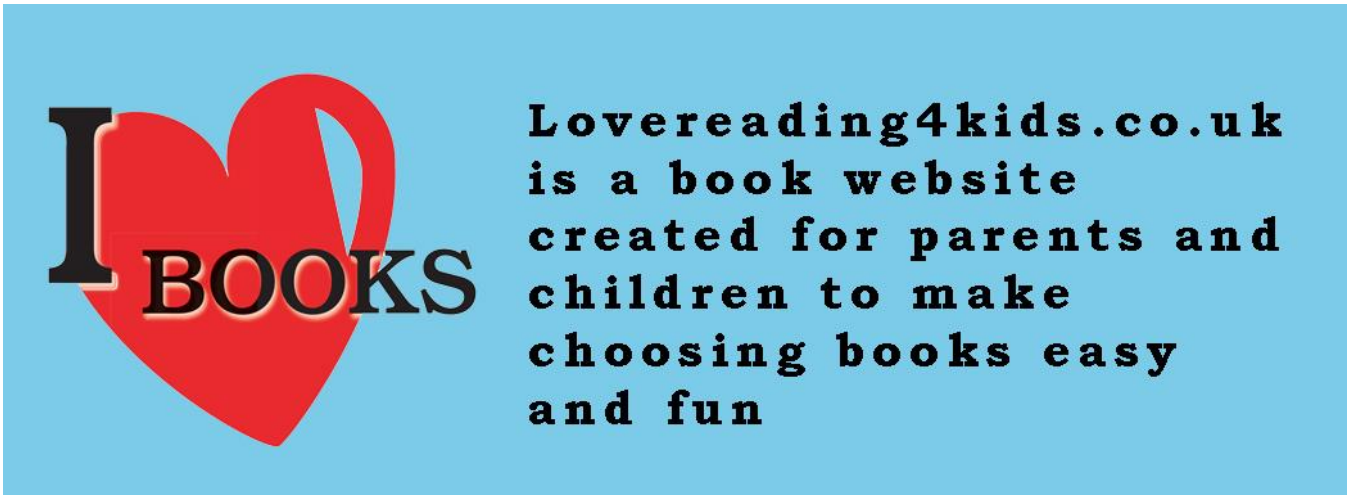


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Abi Elphinstone

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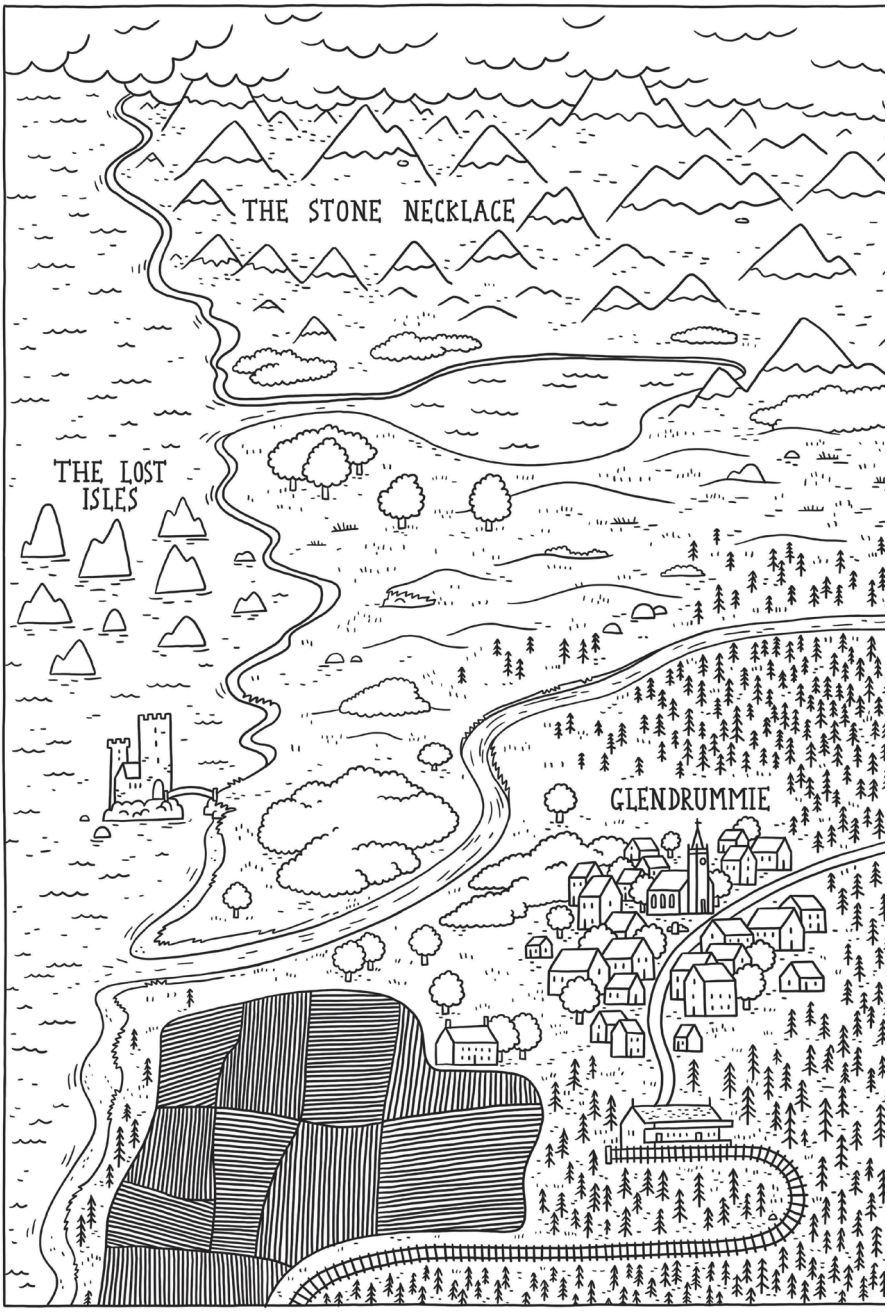
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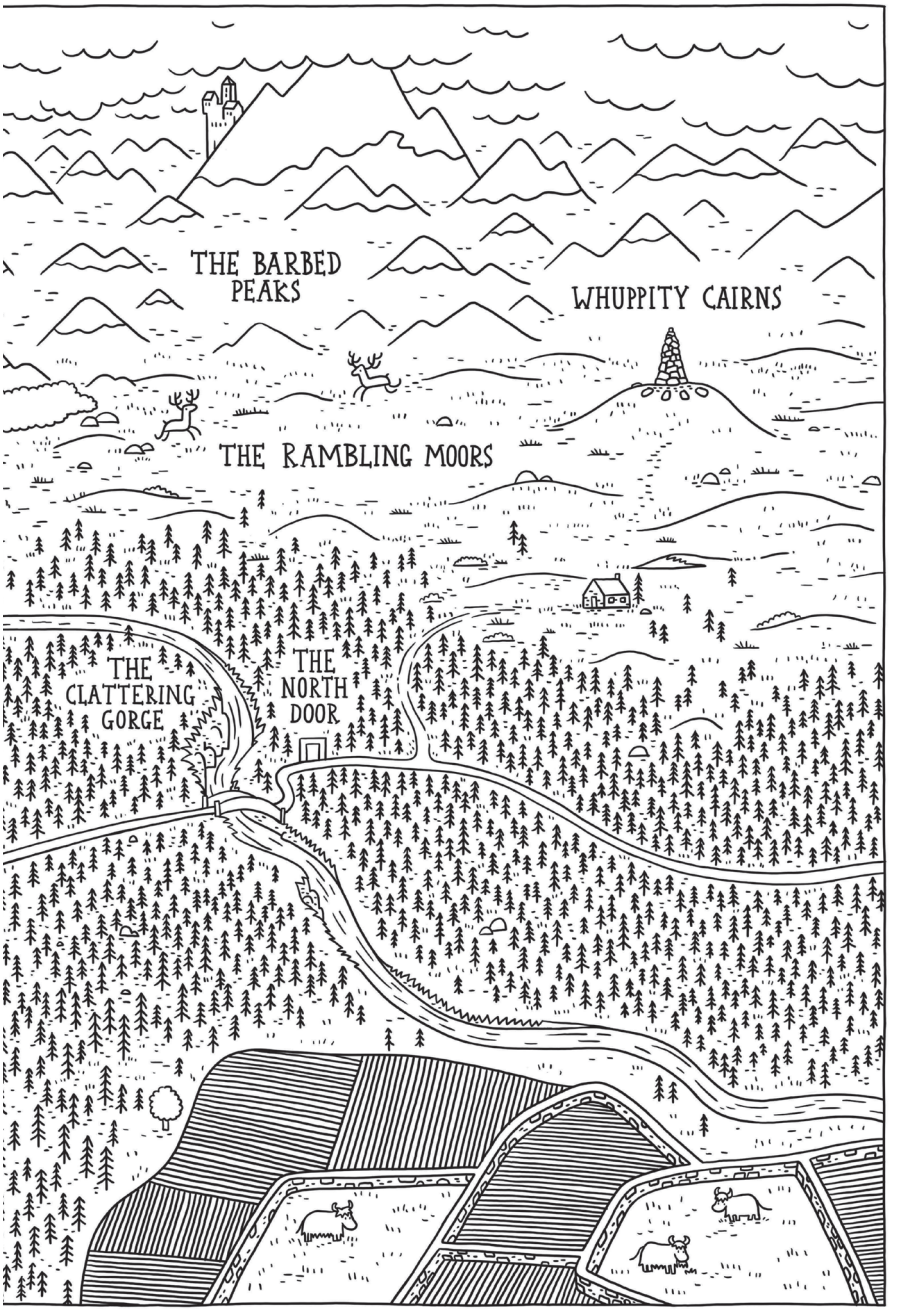
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To my Angus Girls: Els, Luce and Georgie.
For all our adventures in the northern wilderness.


THE STONE NECKLACE
THE LOST ISLES
GLENDRUMMIE


THE BARBED PEAKS
WHUPPITY CAIRNS
THE RAMBLING MOORS
THE CLATTERING GORGE
THE NORTH DOOR

Prologue
The Rookery

Few remember the monastery. Carved into the face of a towering mountain, it perches above the surrounding peaks, its forgotten turrets twisting into the clouds. The Rookery, the people of the north call it. Once, monks were said to have passed through the courtyard into the cold, stone chambers. But the monks have long since gone and now only the rooks remain, huddled on crumbling ledges. Sometimes the birds launch off, circling the turrets like scraps of the night, and crying to each other with lonely *kaah*s. But mostly they are silent and still, turned inwards on the ledges, watching and waiting, because they know something the people don't. There is still somebody left inside.

In a dark room a figure sits on a stool before a spinning wheel, his robes silhouetted in the candlelight, his face half hidden by shadow. It is night outside the turret, but Wormhook has no intention of sleeping. Extending a hand towards the spindle, he lifts it from the wheel, then sifts through the strands of glittering black hair that have gathered

there. He glances at a rook watching from the open window.

'Hair belonging to the Guardians of the Oracle Bones,' Wormhook mutters. 'Spun with spider silk and a thousand nightmares from the depths of the Underworld to form the thread I need.'

The feathers on the rook's neck rise and shiver apart, but Wormhook only smiles. His face is covered by a mask of tattered sack with the eyeholes cut away, a slice for the mouth and straw straggling down instead of hair. He cradles the thread and, from inside an old wardrobe at the far end of the room, a hollow pummelling sounds. Placing his thread on the stool, Wormhook crosses the room.

'I am ready for you now,' he whispers, and he lifts the plank of wood that holds the wardrobe doors closed.

At first nothing happens and then slowly, quietly, two shadows slip out. They hang in the air like clouds of soot and the turret darkens. Then Wormhook walks back to the spinning wheel, sits on the stool and, with his thread in his lap, he summons the shadows closer.

They obey, gliding soundlessly across the room, while Wormhook plucks a needle from a sewing box at his feet and slips the thread through it. The shadows are suspended in front of him now, side by side, and he sets his needle through the first, then pulls it across to the second. His fingers rise and fall through the darkness, binding the two shadows together to form a jet-black quilt that shimmers silver in the middle where the stitches show.

Wormhook tucks the last of the thread into the quilt and

as it shifts up and down in a regular, trembling rhythm, he blinks coolly in the knowledge that his creation is now a living, breathing thing. He closes his eyes and listens. There are sounds coming from the quilt now, muffled and distant, but they are there, as he knew they would be, locked inside the thread: sobs, screams, gasps – echoes of nightmares snatched from the Underworld. Wormhook looks up and walks over to the window which sends the curious rook skittering into the sky.

'The girl and the beast may have destroyed four Shadowmasks and broken our Soul Splinter,' he says, and the eyeholes in his mask narrow at the stars above the clouds, 'but there are still two of us witch doctors left – two Shadowmasks armed with deadly curses – and, on top of that, we now have a weapon more powerful than anything that has come before.' Wormhook turns his back on the night and raises his hands. 'Behold the Veil!' he cries.

The quilt rises and Wormhook throws back his head and laughs. Then his voice drops to a purr.

'You, my precious Veil, will travel across the land, from the northern wilderness to the southern seas, spreading evil wherever you go. You will fill souls and minds with fear; you will break the spirits of the people so that they are ready to obey the Shadowmasks' rule when it comes.' He pauses. 'And once Orbrot has stolen Molly Pecksniff's impossible dream you will kill her and her wildcat! Then your power will be absolute and the dark magic will rise in all its glory.'

Wormhook points at the window and the Veil floats

through it before hanging in the darkness as it waits for its next command. The witch doctor places a hand on the turret wall and the rooks still gathered on the ledges outside spring into the sky, wheeling above the monastery in frenzied circles.

A crooked smile breaks across Wormhook's face and he leans out over the Veil. 'I can feel your hunger awakening,' he whispers, 'but you will need a rider – someone to lead you until you are powerful enough to lead yourself.'

The Veil shivers with delight and then it follows the witch doctor back inside the turret, on through the winding passageways.

Chapter 1
Eavesdropping

That same night, many miles south of the Rookery, a group of gypsies had gathered round a campfire deep inside Tanglefern Forest. Lanterns dangled from the branches of the oaks that lined the clearing, throwing light on a ring of colourful wagons and picking out the good luck charms scattered along their ledges: lemon peel, shards of mirror, fox teeth, iron nails.

The night was hushed and still. Clouds swallowed the moon and stars, foxes sat tight in their dens and even the owls were unusually quiet. Only the Elders of the camp broke the silence, a dozen of them huddled round the flames on upturned logs, with voices folded into whispers. Theirs was a conversation too dark for the children tucked up inside the wagons, but for the girl crouched just out of their sight on a branch overhanging the clearing, this muffled talk was most frustrating.

Moll scampered along the branch, straining her ears towards the murmurs, and behind her a wildcat followed with silent paws. They stopped halfway along the bough, two

sets of green eyes blinking in the dark, while down below, Oak, the leader of the camp, took a sip of rosehip tea, then stoked the fire.

'We're running out of ideas,' he muttered. 'Moll can't throw the Oracle Bones to find the last amulet – everyone knows a Guardian only has one chance at that … And Cinderella Bull, you say you've searched your crystal ball for answers without any luck?'

Across the fire, a very old woman nodded and, as she did so, the coins lining her red shawl tinkled. 'I've tried the orb again and again, and looked for clues in the tea leaves, but something's preventing me from reaching the old magic.' She paused. 'I think it's the Shadowmasks' curses; they're trying to stop us from finding this final amulet.'

The darkness around the camp seemed to inch closer and Moll shrank inside her duffle coat. It had been three days since they'd found the second amulet in a secret cave down by the sea and then fought off the Shadowmasks in a terrifying battle in the sky, but, every time anyone mentioned the witch doctors, Moll's skin crawled with dread.

'We need to wait for a sign from the old magic,' Cinderella Bull said eventually, 'here in the forest where our ancestors first heard the tree spirits and the water spirits stir.' The coins on the fortune-teller's shawl glinted in the firelight. 'The old magic will find us, even if I do not have the strength to find it.'

Oak took off his wide-brimmed hat and turned it over in his hands, then after a while he nodded. 'We'll wait

for two days, but we can't afford to delay any longer. The Shadowmasks may have lost their Soul Splinter—'

Again Moll shuddered as she thought of the deadly shard of ice the witch doctors had used to kill her parents ten years ago.

'—and that might buy us some time,' Oak continued, 'but it won't be long before the last two witch doctors come for Moll. We need to cast a powerful protection charm to keep her safe.'

There were nods from the Elders and murmurings about spells involving hedgehog bristles, acorns and moonstones, but Moll wasn't thinking about her safety. Talk of the Soul Splinter had stirred unwanted memories inside her, thoughts so raw she felt her chest tighten. She had spent almost a month living as an outlaw in a seaside cave with her best friends, Alfie and Sid, and a few other members of the camp as they searched for the second amulet. But not everybody who'd set out on that journey had come back.

Moll tried to blink her thoughts away, but Alfie's final moments came crashing back to her: the giant eagle they'd ridden out over the sea together after they'd found the second amulet; Alfie destroying two of the Shadowmasks – Ashtongue and Darkebite – *and* their Soul Splinter so that she, Gryff and Sid could go on with their quest; and then Moll watching, powerless to help, as Alfie faded to a wisp in front of her before disappearing completely.

Moll closed her eyes. Alfie hadn't even been part of her camp at the beginning. He'd been living under the

Shadowmasks' command, a neglected orphan snatched into the folds of their dark and terrible magic. The witch doctors had used his tears in the making of their Soul Splinter and in doing so they had broken something deep inside Alfie that meant he could only be seen by those who believed in the old magic. To others, he was invisible, as if he wasn't even *real*. But he had torn free from the witchdoctors' clutches, he had helped Moll escape from a Shadowmask's lair and he had journeyed with her and Sid to find the first two amulets.

Moll sighed. She had come to regard Alfie as a part of Oak's camp, as someone whose loyalty could be counted on in the very darkest of times, and, though it had been a friendship forged in the unlikeliest of situations, it had been a friendship that mattered, one that had stamped a mark deep upon Moll's soul.

The wildcat beside Moll nuzzled into her side, as if he could sense her thoughts, and Moll tried her best to focus on what was happening down in the clearing.

Oak was standing and the Elders, a jumble of patterned headscarves, neckerchiefs, caps and tin cups, were looking up at him expectantly. 'All those in favour of waiting for a sign from the old magic, raise your hand.'

One by one, the men and women round the fire lifted their hands.

Moll turned an indignant face to the wildcat. 'We're not waiting, Gryff,' she whispered. 'Alfie's gone and I'm not just going to sit back and do *nothing*!' She spat the last

word out with such force that she lurched forward on the branch and several Elders glanced up at the trees. Gryff shot a paw out to steady Moll, then he curled his black-and-white striped tail round her as the Elders turned back to their meeting.

'The old magic has never let us down before,' Oak said. 'We have to keep faith now.' He looked at the others. 'Does anyone have anything to add?'

Moll felt the unsaid words rise up inside her and without thinking she scrambled further down the branch.

'Yes!' she shouted, raising her body to full height. 'I have a lot to add!'

The Elders were on their feet at once.

'Moll?' Oak spluttered as his gaze fixed upon her. He turned to the woman beside him whose round face was framed with a spotted headscarf and two large hoop earrings. 'You said she was asleep, Mooshie!'

Mooshie blinked. 'I thought she was!' She narrowed her eyes through the dark at Moll. 'Do *not* jump from that tree, young lady!'

Moll lowered her body on to the branch then, with her arms and legs clinging tight, she swivelled beneath it before dropping like a furious raindrop into the clearing. She landed in a crouch just beyond the fire and, a second later, Gryff leapt down beside her and then slunk towards her wagon. Despite the bond he shared with Moll, the wildcat was a solitary creature.

Mooshie seized Moll by the shoulders, then brushed the

bark from her coat. 'This is only your second night back in camp and you're already stealing out of bed and swinging from trees!'

Moll shrugged Mooshie off. 'Waiting around isn't going to bring Alfie back. Or help us find the last amulet.' She threw up her hands. 'I'm the Guardian of the Oracle Bones and the Bone Murmur doesn't talk about sitting tight until things just happen – it talks about me and Gryff fighting back against the dark magic!'

The Elders knew the words of the Bone Murmur, the ancient prophecy handed down through Moll's ancestors, almost better than anyone, but, before they could say anything, Moll was off again.

'The Shadowmasks know how to drag the darkest curses from the Underworld across our land. They rotted fields and tore apart cliffs and beaches when they searched for me all last month – so what if Tanglefern Forest, *our home*, is next? They don't care what happens to our world!' Moll shook her head. 'And they don't care what happens to our friends and our families either! The Shadowmasks have taken my parents *and* Alfie already, and we know they're making a quilt of darkness – a weapon more deadly than the Soul Splinter – so they'll use that to take me and Gryff soon.'

Mooshie flinched but Moll went on.

'And then afterwards? There won't be an old magic, the goodness at the heart of all things, that's for sure. This world will belong to the Shadowmasks and to all the cursed creatures they conjure from the Underworld. I don't know

what their new world is going to look like, but I'm not waiting to find out. I'm going to find the last amulet – and I'm going to find Alfie. Because I made a promise to him,' Moll said firmly. 'I swore that wherever he went and whatever the Shadowmasks had in store for us, I'd go after him.' She lowered her voice. 'And I promised that I'd make him real – so that *everyone* could see him.'

Mooshie squeezed Moll's hand. After saying goodnight to Moll the evening before, she had heard the young girl whisper her promise to Alfie before turning off her light. 'It's not your fault that he disappeared,' Mooshie said gently.

Moll could feel a lump rising in her throat. None of the camp had dared voice the possibility that Alfie might be gone for good – that his disappearance might have meant something else – but Mooshie, who had raised Moll like her own child, knew the girl inside out and she understood that behind the desperation to find Alfie there lay a fear that he had gone to a place where Moll could not follow.

Moll glanced around, suddenly aware of the Elders watching her. She was surprised to see Oak's youngest son, Domino, among the adults – he was only in his early twenties so wasn't usually involved in such discussions – but she kept her gaze low and scuffed the ground with her boot.

Oak reached behind him and drew up another log. 'You don't exactly qualify as an Elder yet—'

'Because my legs still work fine and I don't need afternoon naps?' Moll muttered.

Mooshie gave her a quick thwack across the back with

her tea towel while Oak went on, '—but take a seat just for tonight and we'll answer any questions you have before we all head off to bed.'

Moll settled herself down between Oak and Mooshie.

'At least Siddy's following orders and getting a good night's sleep,' Mooshie sighed.

There was a nervous cough from beneath a blue wagon decorated with gold stars, then a boy with a flat cap sunk low over dark brown curls emerged sheepishly.

'I was going to sit it out under the wagon,' he said, shaking the mud from his cap, 'but it's actually quite hard to listen in when you're face down in the soil.' He dipped his head towards Moll. 'Didn't realise you were up and about too.'

Moll grinned at her friend. Things always felt better when Sid was around. He approached the fire, wincing as he caught sight of his mother shaking off a blanket and placing two indignant fists on her hips.

'Sorry, Ma,' he mumbled. 'But I couldn't sleep knowing the last two Shadowmasks will be coming for us soon. We can't just wait it out . . .'

Moll nodded. 'People wait for water to boil and rain to stop. They don't wait for dark magic.'

'So what exactly do they do, Moll?' Mooshie asked wearily.

Moll budged up to make room on her log for Siddy. 'They pounce,' she replied tartly. 'And they—'

Her words were cut short by a gasp from across the fire.

'Look!' Cinderella Bull whispered. 'In the flames!'

Moll watched the flickers dance, but saw nothing unusual.

'Look closer,' Cinderella Bull urged, 'with believing eyes, because it's not only the tree spirits and the water spirits who dwell within Tanglefern Forest.'

Moll's skin prickled. Was the old magic stirring? She leant in towards the fire and let her eyes travel up from the blackened logs to the twisting flames and the sparks flitting up into the surrounding trees. But she saw no sign of magic. She watched the Elders, their faces aglow in the firelight, their eyes locked on to something just out of her sight. Then she slid a look to Siddy who was also scouring the flames with a crinkled brow and, just as Moll was thinking that perhaps the old magic was only going to show itself to the Elders, she and Siddy saw it too.

Deep within the fire, like a scene stolen from another world, shapes were moving. They were not fitful and darting, like the flames around them: these images moved to a different rhythm. Moll held her breath as large clouds drifted across the heart of the fire, then melted away, and a huddle of houses appeared, still like stone amid the crackling flames. They slipped from sight and in their place were two hands clasped in greeting, which fizzled away to reveal a row of jagged peaks. Moll narrowed her eyes, trying to understand, then there was a bang, like a gunshot, as the fire snuffed out and the gypsies were plunged into darkness.

Domino leapt up and grabbed a couple of lanterns from the surrounding trees which he placed in the middle of the Elders' circle and Moll saw in their flickering glow that Cinderella Bull was smiling.

'The fire spirits found a way through to us for a moment before the dark magic forced them away,' the fortune-teller said. She turned to Moll. 'The old magic listens for the sounds that our ears miss – the straining of our hearts and the fear in our blood – and it heard the pain beating inside you tonight, Moll. That's why the fire spirits came.'

Moll felt her cheeks redden. 'What was the old magic saying? I saw clouds and houses – and hands and mountains!'

Cinderella Bull's eyes glittered. 'Not clouds, my dear, but steam. You have a train journey ahead of you. And the clasped hands, houses and mountains – they signify a meeting with strangers in the last village before the land grows fully wild. The northern wilderness – that's where the next part of your quest will start. That's where you will begin your search for the final amulet.'

'A train journey!' Siddy cried. 'I've never been on a train before, only horses and wagons. What a way to kick things off!'

But Moll wasn't listening. 'The northern wilderness . . .' she murmured, looking over her shoulder to see Gryff watching from the steps of her wagon. None of the camp knew where the wildcat had come from – he had simply arrived in the forest to keep Moll safe the night the Shadowmasks killed her parents – and he had been by her side ever since. But there was talk that wildcats came from the north and Moll had always wondered whether the wilderness was where Gryff really belonged. She swallowed. What if this last adventure was a journey to lead him home?

Cinderella Bull leant forward. 'Now the old magic has sent a sign, you must leave at dawn.'

Mooshie shook her head. 'The children need more rest and—'

'There's no time to spare, Moosh,' Oak interrupted. 'It's a two-day walk to the train line from here. They have to leave tomorrow.'

'*They?*' Moll said quietly. 'You – you aren't coming with us?'

Oak turned to Moll and Siddy. 'The old magic might have saved me from the Shadowmasks' cursed owls – their wings, all sharpened like knives and coated in poison, couldn't kill me back on the cliff tops – but ever since that fight my legs have been slower. And you need to be led by someone strong, someone fast, someone who can keep you safe.'

Domino crossed the fire and crouched before them and Moll suddenly understood why he had been called to the Elders' meeting.

'You're coming with us, aren't you?'

Domino nodded. 'I promised my pa I'd protect you, Moll. You, Siddy and Gryff – and that I'd do everything in my power to find the last amulet.'

Moll tried to imagine a journey to the northern wilderness without Oak, without the man who had taught her how to climb trees and fire a catapult. But the old familiar structures that had once held up her world were gradually falling apart. Alfie was gone, Oak would be staying in the forest and she and Siddy would be on the move again, away from the safety of their camp.

Domino twisted the spiked rings on his fingers. 'For what it's worth, I don't believe Alfie's gone either, Moll. We've got no proof, of course, but sometimes a feeling deep in your gut is all you need to find someone.' He paused. 'I know I'm not the same as Pa, but I'll help you bring Alfie home, I promise.'

Everything Moll had ever learnt about speed in the wild – how to outswim the river's currents, how to track the swiftest deer and how to run with wild ponies out on the heath – had come from Domino. And as she thought about those times and looked at Domino's face, the same dark hair, olive skin and kind eyes as Oak's, suddenly the shift from father to son didn't seem quite so strange.

The Elders began to clear away their upturned logs and tin cups, but Oak, Mooshie and Domino stayed with Moll and Siddy. Beneath the silent trees, they spoke of the northern wilderness and all that might be waiting for them there. And, when the rest of the Elders had gone to bed and only they were left, they wrapped arms around each other and, in the fragile shell of lantern light, Mooshie called upon the old magic to keep them safe.