafy nook set back from the road. Betty stopped dead and stared as Charlie and Fliss almost skidded into her. Their giggling was cut off abruptly.

'This can't be it,' said Fliss, her lip curling in disgust. She tugged Betty's arm. 'It must be further on.'

'No, that's right,' called Granny, puffing along to catch them up. 'This is it.'

The girls stared past the rickety gate. BLACKBIRD COTTAGE said the weathered sign on the house. A house absolutely *nothing* like what Betty and her sisters had been expecting.