WITCHSTORM

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USBORNE

THE FENS
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W
E
S
Crow Rock
Crow Way
Thorsley Road
St Guthlacs
March Wood Road
Heath Road
West Meadow
Fitch Fields
Fitch Fields
Fitch Fields
Frog Cottage
Water Channels
West Marsh Main Drain
Boat Wreck
Sedge
Evermore
The Kingfisher
Barrow Road
Willow Road
Potter Copse
Beck Way
Fitch Fields
East River Mull
Fenbridge
Pumping Station
West River Mull
Water Channels
The Washes
Goldwind Mill
Kingsmarsh

PROLOGUE

Stories and songs change the world, one word at a time. That's what Ma says. Ma loves stories and songs – the ones set in stone, the ones carried in our bones, in our hearts, and on paper. Ma tells and sings them at every opportunity.

"Tale or tune?" hums Ma, as we stand side by side in the galley of the *Kingfisher*, our narrowboat, chopping strawberries and blueberries.

"Tale," I reply.

Ma curls a lock of red hair behind her ear and leans close. "One about the Shuck, the mystery Fen beast, the black lion that roams in storms and has a roar like thunder? One about Barton, the deserted Fen town that disappeared overnight without a trace? Or one about will-o'-the-wisps, the ghost lights that lull travellers to a watery grave?"

I glance through the porthole window at the river

and the fading light over the Fens. "Tell me a tale of witches."

Ma's eyebrows narrow as she throws me a serious look. "Are you sure? There's still time to change your mind."

I smile.

"All right then, witches it is." Ma matches my smile. She smooths a flour-dusted hand down her apron. Then she scoops up a handful of sliced berries from her chopping board, and drops them into the chipped mixing bowl. "Once there were witches. Witches here in the Fens, and all around the world. They were beautiful and wise, and used magic to make the world better. They brewed potions from barks, berries and leaves – helping sick people, crops and livestock."

I know every twist and turn of this story. There are some stories that never leave you once you hear them. I gather up my sliced berries, add them to the bowl, then stir them as the tale continues.

"Everyone in the Fens loved witches. Then one summer, a group of hunters arrived. They saw how much power and respect the Fen witches had and they wanted it for themselves. No one believed the hunters when they

said that witches were evil. So, they made them believe." Ma pauses to cleave a lemon in two. She wraps one half in cloth, and squeezes the juice into the bowl. Then she unstoppers a small bottle of rosewater, and adds four dashes.

"They spread sickness with wicked poisons. Crops failed, and cattle and people fell ill. The hunters told everyone they had uncovered a secret plot. They said that witches – up and down the country – were making things sick so they could be paid to make them better. The story swept across the land like a summer wildfire."

I breathe in the rich scent of berries, rose and lemon and carry on stirring the bowl. The scent makes my mouth water.

"As the tide in peoples' hearts turned to distrust, the hunters set themselves up as witch-hunters. They offered to rid the Fens of witches, but for a price. Most folk agreed to pay their demand in silver or gold. That was when witch-hunters, all across the land, tracked down witches, one by one, and killed them."

"Not all of them." I stop stirring. Together we spoon mixture into the waiting pie cases.

"Not all of them," echoes Ma. "Our family never

believed the witch-hunter lies. One night, during a terrible storm, a young witch called Agatha Crow was fleeing witch-hunters. When she arrived at the home of Lori Knight – our ancestor – Lori took her in and hid her in the rafters. Soon after, the witch-hunters came looking for Agatha. Lori let them search the house, but they never found her. Lori called Agatha the Last Witch, but Agatha said there were other witches who survived. Living in secret—"

"Hidden high in the mountains, scattered across the world," I chime in.

Ma nods. "That's what we strongly believe."

We place the pastry lids on top of the pies, then gently crimp the edges as Ma continues. "Agatha didn't join the other witches, because she wanted to prove to everyone that the witch-hunters were liars. Agatha spent months spying on the hunters as they got drunk on their riches. She found the evidence she needed, a written confession by one of the witch-hunter generals, but when she showed the Fen folk no one believed her."

"Because a lie told long enough becomes the truth."

"That's right." Ma makes a little cross in each pie lid with a knife. "The witch-hunters had friends with

mechanical printing presses, who helped them to spread their lies. Agatha was chased back into hiding. She stayed hidden, keeping an eye on when it was safe for witches to return to the world. Sadly, it wasn't during her lifetime. But just before she died, Agatha buried her witch treasure and taught Lori a song."

"Agatha's song."

"A secret song that has been passed down through the Knight family for generations, and that no one else knows."

My insides turn. I know this isn't true. Not since I told Alfie Fitch, my best friend.

"The song that reveals the location of Agatha's treasure."

There's the familiar creak of Fa's footsteps on the galley steps, then he appears in the kitchen. Apart from his many-pocketed jacket with sun-faded shoulders, we're dressed the same. We have the same dark eyes and peat-black hair, the same cowlick that always sticks up at the back.

"Mmm, those pies smell good." Fa's eyes twinkle. "What's going to happen when you find this witch treasure?" He grins playfully as he pulls Ma into a hug.

"Are you going to use it to find the hidden witches, then fly off on a broomstick and live with them in the mountains? Leave me and Will all alone with your sister?"

Ma smiles and wraps her flour-dusted fingers over Fa's. As their wedding rings clink together, Ma says, "I'm not going anywhere. I just want to find it – for us – so we can prove witches really exist."

Fa holds her close and winks at me. "But you and Will already believe in them."

Ma jabs an elbow into Fa's ribs. "I know, but you don't, and neither does Hera any more."

Fa beams. "I want to believe in witches, and for magic to be real, but I've seen nothing in the world that has changed my mind. Maybe one day I will." He reaches for his mandolin on the bench seat, then plays the first few chords of Agatha Crow's song.

Ma closes her eyes and begins to sing in her honeyed voice. I join in. A warm feeling floods my chest as our voices and Fa's mandolin weave their music.

We sing the song of Agatha Crow,
A witch who lived

A long time ago.

Beneath great skies
And Fenland weather
A hidden witch
Buried her treasure.

Artwork to come

Below Crow Rock
And underground
Witch treasure sleeps
And waits to be found.

Witch treasure sleeps
Through sun, wind and rain
Until it is needed
To waken again.

The music fades and leaves Ma and Fa with faraway looks and faint smiles. There's a long moment of silence, then I say, "We haven't been to Crow Rock in weeks. Witch treasure is waiting. We should go back – first thing tomorrow morning."

My voice pulls Ma and Fa from their daze.

"Alright," Ma blinks, then picks up the tray of Midsummer pies and slides them into the hot oven. "But Crow Rock will have to wait till after I've delivered these pies. We can have lunch at West Meadow, before it's gone. We can watch the goldfinches peck at dandelion seeds, and the swallows swoop through the sky. We need to fix the meadow in our minds, so we'll always remember it."

My insides twist. I don't want West Meadow to disappear, but we have no choice. I thought it would always be there, for ever and ever, like my family, and Agatha's song and Crow Rock.

CHAPTER ONE

THE AMULET

Three weeks, that's how long it's been since Ma disappeared. In the aching minutes and hours that stretched into days without her, most of the locals have decided that Ma has left Fa and me. Whispering tongues say she's run away from the Fens. But it's not true. Ma would never leave us. Or Aunt Hera. We're her world and the Fens is her home. I believe the truth is very different – Ma's disappearance has something to do with her searching for Agatha Crow's treasure. It's the only reason that makes sense.

I walk my bicycle, wheels tick-ticking like a pocket watch, then stop by Ma's bird hide at the edge of West Meadow. Ma and I would come here to silently watch wildlife – hares running through the corn, hawks hovering with flickering wings. We would come to play

catchball and see sunsets, lighting up the great sky with colours. Ma would tell me folk tales, and sing Agatha's song.

Ma's bird hide was where she was headed the day she disappeared. I lay my bicycle down next to it, then take a deep breath and brace myself.

I've searched here, and Crow Rock, every day.

Maybe today – the first day of the summer holidays – is when I'll discover a clue that'll lead to me finding Ma.

I push the sun-silvered door to the hut open, then step into shadow. As I repeat my careful search of every wood panel, every gap, I go over the mystery of her disappearance in my mind.

Artwork to come

Ma came to the bird hide mid-morning, after delivering her Midsummer pies. We were going to spend time in West Meadow, make new memories of the place, before it becomes another field. When I arrived, there was a strange veil of summer fog wrapped around the hut. As I drew closer, I discovered the meadow here was frosted. Everything was coated in glittering crystals of ice. The frost-covered flowers reminded me of the sugared violets Ma makes.

When I looked inside the hide, Ma wasn't there. There was only her tea flask, still warm, and our sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper. As I searched outside, I found other footsteps beside Ma's, circling the hut, going nowhere.

I waited for the fog to lift, then rode back to the *Kingfisher* to find Fa. When we returned, the frost had disappeared, and so had Ma.

I know it must be something to do with witches. Maybe Ma went off with them. But it doesn't make sense. She wouldn't just leave me waiting at the bird hide. She'd have left a message. I have a feeling, deep down, that witches wouldn't have taken her – our family helped Agatha, they're our friends.

My heart lifts as I come across a familiar folded note, wedged between two wooden panels. I take the note, careful not to tear the worn folds, and read the message:

Never give up till the end

Ma wrote the note years back. We keep it here as a reminder for us to keep seeking Agatha Crow's treasure. When she was younger, Aunt Hera was part of the search too, but she gave up. She believes Agatha was a family legend, that she never existed, but Ma and I know she was real. The certainty we share about witches and magic is so strong that sometimes I wonder if my beliefs were seeded before I was born. When our hearts were a double drum, and Ma's folk stories and songs hummed in my bones.

With a sigh, I refold the note, return it to its hiding place, and continue my search. Ma spent so long digging holes, going over the song lyrics, and turning over stones around Crow Rock. She never wanted Agatha's treasure for fortune or glory. She only wanted to prove to herself that her feeling was right – that Agatha was real.

When I've finished scouring the wooden panels for

clues, I check every inch of ground inside the bird hide. It doesn't matter how many times I need to keep looking here, and at Crow Rock where Ma might have gone, I won't stop till I uncover a clue.

After searching the hut, I step outside and pull the door shut, wincing and blinking at the brightness. Even though it's still early, the sun is already blazing. There's not a scrap of cloud in the great Fen sky. It's going to be another hot day.

Just as I'm about to pick up my bicycle and point it towards Crow Rock, I notice a Fen adder basking close to a weather-wrecked sheet of iron. The snake glares at me with stone-cold eyes. Ma and I love wild encounters, experiencing nature up close. The blue-fire flash of a kingfisher. The glistening fur of an otter. The clicks, churrs, gurgles and whistles of a nightingale. Ma says they snare the heart, wake up the senses, make us feel more alive.

I realize it's been weeks since I stopped, and was still, and spent time getting close to the wildlife in the meadow. I've been too busy trying to find Ma and looking after Fa and Aunt Hera.

I step closer and closer to the Fen adder.

The adder tenses.

Fear and excitement rush through me.

As I edge even closer, something catches my eye. It's one of the meadow stones Ma and I lift when we're looking for insects. We always put the stones back exactly as we find them, but this stone is turned the wrong way round. It's not as if someone knocked it out of place. My heart lifts. This could only mean one thing – Ma moved it deliberately, knowing only I would notice…

For a moment, I forget the adder, and reach for the stone.

The adder twists itself tighter, then rises, readying to strike. I know the venom from its bite rarely kills, but Fa's turf-cutter friends say it's agony.

"No one's going to hurt you," I whisper and pull my hand out of striking distance.

I keep still.

The adder glowers at me a moment longer, then slips

away, like a slow-flowing river.

I lift the meadow stone. There's a dozen or so woodlice huddled underneath and a centipede, which scurries off to find new shelter. There, among the woodlice, is a speck of something silver, gleaming in the sun.

Carefully I dig the loose beetle-black soil with my fingers, revealing a silver chain beneath the surface. I continue digging, then tug on the chain. There's something attached to the end, maybe a pocket watch or a locket.

I forget to breathe for a moment. The soil churns. I keep pulling till a silver amulet appears. The amulet is disc-shaped, with a hole in the middle, a setting for a missing jewel. I dig some more, but there's nothing but soil.

I lift up the amulet and let it hang from its chain.

Artwork to come

It's definitely not Ma's. As I brush away the dusty soil, an engraving of a crow appears, its outstretched wings wrapping around a hole near the top.

This must be Agatha Crow's treasure.

The thought rings in my mind. A wave of excitement crashes through my senses. Ma must have buried the amulet here and left the upturned stone as a marker for me to find.

My heart flickers like hawk wings. All this time I've been searching for a secret sign or note from Ma, inside and outside the bird hide. When all along it was right here, fifteen feet away, buried under a stone we turned over looking for insects.

My excitement fades and is replaced with questions. Did Ma find the amulet at Crow Rock? Why would she hide the amulet here for me to find? Judging by the frost and strange fog, Ma must have met witches the day she disappeared. So why didn't she give the amulet to them? Ma never wanted Agatha Crow's witch treasure for fame or fortune. She just wanted to prove that Agatha was real – just for us – and it seems like maybe she did.

I run my fingers over the engraved crow on the amulet, tracing the overlapping feathers of its wings.

Then I flip over and find an identical crow.

Was Ma hiding the amulet from witches? Maybe there's more to witches than we know. Whatever the answer is, I feel one step closer to finding Ma.