

Prologue

It was a starless, moonless night.

A night dark enough for kidnapping . . .

A roaring October wind wailed around Gaunthead Towers, wrenching open windows and howling into rooms as the sea crashed on to the cliffs below.

Another kind of howl echoed down the cold stone corridors of the school:

'*PRUDENCE!*'

Urgent footsteps rang along one of the corridors. The dormitory door burst open, and frightened children sat up in their beds as a wild-eyed woman hurtled inside.

'*WHERE'S PRUDENCE?*' the woman screamed, charging to the bed at the end of the room.

The bed was empty, the covers pulled back.

'SHE'S GONE!' the woman cried, falling to her knees.

The open window banged in the wind and, across the bay, a ship with ragged sails lurched out to sea.

Lightning flashed through the dormitory, illuminating the wall between the window and the empty bed, where a single word was scrawled:





'The stars are full of stories, littlest Hatmaker. Following the stars will always lead you to great adventures.'

Cordelia Hatmaker gripped the ship's wheel, the deck of *Little Bear* solid beneath her feet. She could *smell* adventure in the spring wind; it smelled of salt and sky laced with a hint of fresh tar. Stars spangled the rigging, winking with the promise of exciting escapades to come.

Her father, Prospero Hatmaker, stood on the deck beside her.

'But every adventurer needs a compass,' he added. 'The *heart* is a compass. Follow your heart and you'll go wisely and wildly all your life.'

Cordelia put her hand to her heart. She could feel it beating, soft and steady in her chest – a living creature.

'Is that today's lesson, Father?' she asked.

Prospero grinned. 'Today's lesson is this: be careful of the ship's biscuit! It doesn't taste like biscuits at all!'

Cordelia grinned back.

They were not out at sea yet. All through autumn and winter, Cordelia had witnessed the ship being built and marvelled at the magic of making such a thing: a beast to ride the sea, made of wood and rope and canvas. She had climbed through the ribcage of its skeleton, been caught up in the criss-crossing sinews of rigging, and gaped at the baggy swags of sails that would fill, like lungs, with air. The ship was made of Fleetwood, which skimmed swiftly across water. The figurehead was a perfect little bear with fur carved into wind-blown ripples.

When the master shipwright, bobbing up from Greenwich on an important-looking barge, had come to inspect her, he had pronounced *Little Bear* 'the finest vessel of her kind' and had added, 'I'll wager she's the quickest too!' – causing Cordelia to glow with pride.

Tonight, *Little Bear* was quiet. After finishing the sticky job of tarring her hull, the shipbuilders had gone home, leaving Cordelia and her father listening to the lap and hush of the Thames just beyond the dry dock in which the ship had been built. In a few days, when the glistening tar had set, the dry dock would be flooded with water and *Little Bear* would float out on to the wide river.

'Then all that's left to do,' Cordelia said, 'is add *provisions*. Meaning food.'

'And water,' Prospero added.

'Yes,' Cordelia agreed. 'Water's very important for a sea voyage.'

The long-promised sea voyage! Now the spring tides were rising, it was nearly time to set off.

Cordelia and her father were going on a voyage to collect magical ingredients for the hats their family made. They were to sail to the Canary Islands, to search for the freckle-leafed Vim Shrub and Songstress Snails, whose pearly trails warbled with silvery music. From the Canaries, they would sail due east to the coast of Morocco, where they planned to rummage in the sands for the flashing whorls of Storm Nautilus Conches.

Soon there would be a much greater demand than usual for ingredients, because next week, for the first time in two hundred and fifty years, King George was to declare that making magical things would be unrestricted for everyone in Britain once again.

For the past two and a half centuries, only the six Maker families of London had been allowed to create clothes using magical ingredients. But in a few days' time *everyone* would be able to express themselves using magical ingredients, free from the fear of arrest.

Cordelia loved feeling the tingle in her fingertips when she was making something magical, whether it be a bonnet to give the wearer confidence or a bicorn to inspire

daydreams. When she and her father returned from their voyage, the cargo hold of *Little Bear* would be bursting with magical ingredients to transform people's ordinary clothes into enchanted ones. Cordelia could not wait to set off.

However, one slight shadow was cast over the bright adventure: the rumours of a dangerous band of pirates calling themselves the Troublemakers.

First, these pirates had kidnapped the daughter of an important politician, snatching her from her boarding-school bed in the middle of the night, leaving nothing but their name scrawled across the wall as a sign that they'd been there.

Then there had been chaos at the Winter Ball, when several lords had suddenly been attacked by their own garments, shrieking and howling as their boots suddenly made them leap as though their feet were on fire. Moments later, their hats clamped themselves over their eyes and the wearers began bellowing swear words in multiple languages. A nest of Whistling Wasps had been thrown into their midst, and the air filled with the sinister whistle of thousands of wasps mingled with the sound of stampeding revellers fleeing the scene. In the ruckus, several ice sculptures – not to mention Lady Trundlemonk's nose – had been broken.

London had barely had time to recover from the Winter Ball (victims of the wasp stings were still whistling) when the Troublemakers struck again. Imp Eggs were crushed into the ink of a self-righteous magazine called *The Quarterly Scorn*

and, rather than the usual articles sneering about the latest fashions, every single copy of the newest issue contained nothing but foul words and fart jokes from cover to cover.

Days later, the king's horses were somehow fed Craze-Hay, which led to neighing chaos in front of the palace. Riots broke out regularly at chocolate houses across the city, and strange orange caterpillars were placed on hundreds of paintings in the Royal Academy, so that very serious portraits of noble ladies and gentlemen all appeared to have bushy ginger moustaches. The caterpillars proved impossible to catch and several days later hatched into dazzling and distracting butterflies that caused three carriage accidents on Piccadilly, and Lady Clustertrunce to be tipped from her sedan chair into a large pile of horse poo.

All winter, the Troublemakers had gone on to create catastrophe and disaster throughout London, gloating about their actions in a morning newspaper called *The Rude Awakening*. Despite being the architects of some strange and spectacular acts of destruction, the Troublemakers had never actually been *sighted*. Rumours about them grew wilder in the dark. Some people claimed they were evil sorcerers, who wore the night like cloaks. Others insisted they transformed into ravens to flee the scenes of their crimes. One wild-eyed man was seen shouting at Speakers' Corner that the Troublemakers were 'the ghosts of traitors put to death in the Tower, risen from the dead for revenge'.

Although Prospero did not believe these feverish speculations, he became hesitant to take Cordelia on a voyage across seas that were infested with pirates. Cordelia, however, had endeavoured to persuade her father that the Troublemakers were highly unlikely to cross their path, seeing as how the ocean was very large and ships were very small.

'Besides,' Cordelia had said persuasively, 'they're causing trouble in *London* – we'll be somewhere else!'

Prospero had pointed out that, although the trouble was being made in London, many of the magical ingredients being used to create the chaos were not commonly found in Great Britain.

'They must be finding them somewhere else,' he mused. 'And getting them into London somehow.'

Cordelia was not concerned by this small detail – so long as the Troublemakers did not stop her from going on the long-promised voyage with her father aboard *Little Bear*.

She had her own little cabin, with a bunk that swung gently from the ceiling on ropes to stop her from getting seasick as she slept, and a round porthole with rippled glass in it. She liked to look out of her porthole, imagining the sights she would soon see: perhaps a triumphant sunrise over the blue Atlantic or the coast of a whole new continent.

Her father's cabin, which had glittering windows that stretched the width of the ship, contained a collection of maps and instruments that he used to navigate the seas. The other

cabins, pieced together within the ship like a neat puzzle, contained bunks for all twelve members of the crew – everyone from the first mate to the cabin boy. There was a galley for the ship's cook, complete with a brick stove, and a large store for the food and water they would need for the journey.

One of Cordelia's favourite nooks on *Little Bear* was the Weather Pantry, which had been stocked by her friend Win Fairweather, who brewed all kinds of weather and bottled it in glass jars. Weather-brewing was not officially legal yet, because it was a kind of ancient Maker magic that had been outlawed centuries ago, so the cabinet was cleverly concealed behind a wooden panel. The shelves hung on ropes so that the jars wouldn't be shaken about in stormy weather. In their secret cabinet, the Cumulus Bottles gleamed, the Wind Bags trembled on their pegs and the Breeze Strings danced.

'All you need do if you're stuck in the doldrums,' Win had told Cordelia, catching a piece of Breeze String as it wriggled away across the deck, 'is undo one of these knots. It will unleash the strand of wind caught within, then you'll be underway again. You should save the Wind Bags in case you ever become becalmed.'

When Cordelia put her hand on a Wind Bag, she felt a belly of air straining at the cloth. She was proud of the Weather Pantry; no other ship had a secret store of weather on board.

This evening, Cordelia decided to practise climbing the rigging once more before they went home for dinner. She was determined to climb it as fast as the cabin boy, Jack. He was as quick as a monkey, scampering up the ropes to the crow's nest. Cordelia climbed more slowly, hand over hand, up the nets. She had calluses forming on her palms from the rough ropes. She was very proud of her calluses.

She tucked her hatpin, with its ocean-blue stone, firmly into her hair and swung into the rigging, up, up into a complicated forest of ropes and masts. The deck grew smaller as she climbed; she saw her father beetling across it as he went to check the bowsprit ropes. Cordelia climbed high enough to see the haze of the marshes beyond London, almost lost in the blur of twilight. A ship was coming upriver towards them, a heavy shape low in the water, laden with goods it was bringing from some far-flung place.

'Must be a merchant ship,' Cordelia murmured.

Suddenly a *splash* tore through the quiet tapestry of evening river sounds.

A wooden crate had gone over the side of the merchant ship as it glided by. The crate bobbed in the water, but the ship sailed on, heedless of its lost goods.

Cordelia was drawing breath to call 'CARGO OVERBOARD!' when she heard a thread of voice twist along the river.

'*Double, double!*'

'Double, double!' came a hissed reply.

And, quick as an eel through the water, a rowing boat nipped out from the riverbank.

It was dangerous for a tiny boat to be out there among the hulking oceangoers. But the boat was nimble, the person rowing quick and strong, not hampered by the thick cloak that swaddled him.

As the merchant ship sailed onward, the rowing boat chased the crate left bobbing in its wake. Within moments, the boatman caught it and hauled it aboard, before slipping away into the shadows of the riverbank.

Cordelia was motionless in the rigging.

The river smoothed over as the whispers of '*Double, double!*' dissolved in the air.

It had all happened in a few heartbeats, in that strange last light as the evening gave way to the oncoming night.

But Cordelia was sure she had seen . . .

'Smugglers!'