

A SPRINKLE OF SORCERY



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Prologue

THERE WAS ONCE A POWERFUL WITCH WHO LIVED on the edge of a marsh. She lived alone except for her familiar: a large black raven.

Every day, people would come to her, seeking help, and every day the witch would assist them in return for some small token or favour. Her magic could cure many things: from warts to worries; from broken fingers to broken hearts.

One day she had a visitor – the lord of the land – who had come in disguise. He was a cruel man who had heard stories of the witch's magic, and he couldn't bear to think that anyone was wealthier or more powerful than him. While he was quickly satisfied that the witch was far from rich, he unexpectedly began to fall in love with her. But the witch did not return his feelings, even when he threw off his disguise and revealed who he truly was.

Unable to forget her, the lord returned to visit her again. He couldn't understand why the witch did not love him back,

and he flew into a rage and ordered for her to be blinded. 'If you will not look at me and love me, you will not look at anyone,' he declared. But the lord's men took pity on the witch, and left her with one good eye.

'You can take my eye,' she told him, 'but I will always see you clearly.' And she enchanted an old stone with a hole through the middle to act as a magical eye for the one she had lost.

When the lord returned a third time, and the witch's feelings towards him had still not changed, he lost his temper again. This time he demanded that her voice be taken.

'If you will not say you love me,' he said, 'then you will not speak at all.' And he ordered his men to cut out her tongue and throw it into the marshes. But, after the lord left, the witch's raven croaked in a harsh, rasping voice: 'You may have taken my tongue, but you will never silence me.'

On the lord's final visit, he saw what he had done to the witch, and he could not bear to look at her. 'See how ugly and strange she is!' he cried. 'See how she speaks through her raven, a messenger of death! Get rid of her!'

Conjuring a marsh mist, the witch escaped in a little wooden boat with only her cauldron, her raven and her magical hagstone, and rowed far out over the marshes and into the sea. There she found a tiny scrap of land, surrounded by water for as far as she could see, and she and the raven made it their home.

For a while, the witch and the raven lived simply and

happily, and were bothered by no one. She was older now, and had no concern for the petty requests of others.

Then one day she was spotted by a group of fishermen who had been swept near to her island by a wayward tide. Taking pity on them, she blew into a large seashell and summoned a wind that set them safely back on the path home. Once there, they shared stories of the strange woman who had helped them so magically. Before long, these stories reached the ears of the wicked lord. He was married now, and had forgotten about the witch long ago, but the tale awakened his curiosity and he found he could not sleep easy with the thought that the witch was still alive.

Taking a boat, he rowed out to sea until he found the craggy rock where the witch lived with her raven. At first he barely recognised her, for she was old and crooked and grey, battered by a thousand sea storms. But when the raven spoke he knew it was her, and she remembered him, too.

'I have come to beg your forgiveness,' he said. 'I wronged you and I am sorry.'

The witch considered his request. Despite her bubbling resentment towards him, there was still good in her heart and so she decided to offer him a chance to redeem himself.

Filling her cauldron with seawater, she threw in a feather from the raven and some items that had been washed up: an old boot, a torn fishing net, a button, a butter knife and a horseshoe. Into the mixture she added the hagstone that she used as her magical eye.

When the pot had boiled dry, all the items had been transformed in some way. The raven's feather was now a golden egg. The boot had transformed into a beautiful new pair of shoes, stitched from the finest leather. The horseshoe had become a lucky rabbit's foot, the button a cape of softest velvet, the butter knife a jewelled dagger and the fishing net a ball of strong yarn. Only the hagstone remained unchanged. The witch plucked it from the cauldron and cast it far off into the sea.

'You have a choice,' croaked the raven. 'Whatever you decide will lead you to what you deserve. The stone is now an island. If you truly want forgiveness, find the island and bring back the first living thing you encounter there. If you do, you'll be forgiven. Take an object from the cauldron, but be warned: only *one* of these things will be of use to you, for it is enchanted. The others will bring great misfortune.'

The lord's eyes shifted craftily. 'What else is on the island?'

'At its heart there are riches that will last forever,' the raven replied. 'But you need not concern yourself with those. You are already wealthy.'

Without hesitation, the lord reached into the cauldron, picking over the strange items before finally deciding on the dagger. He set off, thinking about the mysterious island, but vowed he would do as the witch asked and return with the first living thing he saw. But, by the time he neared the island, his mind was full of thoughts about what might lie at its heart.

I am *rich*, he thought, *but there are men far wealthier and I would like to be among their number.* And before long his eyes glinted as brightly as the jewels in his imagination.

'I will grab the first living thing I see,' he said to himself, 'before going on to find the riches. Then I can give it to the witch on my return and she will never know.'

As he moored his boat, he noticed a small, twisted root that grew in the cracked rocks at the island's edge. He plucked it out and pushed it into his pocket, then clambered on to the rocks. At the same time, a clap of thunder rolled across the sky. The lord's foot slipped, becoming wedged into a deep crack that had opened up from nowhere. Try as he might, he could not free himself, even with the dagger, for its blade buckled and bent like a reed in the wind . . .

He was never seen again.

And, while this was the end for him, it was also the beginning of a story that would be passed down for generations: the tale of a one-eyed witch who set out to trick the greedy and reward the worthy. Over time, the story changed, as stories often will, but the island remained, along with the witch and the raven and the strange items that sometimes altered, depending on the retelling. For years on end, the story would die out, but every so often it resurfaced to reach the ears of the needy, the ambitious and the greedy. For stories, like magic, can outlive the people who tell them.

And magic, like stories, will always, *always* leave a trace.



Chapter One
The Poacher's Pocket

THE PRISON BELL STARTED CLANGING JUST after teatime.

It was a low, monotonous *dong . . . dong . . .* like the bell was taking a breath in between short bursts of gossip.`

Inside the Poacher's Pocket inn, the gossip began blazing as brightly as the fires.

Betty Widdershins stopped sweeping and glanced up in alarm as murmurs rippled through the pub. Her older sister, Felicity – whom everyone knew as Fliss – looked up from the spilled beer she'd been wiping up on the bar and caught Betty's eye. The bell was a warning: keep off the streets. Stay inside. *Lock your doors.* Fliss set down her cloth and began serving the regulars who were flocking to top up their drinks. Wagging tongues made customers thirsty.

'Someone's escaped, haven't they?' asked a scowling Charlie, the youngest Widdershins girl. She was sitting at

the bar, poking unenthusiastically at a lacy ruffle on the dress she was wearing.

'Yes,' Betty replied. She cast her mind back, thinking of other times when the bell had rung. Living so near to the prison just across the marshes was one of the worst things about Crowstone. And, while escapes were rare, they still happened, and sent the place into turmoil every time.

'It's a right racket!' Charlie complained, sticking her fingers in her ears.

'That it is!' The girls' granny, Bunny Widdershins, banged down a pint of Speckled Pig bad-temperedly, slopping beer over a grizzle-haired customer's hands. 'This is the last thing we need today of all days!' She gave the customer a withering look. 'And I thought I told you to smarten up, Fingerty? It's bad enough that we're surrounded by riff-raff on the outside, let alone having our customers looking like scruff-bags, too!'

'I did!' Fingerty protested with an injured look, but even so he pulled a comb from his top pocket and began tugging it through his straggly hair as Bunny stomped off, probably for a crafty puff of her pipe.

Fliss slid a nip of port next to Fingerty's glass with a small smile. 'On the house,' she said. 'Don't tell Granny.' Fingerty smacked his lips, his grumpy expression softening.

Betty leaned the broomstick against the nearest fireplace and looked around, trying to imagine the pub through a stranger's eyes. It was difficult, for the Widdershins not only worked at the Poacher's Pocket, they lived there, too. Betty

was so used to its shabbiness that half the time she barely noticed the threadbare carpets and peeling wallpaper. But today the tired interior stuck out like a robin among crows.

She brushed a hand across her damp forehead. It was rather too warm for all the fires to be lit, but Granny had insisted on it to make the place feel cosier. Betty and her sisters had been hard at work all day, topping up firewood, sweeping the floors and polishing the brassware until it gleamed. Fliss had even baked in order to fill the place with a homely smell. So far so good . . . except for Granny's mood souring the atmosphere.

Betty approached Charlie, who was now hovering by the steamed-up window for the third time in ten minutes.

'Granny shouldn't talk to customers like that,' Charlie said. 'Or we'll have none left!'

Betty snorted. 'You reckon? The Snooty Fox is nearly two miles away, and their beer's double the price!' She leaned closer to the glass, wiping a clear patch to peer through.

'They should've been here by now.'

'Wish they'd hurry up so I can take off this rotten dress!' Charlie muttered, fidgeting furiously. 'Posh clothes are so ITCHY!'

'At least it makes a change from nits,' said Betty.

Charlie grinned, her freckled nose crinkling. For once, she looked presentable, with her brown hair neatly brushed and in two glossy pigtails tied with ribbons. Betty knew it wouldn't last.

'Ain't had nits for ages,' Charlie answered proudly, sticking her tongue out through the gap where her front teeth were missing. 'Six whole weeks!'

'Goodness!' Betty murmured absent-mindedly, still staring out of the window. Daylight was fading fast over Nestynook Green, but a few bright spring flowers could still be seen nodding in the breeze that ruffled the grass and set the sign fixed to the wall of the Poacher's Pocket creaking. Betty eyed it, the two bold words swinging back and forth like a hand waving to attract attention: FOR SALE.

'They'll be here,' she said, but with each passing minute she felt less sure. The sign creaked again, like something chuckling nastily at them. A black crow had perched on top of it and, as it watched Betty with eyes like bright beads, it was joined by a second and then a third. An old crow superstition of Granny's popped into her head:

One for marsh mist,
Two for sorrow,
Three, you'll journey far tomorrow . . .

Betty watched as the third crow took flight, leaving only two. She didn't believe in all that nonsense so why was she feeling so jittery?

'The pub will be sold by spring, you'll see,' Father had told them, after he'd fixed the sign up in the first week of the new year. But it wasn't. The weeks had stretched into months, and

now it was almost May. Granny hadn't even wanted to put the Poacher's Pocket up for sale at first. It had been Betty's idea, and it had taken a lot of persuasion to make Granny see that it was time to spread their wings and leave Crowstone.

'We could go anywhere!' Betty had coaxed. 'Just think! Perhaps open a little tea shop by the sea, or even an ice-cream parlour . . . Something more cheerful for us all.'

Naturally, the mention of ice cream had been enough to convince Charlie, and the idea had taken root.

But leaving wasn't as easy as Betty had thought it would be. While the Poacher's Pocket wasn't as shabby as it had once been, it was far from grand. Not a week went by without a tile coming loose or a window shutter being in need of repair. Even now, their father was upstairs, mending something.

'It's a fixer-upper,' Granny had said brightly to the only two people who had come to look at the place since the FOR SALE sign had gone up. 'Been in the Widdershins family for years!'

However, the real problem, as they all knew, wasn't the pub. It was the location. Set upon bleak, drizzly marshes and overlooked by a vast prison, Crowstone wasn't a place people came to unless they had to. It was the largest of a cluster of four islands known as the Sorrow Isles. Many of those living on Crowstone had relatives in the prison that they wanted to be near to. And the prison held a lot of inmates from all over the islands.

Dangerous ones, Betty thought, with a shudder. Fraudsters, thieves and even murderers . . . all locked up just a ferry ride away on the island of Repent. Beyond this was the smaller island of Lament, where Crowstone's dead were buried. The final island was called Torment, the only one of the islands Betty and her sisters had never been to. For this was where banished people were sent, and it was out of bounds to everyone else.

Betty glanced at Fingerty, still slumped on his bar stool. A nerve in his wrinkled forehead was twitching in time to the clanging bell.

Everyone knew of his past, first as a prison warder, then later as a crook himself. He alone knew more about Torment than anyone else in the Poacher's Pocket, because he had once helped to smuggle people who were desperate to escape off the island.

'Of all the rotten timing,' Fliss said. 'We've made everything so lovely and cheerful, and now that horrible din out there is spoiling it all!'

'It's not spoiling anything,' Granny said, emerging from the door that led upstairs. 'Telling the truth, that's what it's doing!' She gestured helplessly around, glowering at the lit fires as fiercely as the flames. 'Who did we think we were kidding? Trying to make out this place is anything but a drinking hole for the . . . the dregs of society!'

'Granny!' Fliss exclaimed. 'That's a dreadful thing to say.'

'It's true!' snapped Granny, grabbing a glass and helping

herself to a nip of whiskey. 'We can scrub this place up all we want, but it won't make any difference. I said it all along: you can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear!'

Charlie looked affronted. 'Yuck! Why would anyone want to do that?'

'It doesn't really mean that,' Fliss explained. 'What Granny's saying is that it's no good trying to pretend this place is something that it's not.'

'Does that mean I can take off this dress?' asked Charlie immediately.

'Not yet,' said Betty. 'They might still come.'

'They're already fifteen minutes late,' Granny said darkly.

'Maybe . . .' Fliss looked hesitant. 'I mean . . . would it be so bad to stay here?'

'*What?*' Charlie looked outraged. 'Why would we do that when we could open an ice-cream parlour?' Her green eyes grew round and greedy. 'Think of the flavours . . . the bumbleberry sauce . . .'

'Not to mention sharing a room with you two is driving me barmy,' Betty put in.

'I like sharing a room!' Charlie protested.

'So do I, but we're running out of space,' said Betty. 'What with all your creatures, and Fliss's mountain of love letters—'

'Hardly a mountain,' Fliss muttered, flushing scarlet. 'The point is, this is home.'

Betty felt a bubble of frustration rise up. *Trust Fliss to be sentimental!*

'I know.' Granny sighed, her voice softening. 'But the thought that we *can't* leave . . . Well, it makes it feel less like home, and more like . . . like a prison.'

The girls fell silent, exchanging glances. They knew better than anyone how it felt to be trapped. Until Betty's thirteenth birthday, the Widdershins had lived under a curse preventing them from leaving Crowstone. But together Betty and her sisters had broken the curse . . . with the help of a little family magic. It was a secret only the three of them shared. And the Widdershins sisters were good at keeping secrets.

'Fliss,' Charlie said suddenly, sniffing. 'What's that smell?'

'Jumping jackdaws!' Fliss cried, rushing away through the door that led upstairs. A couple of minutes later, she returned with a tray of blackened gingerbread shapes and began offering them around.

'Can't eat that,' Fingerty exclaimed, inspecting a singed piece. 'I'll break me teeth!'

'It's only burnt at the edges,' Fliss said, offended. She pushed her dark fringe out of her eyes, blinking hard.

Betty reached for the least charred piece she could see, trying not to cough as smoke went down her throat. '*Mmm*,' she mumbled unconvincingly.

Before Fliss could retort, Charlie helped herself to two large pieces. 'One for me, one for Hoppit.'

'Are you on about that rat again?' Granny asked, placing her hands stoutly on her hips. 'Oh, Charlie. If you *must* have an imaginary pet, why can't you have a nice one?'

'Rats *are* nice,' said Charlie, crunching determinedly. 'And don't worry, Granny. He's safe in my pocket.'

'Well, make sure he stays there,' Granny muttered.

Betty left Charlie and Granny to their imaginary rats. Once out of Fliss's sight, she threw the burnt gingerbread on the nearest fire. Heading to the window again, she stared past a sprig of dried rowan berries, and Granny's other lucky charms, into the twilight. An evening mist was creeping in from the marshes, and the bad feeling Betty had felt before deepened. She'd always scoffed at Granny's superstitions, but no one would deny that the Widdershins had had more than their fair share of bad luck. Perhaps it was something they couldn't escape easily . . . like Crowstone itself.

Through the wispy grey, a figure came into view. A warder was prowling the street across the green, knocking on doors. There would be more of them, Betty knew. Searching for whoever had dared to escape. The warders wouldn't stop until the prisoner had been found. Soon they'd cross the green and arrive at the Poacher's Pocket, sniffing around and bringing questions and suspicion.

A movement under the vast oak tree on the green caught Betty's attention. Two figures were standing in the shadows under the branches, staring towards the Poacher's Pocket. It was hard to tell, but they looked like men. Betty's heartbeat quickened. These *had* to be the people they were expecting, the potential buyers . . . brothers, Granny had said. From their movements, Betty could tell they were having a disagreement.

One of them gestured impatiently, taking a step towards the inn. The other shook his head, pointing first at the inn, then at the warder going from door to door. Betty watched, heart sinking, as they turned in the direction of the ferry, their footsteps in time with the clanging prison bell. She could imagine the conversation: *Not worth the bother . . . What kind of place is this? We can find something better . . .*

Her eyes smarting with smoke and disappointment, she stepped back from the window. *Granny was right*, Betty thought. They wouldn't be selling this place any time soon.

But Granny wasn't right about everything. The Widdershins *would* be getting visitors before the night was out . . . just not the ones they were expecting.