For Mum & Dad, who always fed me books,

and never laughed when I said I wanted to write my own.

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The Beanstalk Murder

A Giant Murder Mystery

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Stream
Market Square
Windmill
Tavern
Eastern Road
Old Stump
To the coast
Beanstalk planting site

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CHAPTER 1

Mayhem at the Market

Anwen was hiding behind a horse.

She was doing her best to pretend that she wasn't hiding, of course – that she was, in fact, just standing there, minding her own business in a sheltered corner of the tavern stable yard – but she wasn't a very accomplished liar, even when she was lying to herself. She was hiding all right, and the thought of it was downright embarrassing. Not so embarrassing that she was about to stop doing it, though – Cerys Powell was out there somewhere, and Anwen really didn't want to bump into her.

As hiding places went, this was quite a good one. By peering around the horse's backside, she could see most of the busy market crowd without being seen herself. She stroked the horse's flank as her eyes darted from person

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to person, searching for the telltale flashes of golden hair or sea-blue dress that meant Cerys was on the prowl.

"I don't see her anywhere," she told the horse. "Perhaps she already left for the Academy."

The beast snorted and flicked its tail in her face.

"There's no need to be like that," Anwen said. "I know you're hungry, but I already told you I haven't got any food. And don't pretend you didn't understand me, because I'm fluent in horse, I'll have you know. Well, fluent in pony, actually, but it's virtually the same thing."

She realized this last statement had been a mistake when the horse huffed and stamped its hoof, narrowly missing her toes. Anwen sighed.

"Fine, I know when I've worn out my welcome," she said. "Honestly, why do horses have to be so snobbish?"

Cautiously, she stepped out from behind the animal. She felt exposed, and her hand went instinctively to the sprig of lucky heather woven through the untidy thatch of her hair. *Come on, Anwen*, she thought. *You've got a job to do*. Feeling a little more confident, she smoothed down her green woollen dress and made her way into the market square.

The village of Old Stump wasn't a big place – just a handful of cottages, the tavern and a mill, all built from rough grey slate and topped with roofs of shaggy green

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turf, studded with the last of the summer's wild flowers. They all stood, as the village's name implied, on the stump of one of the huge magic beanstalks that had dotted the landscape in the days when giants still roamed freely. As a result, Old Stump sat a few metres above the surrounding countryside, and Anwen could see all the way to the shimmering line of the sea on the eastern horizon, and to the shadows of the Usbrid Woods in the west.

Farmers and traders from every point in between had gathered for the village's weekly market. Anwen relaxed a little as she made her way through the crowd, taking in everything that the stalls had to offer. There was Farmer Pendaran with his wool and mutton; Farmer Pebin with his apples; Meredith, the tall elderly fisherwoman, who had rowed upriver from the coast with her barrels of salted fish and live crabs.

Anwen watched Meredith swat away a cloud of pixies that were hovering around her stall. They were knobbly little creatures, bald and ugly, but with beautiful butterfly wings that shimmered like stained glass as they darted out of Meredith's reach, jeering and pulling faces at her.

"Filthy creatures!" Meredith snapped. She tucked a lock of her sleek grey hair behind one ear and sighed. "Anwen, do you know where that good-for-nothing minstrel's got to? It's his job to keep these things under control."

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"You mean Stillpike?" asked Anwen. "Sorry, I haven't seen him."

Meredith made a grab for a particularly brazen pixie, and missed. "You're good with animals," she said. "Can't you persuade them to go and pester someone else?"

"Magical creatures are different," Anwen replied. "Pixies won't listen to me. Unless…"

"Unless what?"

A smile spread across Anwen's face as an idea took hold. "What if I transformed them into something that *would* listen to me?"

"You mean transfiguration?" Meredith suddenly looked doubtful. "That's High Magic. Can't you whip up something simple, like a charm or a warding spell? You know, some good old-fashioned Folk Magic."

"What if I transform them into butterflies?" said Anwen.

Meredith squinted down her nose. "Can you do that?"

"Of course," said Anwen. "I mean, they've already got the wings."

Meredith looked from Anwen to the pixies, who were now waggling their knobbly bottoms at her. "Fine," she sighed. "As long as you know what you're doing."

Anwen beamed. "Of course I do."

She didn't quite have the heart to tell Meredith the

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truth – that transfiguration was indeed a delicate sort of High Magic, and she had only ever managed it once before, when she had turned an old shoelace into a worm. She'd been *trying* to turn it into a snake, but that was beside the point, and she was confident she could pull it off properly this time. She just needed to concentrate…

Closing her eyes, she raised her hands towards the pixies and tried to sense their presence with her mind. Then she began whispering the secret words of the spell, stumbling over the pronunciation of the ancient language as she focused on shifting the transformation from her imagination into reality. "Glöyn Byw, Glöyn Byw, rwy'n dy weld di, dere ataf i."

She felt a little spark of power slip out of her into the world, heard the *snap!* of the spell taking effect, and opened her eyes to admire her handiwork.

The pixies had certainly changed. But instead of butterflies, they were now a swarm of large, angry hornets.

Anwen's heart sank. "Bother," she said. "I was sure I'd got it right."

"Change them back!" Meredith cried, throwing her arms up to shield herself as the swarm surrounded her. "Quickly!"

"I haven't learned the counterspell yet," said Anwen, trying in vain to shoo the insects away from Meredith.

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"But if we wait a bit, they should change back automatically."

"Should?" said Meredith. "How long?"

A hot prickle of embarrassment crept into Anwen's face. She was about to admit that she hadn't actually read that passage of the textbook when, with a series of fat, wet popping sounds, the pixies reverted to their natural form. "About that long," she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Get out of it! Go on!" Meredith batted a few of the creatures away. The others darted back out of reach and resumed their taunting.

"I told you I only needed a simple spell," said Meredith. "Of course, if Stillpike could be bothered to show up and do his job, I wouldn't need one at all."

"Slander!" said a voice behind Anwen. "Some people have no respect for our hardworking veterans."

Anwen turned and found herself face to face with a small man in a military greatcoat. His thinning hair was slicked back, his face was lined and shrewd, and he wore a pencil moustache that looked as if it had been painted on with ink. He greeted them both with a wink that immediately lifted Anwen's mood.

"Ladies. Colonel Auric Stillpike, war hero and teller of mighty tales, at your service."

More like tall tales, thought Anwen. Everyone for miles

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around knew that Stillpike had bought his military coat from a wandering salesman, and that most of the medals pinned to his chest were from agricultural shows, including one for Most Amusingly Shaped Rhubarb.

"It's about time," said Meredith. "I pay you to keep these little pests away from my produce." She swatted at the pixies again.

"So do a lot of other discerning stallholders," Stillpike replied. "And some of them are willing to pay extra for more prompt attention. Perhaps I could interest you in my premium service?"

Meredith gave him a hard stare. "Just get rid of them."

Stillpike turned to Anwen with a look of exaggerated anguish. "D'you see how she treats me, m'dear? The man who fought off a battalion of giants, single-handed, in the Great Beanstalk War?"

Anwen laughed. "The Great Beanstalk War ended almost a century ago. You're not that old."

His expression brightened in an instant. "I'm delighted you think so. Fresh air and clean living, that's the secret to my youthful good looks." He waggled his eyebrows conspiratorially and swung back to Meredith. "And now, my good lady, let's deal with these pesky pixies."

"Finally," said Meredith.

Stillpike pulled a miniature guitar from the folds of his

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coat. The instrument was old and battered but, when he struck a chord, it rang out clearly. It was a happy sound that lifted Anwen's spirits still further, but that was nothing compared to the pixies' reaction – they stopped flitting about and turned as one towards the sound, their eyes wide.

"Come along, my pretties," said Stillpike, strumming the chord again, then adding a second and third. "Follow the Colonel, and he'll play to your hearts' content." He repeated the three chords, layering in some plucked strings until the music became a happy little jig. He danced backward and the pixies followed, mesmerized. "See? No magic required, just natural talent." He grinned as he skipped away into the crowd, the pixies trailing after him. "Always a pleasure, ladies."

"The cheek of that man," said Meredith, watching him go.

"I quite like him," said Anwen.

"There's no accounting for taste. But enough about him. I take it you're here with my order?"

Anwen straightened, suddenly remembering that she was supposed to be on business. "Oh, that's right." She pulled a small glass bottle, filled with what looked like olive oil, from her dress pocket and held it out. "Grandma mixed it for you this morning. Oil of Good Fortune. Just

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sprinkle it over your fishing nets, and they'll always catch something. Guaranteed effective from one full moon to the next."

"This is the sort of magic I'm talking about," said Meredith, accepting the bottle. "No fancy incantations, just simple, everyday spellcraft. What does your grandma want in return?"

"Four salted herring, please."

Meredith pocketed the bottle, pulled the fish from one of the barrels, wrapped them in cloth, and handed them over. "Give your grandma my regards," she said. "From one old boot to another."

Anwen grinned. "I will."

She started back through the market, and her thoughts returned to the failed transfiguration spell. Months of study, poring over her textbook late at night when her other duties were all finished, and she still didn't seem any closer to mastering it. What did she keep doing wrong?

"There you are, ditch witch."

Anwen froze. Then, with a sinking feeling in her stomach, she turned around.

Three girls stood before her – one tall and square, one small and mouselike, both dressed in rough woollen dresses similar to her own. But the girl in the middle was

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different. Her golden hair cascaded over the folds of a beautiful sea-blue dress, which glimmered like sunlight on water. It even behaved like water – the fabric flowed and broke into tiny white-capped waves that gathered like lace at the hem. It was the best glamour magic Anwen had ever seen, and she burned with envy at the sight of it. Cerys always found a way to make her feel shabby and awkward, without even trying. She would sooner die than let Cerys know this, of course, so she puffed out her chest and set her face in what she hoped was a dignified expression.

"There's no such thing as a ditch witch, Cerys Powell," Anwen said haughtily. "I'm a Meadow Witch, as you very well know."

"You're only an apprentice," said Cerys. "And you don't live in a meadow, you live in a ditch."

"I live on the bank of a stream," Anwen replied.

Cerys tilted her heart-shaped face to one side and flashed a smile without a hint of warmth in it. "I don't care," she said. "I know what you're doing and you're going to stop it."

"I haven't done anything." But that was a lie, and Anwen could already feel a guilty blush starting behind her ears.

"Don't deny it," said Cerys. "You're sending the seagull."

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Anwen fought to stop the blush spreading to her face. "What seagull?"

"The one that's been following me all week," said Cerys. "The one that waits outside my house each morning. The one that…" She trailed off, apparently unable to get the words out.

"The one that what?" asked Anwen, biting the insides of her cheeks.

"The one that keeps pooing on me!" Cerys snapped.

It was finally too much, and Anwen let out a great snort of laughter.

"It's not funny," Cerys retorted, while her friends both glowered disapprovingly. "Every time I step outside it starts dive-bombing me. And I know you told it to!"

Anwen took a moment to restore her composure and, choosing not to risk another lie, looked up into the clear blue sky. "I can't see a seagull anywhere," she said.

"Because Bronwen and Efa keep chasing it off," said Cerys, nodding to her friends. "I can't spend all day sheltering indoors if I'm leaving for the Academy of High Magic tomorrow. I've got to buy things for the journey." She put her nose in the air and looked down it at Anwen. "Tell your bird to leave me alone, ditch witch. I don't want it following me all the way to the capital."

Anwen, who had been preparing to issue a reluctant

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confession, felt her anger flare. “Stop calling me a ditch witch,” she growled. “Just because you’re going to the Academy doesn’t mean you’re better than me.”

“That’s exactly what it means,” said Cerys. She flicked at the heather in Anwen’s hair, dislodging a few petals. Anwen clamped a hand over them. “Lucky flowers and chatting to animals might be all right for you Folk Magic types,” Cerys continued, “but the Academy wants genuine talent, which is why I’m going to become a fully qualified glamourist, and you’re staying here. In your ditch.”

Anwen stamped her foot. “The only reason I didn’t pass my entrance exam is because you sabotaged it!”

“Me?” said Cerys. “I wasn’t even in the room. You messed it up because you can’t handle High Magic, and now you’re taking it out on me with that stupid seagull.”

Anwen could feel her face burning, but she no longer cared. “I should send a whole flock of them after you,” she said. “It would serve you right. And just wait, I’ll apply to the Academy again next year, and I’ll get in.”

“Try it,” said Cerys. “After the disaster you caused, I doubt they’ll even bother opening your application. How long did they say it would take for the examiner’s eyebrows to grow back?”

Bronwen and Efa sniggered, and Anwen balled her fists as her anger reached boiling point. She didn’t care

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how much trouble it got her into, she wanted to knock Cerys flat on her back.

But before she could move, there was a guttural shriek high above them. All four girls looked up, and Anwen saw the silhouette of a bird flash across the sun. Something fell from it with a wet *SPLAT!* and Cerys cried out in dismay. Slowly, with a mix of triumph and trepidation, Anwen lowered her gaze.

Cerys stood rigid as a statue as a thick yellow trail of bird droppings oozed down her face and dripped onto the shifting surface of her dress. Bronwen and Efa gasped in horror. Passers-by stopped and stared.

"This is your fault," Cerys hissed.

Anwen swallowed, uncomfortably aware of all the attention they were now attracting. "If it makes you feel any better, getting hit with bird poo is supposed to be lucky," she said.

Cerys answered with an incoherent howl of fury. Her concentration broken, the glamour spell surrounding her dress stuttered and died, revealing plain grey fabric, heavily patched and mended, underneath. "You think you're so clever, Anwen Sedge," she shrieked as Efa and Bronwen produced handkerchiefs and hastily wiped at the mess on her face. "You're nothing but a useless ditch witch. And that's all you'll ever be!"

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More people were stopping to gawp now, and Anwen's face felt so hot she was surprised it hadn't spontaneously combusted. "Oh yes?" she said, with as much dignity as she could muster. "Well, I'm going back to my ditch to practise High Magic until I'm better at it than you." Then she turned and marched away, her heart thumping.

She didn't look back until she reached the slope leading out of the village, where she flopped against the wall of the tavern and deflated like an old balloon. She was still angry, both at Cerys, for the things she had said, and at herself for being found out so easily – if only she'd called off the seagull a few days ago, Cerys would never have suspected a thing. Now half the market knew what had happened, which meant that word was bound to get back to Anwen's grandmother. And she was not going to be happy.

"Well done, Anwen," she muttered to herself. "Another stupid mistake."

She was so stressed that her head was filling with a high-pitched whistling noise. She screwed her eyes shut and rubbed at her temples, but the noise only got louder. Louder and deeper.

She opened her eyes, and realized that the sound wasn't in her head at all. The bustle in the square died away as shoppers and stallholders looked around in

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confusion, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. It seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Then a shadow appeared on the ground, growing larger by the second until it engulfed the whole square. Anwen raised her face to the sky, and gasped.

Something was up there. Something big enough to blot out the sun, and it was getting closer, fast. The whistle was the sound it made as it plunged through the air, and Anwen just had time to realize that the thing looked like a person before the market descended into total panic. People screamed and ran, abandoning their stalls and baskets in the rush to get clear. It was a stampede, and it swept Anwen with it, carrying her out of the village in the seconds before the enormous thing crashed down on the square with a noise like a mountain splitting in two.

The ground leaped, tossing people into the air like toys. Anwen spun end over end, terrified and helpless, before cold water closed around her. She swallowed a mouthful and resurfaced, spluttering.

She had landed in the stream that skirted the village. Its waters slopped and rolled, breaking over the banks and sending flocks of nesting birds screaming into the sky. The dull roar of the gigantic thing's impact went with them, spreading out across the fields in an almighty echo.

Anwen hauled herself onto the bank and collapsed,

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trembling with shock. People lay scattered around her, some of them unconscious, others stunned and moaning. She forced herself to her feet, staggered onto the road leading into the village, and gave a small cry of disbelief.

Old Stump was gone, flattened beneath the bulk of the fallen thing, which now loomed in front of her like a low hill. As the dust settled, Anwen was able to make out more details. It was shrouded in enormous folds of material: she saw gold embroidery and sprays of white lace as big as ships' sails. Stranger still, two things like monoliths now stood on either side of the slope leading into the square. They were wide with a flat surface, and stood almost three times her height, tapering towards the sky. It took her a moment to realize they were the soles of an enormous pair of feet, shod in some kind of silk slippers, their toes pointing at the sun.

That's when she finally understood what she was looking at, and had to sit down before the shock of it knocked her over.

This was a giant.

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