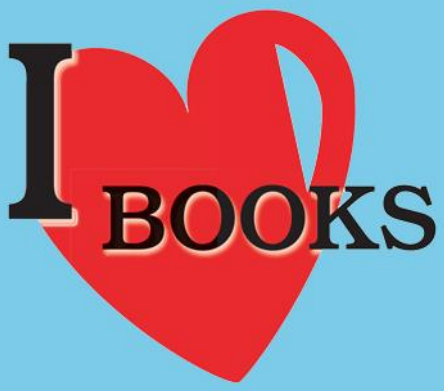


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Prologue
The Crooked Cave

The sea breathes quietly tonight, a sprawled darkness rolling in and out. It slips over beaches and laps at harbour walls. But further along the coast, where the cliffs turn ragged and shards of rock jut into the water, strewn like broken gravestones, the current is stronger. It moves with a strength all of its own here, heaving and churning, smashing and pounding. This is a place few men or women brave, and none on a night as dark as this.

And yet there is a light moving between the shards of rock, a lantern fixed to the front of a rowing boat, and, though the waves swell and suck and crash, the boat weaves a way through. The moon slides out from the clouds for a moment, scattering silver on the sea, and then it is gone. But the lantern still shines, splaying light on the snakeskin mask of the figure in the boat. He wears a cloak, the hood pulled high, and only his tongue moves – forked and flickering. His arms stay folded in his lap – he has no use for oars to propel the boat forward. It moves of its own accord, drawn by magic towards the opening in the cliff face.

Carving a channel through the last of the rocks, the boat disappears inside. The passageway of water within is still, a snake of black beneath arched walls of rock. The boat glides on, winding into shadows, then it nudges to a halt as it meets a metal grate stretched the height of the passageway. The figure drops his hood, his tongue quivers over his lips and he speaks.

'It is Ashtongue who enters the Crooked Cave. I've come to you, Darkebite, as you commanded.'

A hiss escapes from Ashtongue's lips, scratching at the silence, then there's a grinding noise, like a chain being pulled, and the grate lifts. The boat noses through, into a wider cavern, and Ashtongue steps out on to a beach littered with bones. He looks at the glass bottles and metal cages arranged on ledges of rock surrounding the beach. They glint under the light of his lantern and each one is filled with animal parts: moth wings, fox teeth, owl talons, bat claws . . . Ashtongue smiles and turns to the cauldron standing in the middle of the beach. A burst of green erupts from inside it and a cloaked figure emerges from the shadows, plucking the wings from a dead moth as it crunches over the bones.

Ashtongue dips his mask. 'Greetings, Darkebite.'

Darkebite's cloak slips to the ground and, where shoulders should be, two enormous black wings flex, rising up like crooked sails. 'Skull and Hemlock failed.' The voice bristles with anger. 'The child and the beast still live.'

Ashtongue stiffens. 'The girl and her wildcat defeated *two* Shadowmasks?'

Darkebite's mask of charcoaled wood is absolutely still, the jet-black hair wild around it. 'With the help of their friends.'

Ashtongue shakes his head. 'But Skull had the girl locked in a cage in the forest – he had hounds trained to track her – and Hemlock conjured poison to make sure she wouldn't survive!'

'It wasn't enough.' Darkebite's wings twitch. 'The children found the first amulet and used its power to destroy both Skull and Hemlock. I saw it happen and was forced to flee. We must kill the girl and her wildcat before they find the second amulet. Only then can we shatter the old magic and conjure an evil to take its place.'

Darkebite walks towards the cauldron, veined wings trailing through the bones. Ashtongue follows and the two Shadowmasks stand in silence for several minutes, watching the green liquid bubbling inside the cauldron.

'You must call upon the spirits of the Underworld,' Darkebite says. 'Use them to wreak havoc on the old magic.' Picking up a glass bottle, the witch doctor tips an owl talon into the cauldron; the liquid hisses and green smoke fizzes upwards. 'I'll conjure the night creatures; Molly Pecksniff and her wildcat won't escape.'

There is a pause.

'No one escapes the Shadow Keeper's curse.'

Ashtongue nods, his snakeskin mask glimmers, then he watches as Darkebite strips the barbs from an owl feather and lets them flutter into the cauldron. The liquid swirls, sucking the broken feather into its clutches, then a talon bursts

through the surface, snatching at the air before slipping silently down.

The Shadow Keeper smiles because inside the cauldron something hideous is stirring . . .

Chapter 1
Visitors in the Cove

It was Gryff who heard it first. A sound that didn't belong in the cove – sudden, rasping, like paper being torn. He looked up from the rocks where he had been resting, ears cocked, whiskers twitching. The others hadn't heard the noise, but a wildcat's ears miss nothing. Gryff scanned the towering grey cliffs that curved round the beach, closing it off into a secluded bay.

But nothing seemed amiss. Seagulls were still squawking from jutting crags and tussocks of grass, the beach was deserted and beyond it the sea stretched out to the horizon, glittering in the early morning sun. Gryff slunk between the rock pools, away from the cave, before leaping down to the sand.

Then the noise came again, shivering the air like a sheet being ripped in two. It was louder this time, closer, and its echo hung in the cove. A cluster of seagulls on the highest crags launched themselves into the sky, white arcs carried out over the sea. As if pulled by invisible strings, the rest of the gulls followed, leaving the cliff face still and grey. Only the grass and sea thrift moved, fluttering in the wind.

Still Gryff watched, waiting. And then his fur prickled. There was a shadow out of place behind a clump of grass – something dark shifting among the rocks. Then it was gone, lost in the gorse and bracken that spread down one side of the cliff face and partly obscured the path zigzagging towards the sand. But the air felt different somehow, as if it might shatter into pieces at any moment. Gryff's muscles stiffened.

Gathering speed, he ran across the beach, past a wigwam of washed-up driftwood, round a battered rowing boat, on towards the rocks at the other side of the cove which cut into the sea and closed the bay in from the rest of the coastline.

On the furthest rock stood a girl, her long, tangled hair as black as the tip of a jackdaw's wing. She drew herself up and the wind roared in her ears, rippling through the old swimsuit she was wearing and clinking the gold boxing fists that hung around her neck on a chain.

'You won't manage it,' said a boy, treading water just beyond the rocks. 'You'll slip and mash your head.' A strand of seaweed had twisted itself round one of his sticking out ears. He shook it off and turned to the boy in the sea beside him. 'Alfie, you tell her. She's mad to try this!'

Alfie squinted against the sun, his jay feather earring flapping against his neck. 'Sid's right, Moll. Just get a move on and jump in like we did; all this hanging around is making us cold.'

Moll wrinkled her nose and shuffled down to the edge of the rock. The sea slapped against its marbled base before foaming over the limpets and splashing up on to her anklet. She looked across at Alfie and Siddy and tried to raise one

eyebrow to show she meant business – but when both started wriggling she flared her nostrils instead.

Siddy rolled his eyes. 'Don't expect anyone to come and mop you up when you go back to the cave with cuts and bruises. Mooshie's still tempered up because we put seaweed in her hammock.'

Married to Oak, the head of the camp, Mooshie was in charge of cooking meals and tending to injuries; she was like a mother figure to the rest of them. It hadn't been wise to provoke her with seaweed, Moll knew that, but it had been necessary. Because, in Moll's eyes, Mooshie had offended the Tribe – the secret gang comprising Moll, Gryff, Siddy and Alfie that was dedicated to breaking rules and causing havoc.

Moll shrugged. 'Mooshie should've known better than to force us to eat sea slugs – hardly surprising the Tribe rebelled. I'd say she was lucky it was just seaweed we punished her with. It would've been eels if I'd had more time.' She steadied herself on the rock, then looked up and smiled. 'Watch and learn, boys. This is exactly the kind of behaviour the Tribe needs to see more of.'

Alfie, half amused now, flicked the water from his fair hair and kicked up his legs so that he was floating on his back. 'There's not a chance you'll pull off a somersault into a dive; your last four jumps have been bellyflops.'

Muttering a last-minute prayer to the sea spirit in charge of crash landings, Moll bent low. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed Gryff hastening across the rocks towards

them, but, thinking nothing of it, she gripped her boxing fist talisman for luck and launched herself into the air. The tuck that was meant to follow never did. Instead, Moll's legs punched out at extraordinary angles, her arms flapped like a demented bird and she plunged belly first towards the sea. There was an almighty slap, the loudest one yet, as Moll's skin smacked into the water.

She surfaced with a scowl, hair plastered across her face, then raised a fist, ready to take on Siddy and Alfie's abuse. But it never came.

Gryff's growl cut a channel through the waves towards them. '*Urrrrrrrrrr.*'

Moll, Siddy and Alfie met his yellow-green eyes. Then they heard it too: a noise from the cliffs, curdling the air, like silk tearing again and again. But there was no movement among the rocks – just a wall of ragged stone and gorse staring back at them.

'What – what was that?' Siddy asked.

The sea around Moll felt suddenly cold and she narrowed her eyes at the cliffs. 'I don't know but it doesn't sound right. We should get back to the cave and—'

'The seagulls,' Alfie interrupted. 'They've all gone . . .'

'And – and the gorse,' Siddy stammered, pushing dark curls back from his face and straining his own eyes towards the cliffs. 'It's rotted through!'

Moll blinked several times. Siddy was right; the gorse lining the path down the cliff face wasn't green with bright yellow flowers any more: the bushes were bare, a dull grey-brown,

like clumps of rusted wire. Moll flinched. Mooshie had taught her about the plants, herbs and weeds down in the cove and how they changed with the seasons. But no plant shed its flowers and leaves this quickly – and gorse didn't lose its flowers in autumn. Something was amiss.

It was then that the cliff face started to move. A swarm of black shapes crawled out from behind rocks and withered gorse bushes, spreading down the cliff like spilled ink. The creatures called to one another in low, crooning hoots.

'Owls in the daytime?' Moll whispered in disbelief. 'Dozens of them . . . and they're *black*!'

Gryff's hackles rose. Moll's shoulders tensed. She knew a bad omen when she saw one; every gypsy did. She glanced to the rocks for her catapult, then realised she'd left it in the cave.

The birds sprang from the cliffs into the air as one, swarming together in a darkened throng, before flying towards the rocks jutting out into the sea.

Moll, Siddy and Alfie kicked backwards, away from the cove.

And the owls loomed closer, just twenty metres away now, a curtain of black closing over the sea, their calls deep and hollow. They were larger than ordinary owls and their enormous wings beat towards the children above scaled talons. They drew nearer still and Moll gasped as they massed high above their heads in a pulsing cloud. Then a bolt of black screeched before plummeting down, its hooded yellow eyes fixed on Gryff.

'Watch out, Gryff!' Moll screamed.

The owl splayed its razor-sharp talons and Gryff leapt aside, narrowly dodging them. Shrieks from above juddered against the wind, but the owl raced on, swiping at the towel on the rocks and ripping a large scrap of material clean off. The bird circled upwards to rejoin the others.

'Jump, Gryff!' Siddy roared.

'But – but he hates the sea!' Moll cried.

Owl after owl dropped from the sky. Gryff sprang across the rocks, snarling and spitting, avoiding their clutches by a whisker. They spiralled upwards again, black stains blotting out the sun, calling together in ghostly hoots.

'Run, Gryff!' Moll shouted. 'You'll outpace them on the beach—'

An owl swivelled its disc face round, blinking narrow yellow eyes at Moll, then it bulleted down, straight for her. Moll ducked beneath the surface and, without a second's hesitation, Gryff leapt from the rocks and plunged into the sea after her.

Underwater, the sea muffled the owl screeches, but Moll kicked deeper, away from the talons that scratched at the surface. Gryff clawed through the water towards her, bubbles spraying out behind him. Sensing the wildcat's presence, Moll twisted round, her breath caged inside her, and opened her eyes. Her heart surged. Gryff could have outrun the owls on the beach; Moll knew the speeds he could reach. But he'd followed her – as he always did – into the deep unknown. They swam on together, pulling themselves through the water after Alfie and Siddy.

But, above the surface, a dark shape followed.

Moll reached out to Siddy and Alfie, her eyes bulging, her chest ready to burst if she didn't take a breath. Alfie pointed upwards and both Siddy and Moll nodded; they'd have to brave the owls for air.

They kicked up, fingers stretching towards the sparkling surface, but the second they broke the water they met with a wall of sound. The owls shrieked and a cluster broke free, nosediving towards Gryff and the children. They drank in a lungful of air, then shot down beneath the surface, hauling themselves on through the water.

The sea was darker and deeper now and the sandy bottom had sunk out of sight. Small fish darted away, melting into the depths beyond, but still the children kicked for all they were worth, back towards the safety of the cave at the far side of the bay. Moll glanced at Gryff beside her, his grey-black striped fur moving with the sea's pull, his paws working as fast as they could. She blinked at him, her head throbbing as the last of her breath seeped from her lungs. *One more breath and I think we'll make it, Gryff.*

Moll surged upwards, surfacing next to the others, and gasped the air hungrily. Owl squawks clattered in her ears, then the birds thundered down all together. Moll caught the yellow glint of one owl's eyes, saw its talons spread out towards her face, then she plunged beneath the surface again.

She'd only taken one stroke when she heard the scream and, though it was stifled by the sea, Moll knew who it belonged to. Siddy. She swerved back up to the surface to

find Gryff lashing out with his claws; they clashed against grappling talons and wings. Alfie was trying to drag Siddy under the waves, but Siddy was choking on water, his face scrunched up in pain at the sight of the bloodied cut across his forearm.

'Get him down!' Moll shouted to Alfie, beating through the water towards the two boys. 'Just a few more strokes and we're there!'

Together they dragged Siddy beneath the surface while Gryff swung wildly at any owls that came close. And then they were all underwater again, Moll and Alfie heaving Siddy on. The sound of the owls grew fainter as the sandy seabed rose back into sight. Clumps of seaweed swayed below them and the children kicked harder, water-blurred eyes seeking out the rocks that shielded the camp's cave.

A couple more strokes and the barnacled boulders rose up before them. A crab scuttled out from a dark hole that was a metre wide and high, tucked just below the surface of the sea. Then the creature slipped beneath the seaweed as Alfie and Moll pushed Siddy up towards it. The shallow water carried him into the hole and, one by one, Alfie, Moll and Gryff followed. Moll felt the last of her breath ebbing away as they swam into the tunnel, and then, moments later, the rocks above them opened up slightly.

The children's heads burst through the surface, spluttering water and gulping the air back into their lungs. Dark, wet rock arched just above them and water slopped against the sides of the tunnel, draining with a loud sucking noise as

the tide pulled back. But the owls hadn't followed; this was a place only Oak's gypsies knew about.

Siddy glanced at his arm and moaned.

'Quick,' Alfie panted, turning to Moll. 'Get him inside.'

They pushed Siddy further along the tunnel. Moll's knees knocked against the rocks beneath her and they scraped at her skin, then the tunnel veered left, inland for a while, and before long the scalloped rocks above them widened, opening up completely to reveal a large cavern.

They called the cave Little Hollows and it spread out before them now, its marbled roof curving grey and silver far above the sandy bottom. Candles flickered on every shelf of rock jutting from the sides of the cave, lighting up the dried lemon peel, shards of mirror and horseshoe nails that the gypsies had balanced on ledges and in fissures as good-luck omens. And a fire crackled in the middle of the cave, its smoke curling upwards, seeping away through unseen cracks. It had been the gypsies' base for two weeks, ever since Oak had left his son, Wisdom, in charge of keeping the clearing and the other gypsies in Tanglefern Forest safe and a smaller group had broken off to hide from the Shadowmasks.

Here in Little Hollows, Cinderella Bull, the camp's fortune-teller, had taught the Tribe about the sea spirits and mer creatures lurking beyond the cove – about kelpies, sirens and mer ghosts. Mooshie had shown them how to spear mackerel, pot lobsters and cook seaweed, and she'd pointed out which herbs could be used and which ones to avoid: nettles worked in tea, but poppies from the fields above the

cliffs would knock you out cold. And Oak had showed them where the currents were at their strongest in the bay and the best spots for diving.

The Tribe had flourished in the cove – the sea was something new and full of adventure – and Moll was almost able to forget that back in the forest only a month ago the Shadowmasks had used hounds, poison and fire to hunt her and Gryff. But now their threat was all too real.

Panting, Alfie and Moll hauled Siddy up on to the slabs of rock that spilled down from the tunnel into the cave. Gryff clambered out after them, his eyes alert for help.

Dripping with water, Moll stepped over the collection of home-made fishing rods – their lines strung from nettle fibres – and jumped down into the cave. Siddy rocked his arm and whimpered and Moll glanced at the sheets tied back by colourful ribbons from the four alcoves at the far end of the cave.

'Mooshie!' she called.

A woman's plump face poked out from an alcove: two dimpled cheeks framed by a purple headscarf and a sparkling brooch at the neck of a shirt. Glowering, she raised a tea towel in her ringed hand and stormed towards the fire. 'I thought I told you lot to use the beach entrance; that tunnel's dangerous! You'll—' Her words were cut short as she noticed Siddy. She bustled closer, her colourful petticoats bouncing round her ankles. 'What happened?' she asked, her face suddenly pale.

Moll glanced back towards the tunnel. 'I think Darkebite's back.'