

A STORM OF SISTERS



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For Aunt Janet and Unc



Dear Reader

Growing up as the youngest of three girls there were plenty of stories, adventures (and squabbles!) in our household. As most siblings know, you can be the best of friends or the worst of enemies in a heartbeat. That's why my three Widdershins sisters, Betty, Fliss and Charlie, feel so real to me – because they're inspired by my own experiences as a sister. Their Pinch of Magic Adventures take them from breaking a curse in misty Crowstone to outwitting pirates on the high seas, and even to a witch-infested village.

Now, in deepest winter, the Widdershins sisters and Granny are visiting cousin Clarissa in far away Wilderness and one by one they fall under its icy spell. For explorer Betty it's the festive market, animal-loving Charlie is drawn to Echo Hall's resident wolf-dog, and romantic Fliss is enchanted by the ghostly tale of a doomed highwayman.

But the legend, and its hauntings, are closer than the sisters realise. Soon they find themselves skating on thin ice where the highwayman's loot – a magical crystal ball – is said to lie at the bottom of a frozen lake. And someone dangerous is searching for it . . .

Come a little closer and wrap up warm . . . things are about to get chilly!

Wishing you a spine-tingling read.

Michelle Harrison





Prologue

The crystal ball lay hidden, as it had for many years: its smooth surface untouched, and any secrets it had to impart, unknown. It had once rested in its own wooden box inscribed with strange silver symbols, but the box was long gone and the two would never meet again. Yet time had not changed the crystal ball in any way. It was still as perfect, as beautiful and as mesmerising as it had always been.

And it had lost none of its magic.

The crystal ball had once belonged to a family of famous fortune tellers. Within its glassy depths, visions of the future and even the past had been revealed. It had glimpsed births, money, marriages and deaths, and had earned its owners many a pretty penny. But while the fortune tellers were the ones with the fame and glory, they were only as good as the crystal ball allowed them to be. Without it, they would be powerless and penniless, reduced to tricks and clever illusions.

At first, the crystal ball had filled with a furious black fog

when it had been stolen. It had been rather attached to its owner and missed her attention and soft murmurs of encouragement. Gradually, the fog faded and the crystal cleared, and it found that it quite liked being alone without curious eyes peering into it and constant demands to show the future. But occasionally, when it sensed people were near, it could not resist conjuring a vision to look into their lives and see what lay in store for them.

One day, almost forty years after it had been stolen, the crystal ball sensed a new presence and it was an intriguing one. The glassy orb swirled with such a vision of white snowflakes that for a moment it seemed as though the crystal itself was a formation of carved ice. Then, from within the depths, an image of three girls appeared within swirling snow. Three girls who were no strangers to enchanted objects.

Three sisters with their own pinch of magic . . .



Chapter One
Winter in Pendlewick

It was a crisp February morning when the letter arrived at Blackbird Cottage. Betty Widdershins saw it first as she galloped down the crooked stairs towards the smell of breakfast. She scooped up the white envelope from the doormat and read the small, neat writing before heading into the kitchen where her grandmother was pouring tea from a large pot.

'Letter for you, Granny,' she said, handing over the envelope while taking in the smudged postmark. The Widdershins didn't get much post, and the stamp suggested this hadn't come from anywhere local, which immediately got Betty's attention.

Granny puffed a wisp of grey hair out of her eyes and put the teapot down with a bang. She wasn't cross, merely heavy-handed and inclined to clatter about and stamp instead of walking. Wiping her hands on her apron, she took the letter and inspected the handwriting. 'Looks like it's from Clarissa,'

she said, placing it to one side with a groan. 'I'll open it in a minute.'

Betty rolled her eyes, her interest in the letter vanishing. Her father's cousin Clarissa didn't write often, but when she did her letters were usually a very long moan.

Betty's father, a large, red-faced man, was toasting bread over a crackling fire. He looked up and winked, holding out the toasting fork towards her.

'Hungry?'

'Starving.' Betty took the toast and a plate, sitting down to slather on butter. She sank her teeth into it hungrily. 'Where are Charlie and Fliss?' she asked. It wasn't like her two sisters to miss breakfast but she knew they couldn't have gone far. There wasn't a great deal to do in Pendlewick unless you liked tea rooms and meadows, which Betty *did*, but there was only so much tea and cake you could eat. Lovely as the village was, Betty found herself bored all too frequently these days, and wishing that something, *anything* would happen.

'Charlie's out on that swing of hers, you know what she's like,' said Father. 'And Fliss just popped into the garden.'

Betty's eyebrows shot up into her bushy hair. '*Garden?* In this weather?' Toast in hand she marched towards a small door at the back of the kitchen that led to Fliss's room. This was in a newer part of the house which didn't slope like the rest of the cottage. Because of this, her older sister Felicity – or Fliss, as she was better known – had claimed it as her own, as it was the only room which didn't make her feel 'seasick'.

At the back of Fliss's bedroom, which she had named 'the Nest', was another door that led to the garden. Betty went towards it, breathing in the faint smell of her sister's rosewater perfume. Through the window she could see down the path through a leafy archway and past the garden walls. There, in the meadow beyond, her little sister Charlie was swinging high in the air from a large tree, her pigtails streaming out behind her in the wintry brightness.

A swish of chilled air wrapped itself round Betty as a shivering Fliss, who was bundled up in several layers of clothing, burst in from outside. 'Brrrr!' she said. Then, 'Oh, Betty! I was just on my way to get you. Come and look!' Her dark brown eyes shone with excitement as she beckoned Betty outside.

Betty followed without even bothering to grab a coat. Her sister's excitement was catching – had she found something important?

'Close that door!' Granny hollered. 'Yer letting all the cold in!'

Giggling, Betty and Fliss darted outside and snapped the door closed behind them.

'What did you want to show me?' Betty asked as Fliss led her to a neat little flowerbed overlooked by the kitchen window. Each of the sisters had been given their own small patch of the garden to grow things as they pleased, but only Fliss had bothered to. She had planted several rose bushes along with plenty of lavender which she'd pruned back at the

end of summer. Next to a swept-up pile of dead leaves lay a dirt-covered trowel, and Betty's tummy did an excited flip. Blackbird Cottage was over two hundred years old and had already proved to hold several secrets – all sorts of things might have been lost or hidden in its grounds. Images flashed into her head: an old key, a necklace, an ancient weapon . . . whatever could Fliss have unearthed?

'Look!' Fliss pointed eagerly.

'What?' Betty asked, not sure what she was supposed to be seeing.

Fliss kneeled down and poked at the earth with the trowel, where a few small green shoots were nosing out of the dirt. 'These, silly. See? They're golden trumpets coming up, and I think those ones are tulips!'

Betty stared back blankly, her anticipation whooshing away like a blown-out candle. '*Flowers?* I thought you'd found something exciting, like treasure, or . . . or—'

'Flowers *are* exciting,' Fliss insisted, not put off by Betty's lack of interest. 'Because they mean spring's on the way!' She flung out her arm happily, sending a shower of earth over Betty's ankles. 'Oh, I can't wait. Everything coming to life again. Soon there'll be blossom on the trees, new lambs over at Peckahen Farm . . . and then it'll be summer,' she added dreamily. 'Long, lazy picnics in the garden, butterflies and bees humming round the lavender . . .'

'Wasps attacking your ice cream,' Betty added, shaking dirt off her boots. 'Sunburn, and frizzy hair.' She eyed Fliss's

glossy dark locks wistfully. 'Not that you've got that problem.' Her sister had the sort of hair that no kind of weather could ruin, and clear, rosy skin that was always pretty even when streaked with dirt. Fortunately Fliss was as lovely inside as she was on the outside which made her difficult to envy but easy to tease.

Betty was startled out of her thoughts by a shriek.

'Jumping jackdaws, she's done it again!' Fliss cried, scrabbling to her feet. She dropped the trowel and cupped her hands round her mouth to yell across the garden. 'CHARLOTTE WIDDERSHINS! COME HERE THIS INSTANT!'

'EH?' Charlie hollered back from the swing. 'Ain't done nothing!'

'You know exactly what you've done!' Fliss shouted. 'If you're going to bury things, do it in your own patch!'

Betty glanced at the flowerbed, finally understanding. There, poking out of the earth, was the thin little tail of a half-buried mouse.

Charlie leapt off the swing while it was still alarmingly high in the air, landing perfectly on her feet. She ran up the garden path, pausing only to make a couple of soft *chook-chook* noises to the chickens.

'Oh, no!' she exclaimed as she reached her sisters. 'You dug up Mr Whiffles!' She shot Fliss an accusing look.

'Never mind that,' Fliss said huffily. 'Will you *please* stop burying animals over here? I don't want dead mice under my tulips, thank you. If you want to make a graveyard, there's

plenty of space.' She pointed. 'What about over there?'

'That's full of weeds,' Charlie said, wrinkling her upturned nose. 'It's ugly. This bit's pretty.'

'Yes, because I've worked hard on it!' Fliss retorted.

Charlie's large green eyes filled with tears. 'I just thought he'd be happier over here, under the chew lips.'

Fliss softened at once. 'Oh, Charlie,' she said. 'I'll help you plant some tulips of your own, and we'll make it nice together. Just . . . no more corpses in my lavender, deal?'

'Deal.' Charlie nodded, cheering up. 'It'll be the best graveyard ever!'

Fliss eyed the little tail and shuddered, handing Betty the trowel. 'Betty, you do it. I don't think I can.'

'Give it here,' said Charlie, rolling her eyes. She dug up the dead mouse and, with Betty's help, cleared a small space on the other side of the path to rebury it in. 'May he rest in cheese,' she said solemnly, patting down the earth with the trowel.

'Er, it's rest in *peace*, Charlie,' Betty said gently.

'I know,' Charlie replied. 'But I think he'd like cheese better, don't you?'

'I suppose he would,' Betty said, ruffling her little sister's untidy hair. 'Ooh, your cheeks are cold – let's get inside.'

'It's not that cold,' Charlie said. 'Is it?' She sniffed the air hopefully. 'Can you smell snow, Betty? Do you reckon we might get some?'

Betty lifted her nose. 'Dunno.' All she could smell now

was a faint whiff of burnt toast. A few days ago it had been colder, and Granny had insisted she could detect the scent of snow on the air which had thrilled Charlie to bits, but so far it had failed to appear. Betty doubted it would at all, for winter in Pendlewick was far kinder than they were used to.

The Widdershins had moved to the village during the summer. Before this they'd lived on the gloomy island of Crowstone, a prison town surrounded by grey marshes which were forever swamped in cold, damp fog, the kind that made old bones creak and clothes feel permanently clammy. Here, further inland, it was drier and milder, which Betty was glad of, not least because the damp weather played havoc with her frizz-prone hair. But while she loved their new home with its wonky cottage and charming meadows, she found that now the thrill of a new place had worn off Pendlewick was possibly a bit *too* nice.

They turned to go back indoors, but then Fliss gave a cross squeak. 'Oi!'

A scruffy black cat was squatting in the freshly turned earth. It straightened up, sniffed, and then began raking over the dirt with its paws.

'I don't know why I bother.' Fliss brushed the dirt from her knees and flounced indoors.

Betty and Charlie followed, Oi shooting past their ankles to secure the best place in front of the fire. Inside, the kitchen was warm and hazy with their grandmother's pipe smoke.

'I must say,' said Granny while Fliss grumbled about mice

graveyards and cat toilets, 'it's nice to see you looking grubby for once, Felicity.'

'Bit of dirt under the fingernails never hurt anyone,' Father agreed.

'P'raps it ain't dirt,' Charlie suggested wickedly, with a nod in Oi's direction.

Alarmed, Fliss got up and began scrubbing her nails over the sink.

'What's old Bossy Boots got to say, then?' Father asked, nodding at Granny's letter, which was still on the flowery tablecloth, unopened.

'Probably just wants a whinge, as usual,' Granny muttered. She picked up the envelope and sliced it open with her butter knife. 'I do hope she's not going to pester us to visit her again.' Her eyes narrowed. 'Or worse, be planning on visiting us.'

Betty poured herself some tea and sat back to listen. She wasn't especially interested in cousin Clarissa's whingeing, but the lure of a new place was something Betty couldn't resist. She, Fliss and Charlie had never visited Clarissa. They had met her only a handful of times when she had turned up either unannounced or at very short notice at the Poacher's Pocket – the pub the family had lived in back in Crowstone – and proceeded to lecture Granny about everything that was wrong with the place.

'Perhaps we *should* visit her,' Betty suggested, watching as Charlie spooned jam straight into her mouth from the jar while Granny wasn't looking.

'I think not,' Granny said at once, her eyes racing down the letter. 'You know she lives way up north in Wilderness, one of the bitterest places in the country. My creaky old bones can't take that sort of chill.'

'Have you ever been there?' asked Betty.

'Once,' said Granny, with a scowl. 'And never again. I can't imagine why she'd want to live in that eerie place, cut off from everywhere. I told her she was mad, but if you ask me, she did it to make life difficult for herself. All the more for her to moan about.'

'Well, if we went *there* it'd save her coming here,' Betty persisted. She was intrigued by the sound of Wilderness; it was hard to imagine anywhere colder or bleaker than Crowstone. She thought she remembered Clarissa telling them something interesting about the place, too. Something about an old legend . . .

Father snorted. 'Any excuse, eh, Betty Widdershins? You and those itchy feet of yours, unable to keep still. We've only been in Pendlewick for five minutes!'

Betty grinned. It was true: she loved discovering new and thrilling places more than anything. A few months ago Pendlewick had been one such place with its mysterious landmarks and whispers of village witches, but of course, any place that became home eventually became familiar. Her craving for excitement, the 'itch' that her father described, had started to tickle once more.

Betty was sipping her tea, wondering if she could convince

Granny and Father to take them on holiday, when Granny let out a gasp and slapped the letter down on the table.

'Bats and broomsticks! The daft boot's only gone and broken her ankle!'

'Daft boot,' Charlie said at once, clearly squirrelling this away for future use.

'Poor Clarissa!' Fliss said.

'How's she managed that?' Father asked.

'Slipped on some ice, she says,' Granny snapped, clearly irritated. 'And our Clarissa's no string bean. She would've gone down with a bang, that's for sure. Of all the things to happen! Now we'll have to go and look after her.'

'Wait,' said Betty, feeling a spark of excitement. 'We're visiting cousin Clarissa?'

'But you said we couldn't,' Charlie reminded Granny. 'Because of your creepy bones.'

'She's family,' Granny said firmly, as if this explained everything. She gave an especially wrinkly scowl. 'We're going, *creaky* bones or not.'

'Hold on,' Father interjected. 'We can't just up and leave. We've jobs to do, a house to run, animals to feed. Not to mention Betty and Charlie's schooling.'

'You're right, Barney,' Granny said, pursing her lips. 'You stay here and take care of things with Betty and Charlie. Fliss can come with me. She's good at looking after people.'

'But that's not fair!' Betty and Fliss said in unison, exchanging glances.

'You know I like seeing new places, Granny,' said Betty, jumping in. '*I* should be the one to come with you – it'd only mean missing a day or two of school. Next week is half-term!'

Charlie folded her arms fiercely. 'I ain't going to school if Betty ain't.'

'Betty's right,' Fliss said soothingly. 'They won't miss much at school. The three of us will come with you, and that way we can all help out. We know Clarissa can be a little, um . . . demanding.'

'That's putting it politely,' Father said under his breath. 'But I'm still not happy about all four of you heading off up—'

Granny gave a crisp nod. 'Good, that's settled then. Barney, fetch my bag down from the attic. You girls, go and start packing some things. We won't make today's ferry, so we'll have to be on the first one tomorrow if we're to make it by nightfall.'

Betty put down her teacup, utterly thrilled. They were really going!

'Ooh,' said Charlie, sucking jam off the end of one of her pigtails. 'Will it be *very* cold there, Granny?'

'Extremely, so bring your warmest clothes.' She took out her pipe and began stuffing it with tobacco. 'You wanted snow, Charlie. Well, now you're going to get some – and a good dollop of it, too.'

'*Yes!*' Charlie whooped. 'SNOW!'

A whispery shiver tingled down the back of Betty's neck. 'Wilderness,' she said, imagining icicles and tasting

snowflakes. It was exactly the sort of name that invited you to explore . . .

'Betty,' said Granny, with a warning tone in her voice. 'You've got that look in your eyes.'

'What look, Granny?' Betty asked innocently, swatting Charlie out of the way as her little sister immediately peered into her face.

'You know what look.' Granny puffed on her pipe and watched her shrewdly. 'We're going on this trip to help Clarissa, not so you can go off gallivanting.'

'Who, *me*?' Betty grinned and placed her cup neatly in the sink before skipping across the kitchen to the stairs.

'Yes, you, Betty Widdershins,' Granny called after her. 'This is family business, not an excuse for you to sniff out an adventure!'

Betty, however, had raced upstairs and was throwing things higgledy-piggledy into her trunk. The only word of her grandmother's that remained in her head, spinning around it giddily, was 'adventure'.