THE WILDSTORM CURSE



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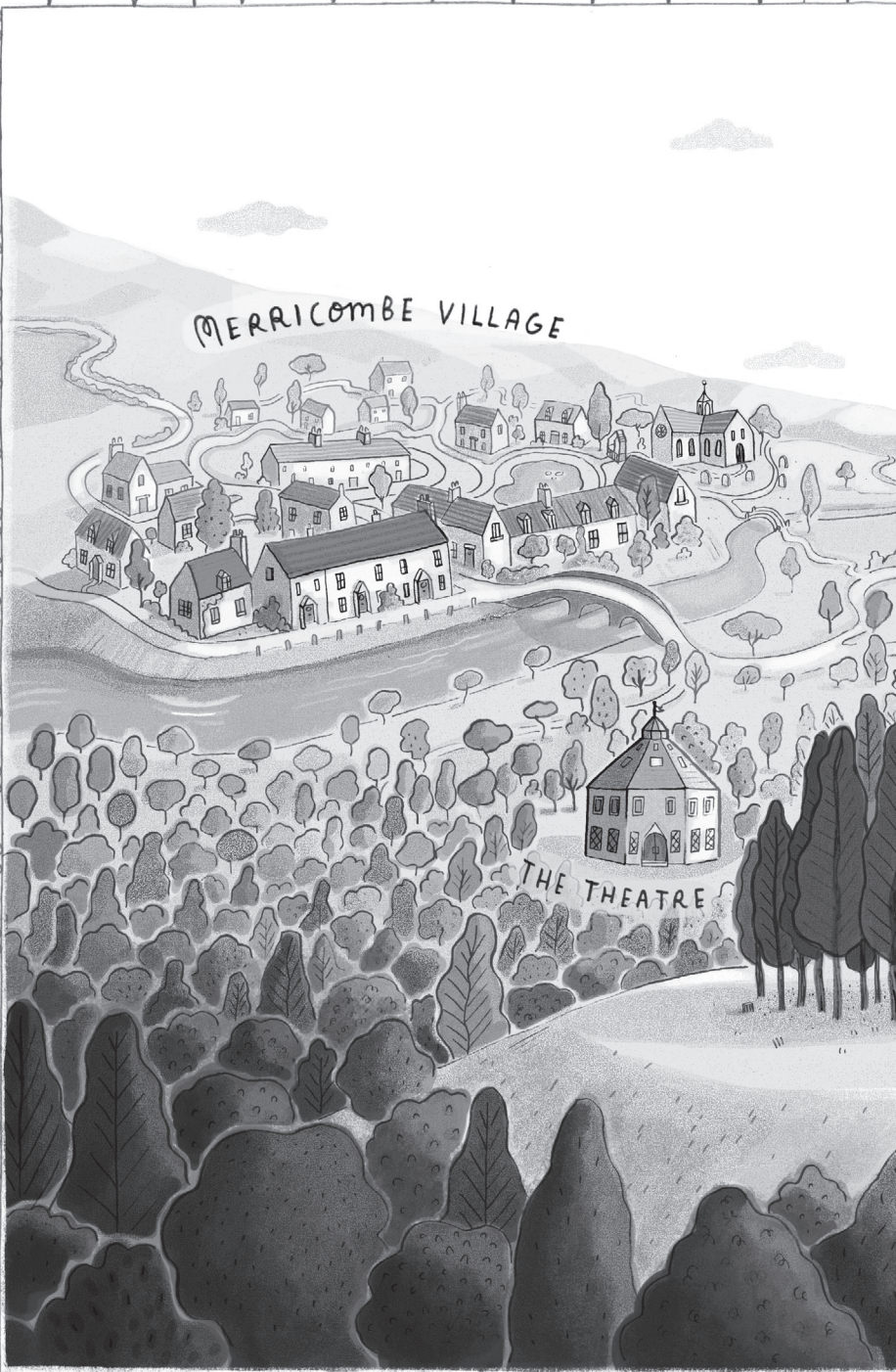
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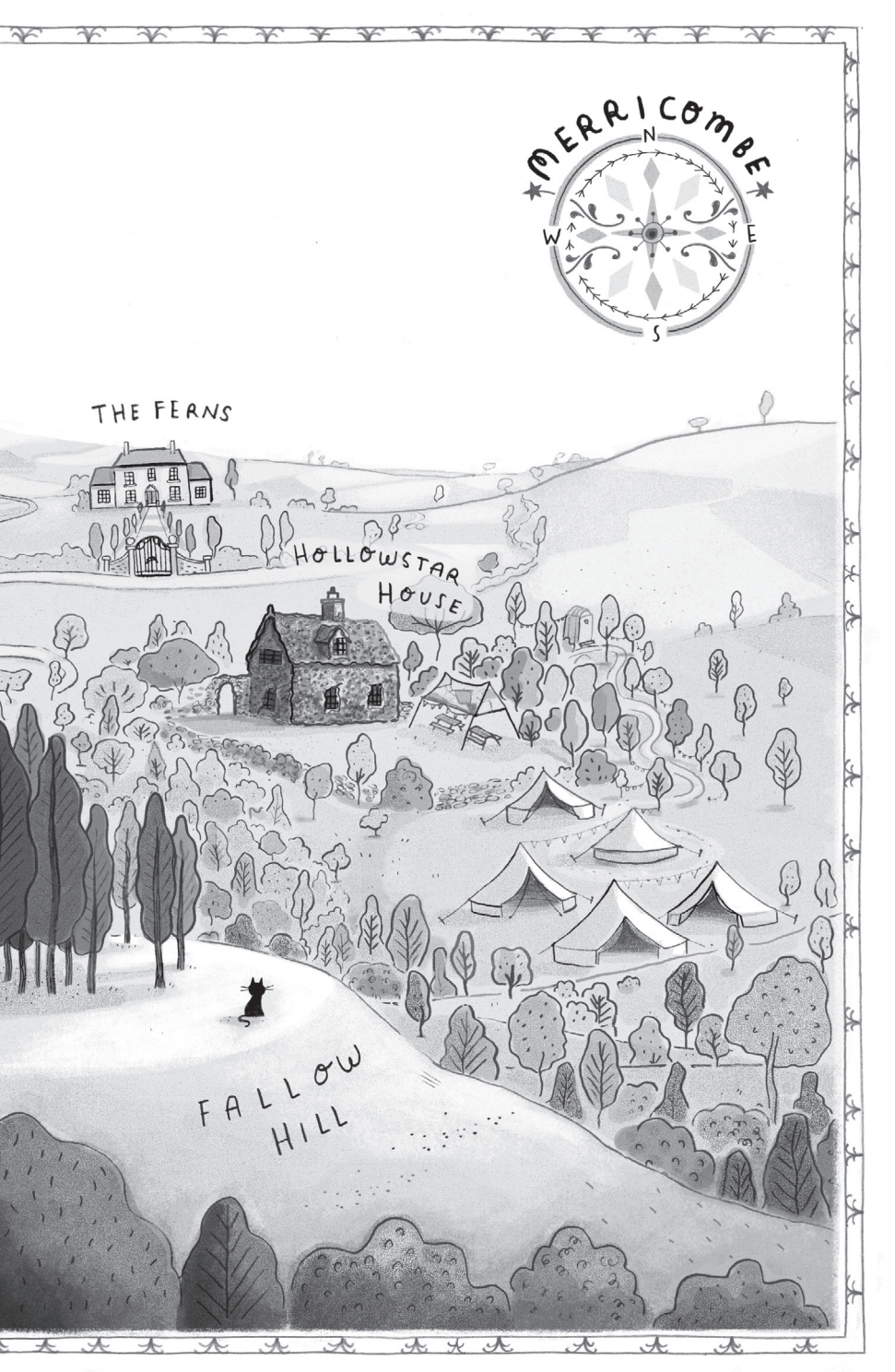


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MERRICOMBE VILLAGE
THE THEATRE


MERRICOMBE
N
W
E
S
THE FERNS
HOLLOWSTAR HOUSE
FALLOW HILL



Kallie Tamm was never meant to arrive at Wildstorm Theatre Camp in the dead of night. However, after two missed trains, a broken-down bus and five stale sandwiches, it was dark when Kallie and her mum finally reached Littlewick-on-Marsh station. All Kallie knew was that they were somewhere in the Gloucestershire countryside and she was further from home than she had ever been before.

The darkness outside the taxi windows was thick as smoke. Kallie peered out, nervousness bubbling in her stomach, searching for some clue to the place she would be spending her summer holiday. The night gave nothing away. The occasional flicker of light from a cottage window was all that disturbed the blackness.

Kallie's mum sat beside her, leaning forward every ten minutes to remind the taxi driver of the address: Hollowstar House in the village of Merricombe. Kallie had never even heard of Merricombe before a month

ago. She liked the name, though – saying it felt like chanting a spell.

At thirteen years old, teachers sometimes mistook Kallie as shy. She could often be quiet but that was only because her head was buzzing with stories and speeches for plays. Kallie's mum said she had a gift for daydreaming. But it was a gift that sometimes made it hard to make friends. And Kallie would know no one at the theatre camp. The thought made her insides plummet.

'We're here,' the taxi driver grunted.

Kallie looked out of the window. She could see the outline of a tall house, so wrapped up in plant life it could have been part of the hedge. There was a brass star above the front door. Kallie's mum prodded her out of the taxi.

'I think this is the place,' muttered her mum, looking up at the shadowy windows. There was no one around.

Kallie glanced up and down the lane. There were no street lights. No moon. The road ahead vanished into pitch black. It was as if the house was the only thing in existence and if Kallie took two steps forward, she'd fall off the earth into nothingness.

'Look – what's that?' Kallie stepped a little closer to her mum.

A light had appeared, like a single glowing eye. It moved swiftly closer, growing larger, until Kallie realised it was a torch.

'Kallie Tamm? I thought it might be you,' came a voice.

'We're here for the theatre camp,' Kallie's mum called back.

A figure stepped into the taxi's headlamps. Kallie recognised her from the website: Jackie Masters, the director of Wildstorm Theatre Camp. Black-haired and uncommonly tall. She looked forbidding.

'You're late,' Jackie observed, her mouth a thin line of disapproval.

Kallie was always very interested in people's voices. Jackie had a hard voice, like a hammer knocking on nails.

'We're so sorry. We missed the change at Reading,' Kallie's mum stammered. 'I've got to get the last train back to London. Early shift tomorrow.' She turned to Kallie. 'You'll be OK, won't you?'

'Yes.' Kallie nodded, but her heart was racing painfully. 'I'll – it'll be fine, Mum. Don't worry.'

Her mum squeezed her shoulders.

'Have the best time, babe,' her mum whispered, giving Kallie a final hug. 'I'm so proud of you. Love you.'

Then she was gone, the taxi headlamps sweeping away into the blackness. Kallie stared after it, panic rising inside her. Everything was happening so quickly.

'You're too late to meet the rest of the cast tonight,' said Jackie, scooping up Kallie's bag as if it weighed nothing. 'You've had a long journey. You need a good night's sleep.'

Kallie felt light-headed and empty, as if half her body had been whisked away with her mum. Maybe this hadn't been a good idea after all. Dazedly, she followed Jackie into Hollowstar House.

The house was a muddle of wooden beams, sloping ceilings and cushioned cubbyholes. Kallie almost forgot her nervousness as she stepped over the threshold. There were paintings and old maps lining the walls and mountainous bookshelves full of playscripts.

Despite her great height, Jackie moved quickly through the rooms and low doorways. Kallie hurried to catch up, breathing in the dusty warmth. She was just starting to get excited when Jackie spoke.

'The house is off limits to the cast,' she said briskly. 'You'll eat your meals out here.'

Her heart sinking, Kallie followed Jackie into the dark garden. A trail of fairy lights marked a path heading away from the house. Kallie would have found

it beautiful had it not been for the darkness and the silence, still pressing in all around them. Jackie set off between the lights.

'The Wildstormers camp in the meadow,' said Jackie, with a jerk of her torch.

'I don't have a tent,' said Kallie, half hoping Jackie would send her back to Hollowstar House.

'That won't be necessary.'

Kallie never considered that the theatre camp would involve actual camping. She'd never slept in a tent before.

At the end of the garden there was a hut with an orange lamp outside. This was the bathroom and shower – thankfully it had an electric light – and Jackie waited outside while Kallie hurriedly brushed her teeth. The night felt even darker when she emerged.

'Everyone must be inside their tents at ten,' said Jackie, gesturing to the meadow beyond the hut. 'I advise getting your rest: putting on a play is hard work.'

Kallie could make out the spectral outlines of several tents. There were torches moving inside them, darting like fireflies, and the low rumble of voices. Kallie's throat tightened. She was glad she wasn't meeting the other kids tonight. The beam of Jackie's torch picked out a tent at the far end of the meadow.

'You can take that one. It's small but you'll fit. Here.'

The director placed her torch in Kallie's hand. She paused, then gave her a surprisingly kind smile.

'You'll get used to our ways soon enough.' Jackie gave her a curt nod. 'Welcome to Wildstorm Theatre Camp, Kallie. Sleep well.'

And Jackie strode away, leaving Kallie alone in the dark.



Chapter Two

Two eyes opened, bright as fire.

Something was stirring in the ancient woodland above Merricombe. Less than one mile from where Kallie Tamm slept an uneasy sleep in the meadow behind Hollowstar House.

Deep within the undergrowth – deeper than even the rabbits and voles dared to go – in a thicket of ferns and grizzled roots, two bright eyes blinked. Nothing else moved.

Then the eyes flickered from side to side. They could see again. After all this time. Sleep, which had clung like a cloak for so long, was falling away. As the eyes moved back and forth, they saw the shapes of trees and patches of night sky.

It knew this woodland, these trees, this moonless sky. But everything was foggy. How it had come to be – and what it had been – was still a mystery. It was thirsty. Hungry. The instinct to hunt was rising inside it.

The eyes blinked again, trying to make sense of everything. But it was so thin and weak it could barely think. It was little more than a shadow, crouching in a mossy nook. Even so, the woodland feared it. Leaves shuddered and wild flowers shrank and cowered.

The shadow's memory was swirling like a whirlpool. It saw a flash of light, the sweaty-faced villagers and then . . . terrible, blinding pain. Anger flared within the shadow and the eyes blazed in the gloom.

It remembered now. It knew why it had awoken – why it had returned.



Kallie dreamt she was in a forest at dusk. The trees around her were grey and the grass was like smoke. A chill prickled her skin as she walked amongst the strange landscape. And then she heard something: footsteps coming slowly closer and closer. She started to run but it felt like she was wading through sludge – she couldn't run fast enough and the footsteps were growing louder behind her. At last, she reached a clearing and ahead she saw a tree stump, illuminated in the starlight. She moved closer. On the stump lay a green feathered quill. There were shouts behind her, threats on the cold air. As Kallie reached out a hand for the quill, something seized her from behind and she was dragged backwards into blackness . . .

When Kallie awoke, hours later, the dream faded from her mind like summer mist. Sunlight was shining through the walls of the tent. She rubbed her eyes. Outside she could hear the coo of a wood pigeon and

a distant bleating of sheep. It was as if the tent had been transported to a new location in the night.

It was cosy and homely inside the tent. Kallie hadn't noticed it last night; she'd been too busy stumbling around in the dark trying to pull her pyjama leggings on to her arms.

The tent wasn't one of those plastic ones she'd seen on TV, which deflated whenever there was a gust of wind. It was made of thick white canvas, held up by a wooden frame. The sleeping bag lay snugly on a foam mattress, which was covered in a beaded blanket. There were colourful lights strung over the ceiling connected to a battery pack switch, which made them glitter like jewels. At the foot of her mattress was a box with *Wildstorm Theatre Camp* printed across the top; inside she found snack bars, a notebook, a tin water bottle and a tiny torch. Camping really wasn't as bad as she'd thought! Kallie felt excitement stir inside her.

The camp had been her idea. Kallie wanted to be a playwright, ever since she'd visited Shakespeare's Globe on a school trip two years ago, and fallen in love with theatre. It was like nothing else. In the theatre, she'd seen people fly on invisible cords, vanish into thin air and change their appearance with a

click of their fingers. The playwright's words were turned into real-life adventures right in front of the audience's eyes.

Since that school trip, Kallie had been writing her own plays, about fairy tales and monsters mostly. She'd perform them for her mum, with the help of their two cats, Puck and Mustard-Seed. The cats might not be any good at learning lines but they always looked great in their costumes (which Kallie made from old clothes and newspaper).

But she longed to be part of a real play – preferably one where the set wasn't made of sofa cushions and a laundry basket. Kallie's school didn't do a school play and their drama class was taught by the sports coach; the only acting they did in Mr Ward's classes was when he got them to re-enact the football team's latest goals.

So Kallie had started researching drama clubs and theatre camps for the summer holidays. Her mum would be out at her cleaning shifts and Kallie would be alone in the flat. The only problem was everything she found was too expensive and everywhere required an audition. Kallie wasn't a bad actor – she liked coming up with characters and was pretty good at doing different voices – but reading something

aloud for the first time was tricky: familiar words would look nonsensical, and sentences kept rearranging themselves. Last time she'd read aloud in English, she had messed up easy words, skipped sentences by mistake and mispronounced the main character's name. She still went hot with embarrassment every time she remembered the giggling from the back of the classroom.

Kallie had almost given up hope when she spotted a flyer in the school library:



And the best part . . .



Kallie didn't pause to wonder what a flyer for a Gloucestershire theatre camp was doing in a London school. She immediately checked out the Wildstorm Theatre Camp website and saw there was still time to apply. Kallie knew this was her chance. She spent the next week working on her new play, writing and rewriting pages at breaktime and reading and rereading it every night before she went to sleep. After her mum had checked it for spelling and Kallie had typed it up on the school library computer, *The Unlikely Hero* was ready to send off. Kallie had thrown everything she loved into it – adventure and peril; bravery and friendship; a terrifying villain who came to a sticky end! She liked it but she had no idea if it was good

enough to win. So when Jackie Masters emailed telling Kallie she was the winner, she thought she might explode with happiness. That had only been two weeks ago. The memory of her mum dancing around the flat in celebration still made her swell with pride.

Kallie unzipped her sleeping bag. It didn't sound like anyone else was up yet and if she was lucky she'd have a chance to explore alone. Kallie dressed quickly in her usual black jeans and favourite black-and-white top. She hastily combed her hair with her fingers. She had very long brown hair, which was always getting knotted. She wriggled into her trainers and stepped outside.

The sun was dawning bright and rosy. It must still be very early, she thought.

The meadow was a lot smaller than it had looked in the dark. There were ten canvas tents; most of them were much larger than Kallie's tent – the bell-shaped one in the opposite corner could probably sleep about five or six. There was another tent with *STAFF* painted on the side. Colourful bunting was strung out between them, fluttering in the morning breeze. Thick hedges hugged the sides of the meadow, daisies scattered at their roots, and beyond Kallie could see fields slanting away towards a wood. The air was fresh

and she couldn't help smiling.

She opened the gate to the garden and saw Hollowstar House properly for the first time. It was older than anything she'd ever seen. Ivy spread so densely across its walls, burrowing into every crack, that Kallie thought if you took the house away the ivy would hold its shape perfectly.

She walked quietly towards the house; the fairy lights that had marked their way last night were woven into purple hydrangeas lining the path. On the lawn in front of the house were two wooden tables covered with a gigantic patchwork canopy, protecting them from the morning dew. There was no one around.

Kallie squinted up at the roof. There were dark markings under the eaves and around the windows. Curious symbols like flowers, six thin petals fanning out in a perfect circle. Kallie felt a thrill of curiosity.

She took a step closer, then all of a sudden a dark shape sprang on to the path ahead of her. She stumbled backwards, half-scared, before she realised it was a small black cat. The cat stared at her with stern green eyes. There was something about its calculating expression that reminded Kallie of the Wildstorm director, Jackie.

'I'm just having a look around,' said Kallie, as the cat continued to stare.

The cat turned and trotted away, but when it reached the side of Hollowstar House it looked back at her before flicking around the corner. Her interest piqued, Kallie hurried after it. There was a narrow path between the house wall and the hedge – but instead of going straight and coming out on the road, the cat veered to the left and disappeared into a gap in the hedge.

Kallie followed and found herself in a thicket of trees. There was a building a short distance away, just visible between the trunks. The cat bounded ahead and Kallie hurried to keep up. The trees loomed above her; their branches clawed up towards the sunny sky. There was something strange and enchanting about these trees and she felt a peculiar chill creep over her. She wasn't scared exactly but they set her imagination spinning. The wood felt full of stories and secrets waiting to be uncovered.

The cat had stopped, watching her.

Kallie placed a hand on a trunk. These trees reminded her of something . . . the dream! She'd almost forgotten about it. The grey woodland and the green quill on the tree stump. And there had been someone chasing her—

There was a noise – footsteps were approaching behind her – and Kallie whirled around.

'Don't touch him! He'll take your eyes out and eat them for breakfast!'

A girl, who looked about thirteen, was jogging up the path from the house.

'I'm sorry,' Kallie stammered. 'I got up early and didn't know where to go and—'

'Oh, you're a new Stormer! Ah, no trouble then!' The girl's face broke into a wide, open smile. She bent down and scooped up the cat. 'Thought you were from the village – snooping. Some of them don't like it, do they? Think it's bad luck and all that rubbish! The Historical Society are the worst of the snoops. But we'll show them, won't we?'

Kallie blinked at her. This girl was smaller than Kallie, with short curly blonde hair. She spoke like a whirlwind but in a way that made Kallie feel instantly like she was part of the plan – even though she had no idea what this plan might be.

'Sorry but – who are you?' said Kallie.

'I'm jumping five steps ahead. I'm sorry! I'm Emilia. The cat's Smudge.'

'I'm Kallie,' she said, reaching out to scratch Smudge under the chin. The cat purred in greeting.

'Poor Smudge,' observed Emilia, 'I say he's fierce to give him a good reputation, you know, but he's actually

just a fluff-brained sweetie. Couldn't frighten a mouse. But he likes to think he guards this place.'

She nodded to the building through the trees. They moved closer and Kallie's heart started to drum with excitement. It was made of a weather-worn grey stone with diamond-patterned windows beneath a slate roof. There was a grandeur about the place. It felt just as alive as the woodland around it.

'Is this the Merricombe Theatre?' said Kallie in an awed tone that made Emilia grin. 'What did you say was bad luck?' she asked curiously.

Emilia blew a curl out of her face and sighed.

'It's the theatre, you see,' said Emilia. 'The villagers think it's cursed – because of the witch.'