

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 'barrassed about him being in there.'

'*Em*barrassed,' 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!'