THE MIRACULOUS SWEETMAKERS



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The Frost Fair

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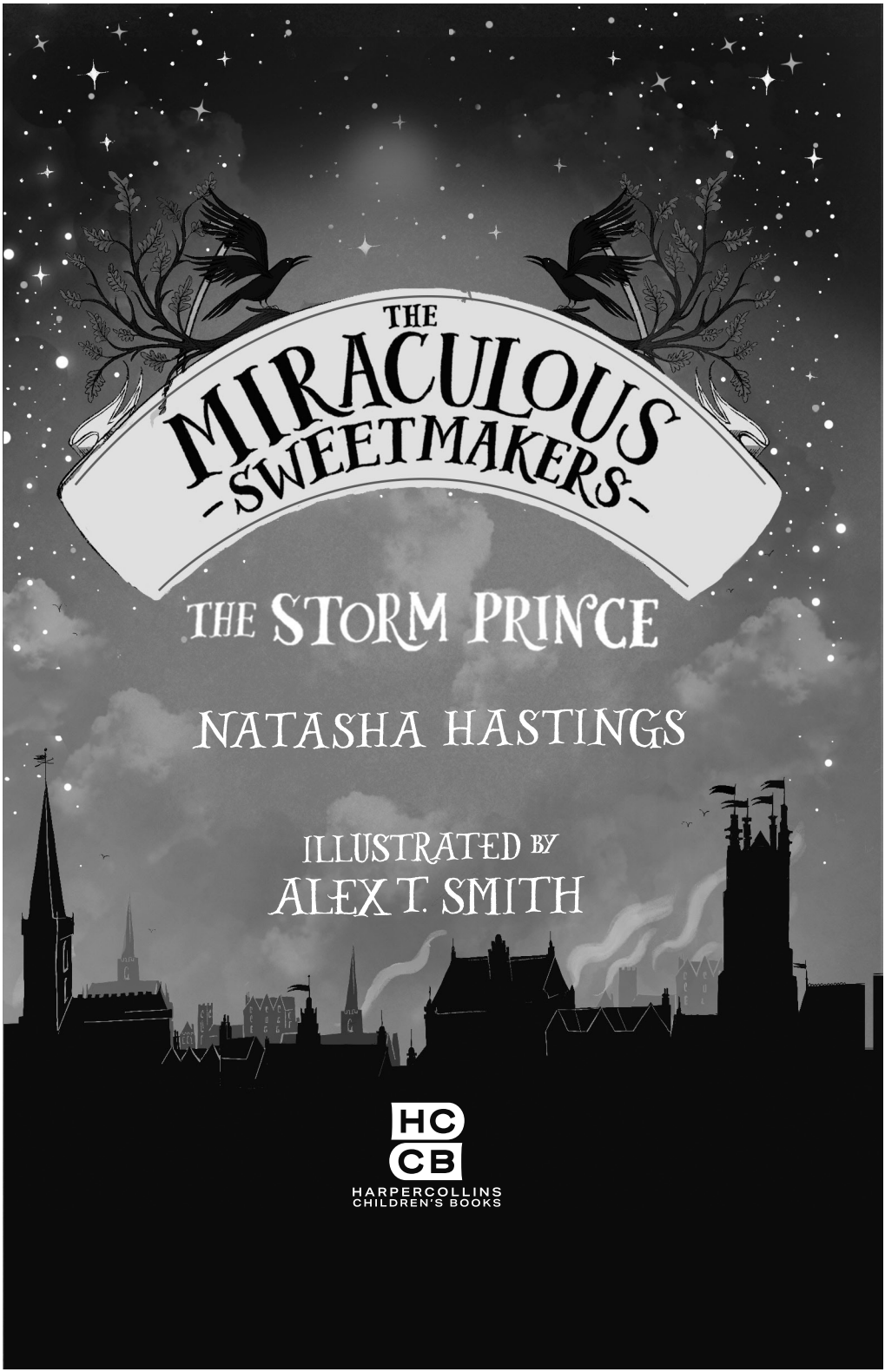
Books by Natasha Hastings

THE MIRACULOUS SWEETMAKERS

THE FROST FAIR

THE SEA QUEEN

THE STORM PRINCE


THE
MIRACULOUS
SWEETMAKERS
THE STORM PRINCE
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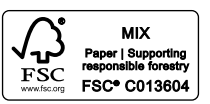
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For Alexander, Lawrence and Peter:
I love you fiercely and forever.

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Chapter One

A Voice in the Darkness

The voice inside her emerged so gradually that Thomasina scarcely realised it was happening. It first spoke to her in the dead of night. Over the past few weeks, as July turned to August, Thomasina had found it easy to sleep – that is, unless Shadow bothered her by yowling for food or walking all over her in the early hours, as he was prone to do.

It was on a balmy night in early September, however, that Thomasina found her sleep was disturbed. Rain trickled down the windows like long fingers reaching out for her, making her twitch as she remembered the Sea Queen's former powers. Her eyelids fluttered slightly as she became aware of the

smooth, cool voice pressing itself into the darkest corners of her mind.

Thomasina. Can you hear me?

That time, she discounted it as a dream, and willed it to go away and stop bothering her. After a while, it did. The voice was strangely familiar to her, but it wasn't her twin brother Arthur's. For this, she was glad: she'd spent years speaking to him after his sudden and tragic death, and as much as she still loved him, she was now content to visit him at his resting place in St Bartholomew's Church, speaking to him there, occasionally with Mother beside her.

Thomasina. Are you there?

The second time the voice spoke to her, a week later, she lay there for hours afterwards, wondering whether she'd dreamed of customers clamouring for her. During busy periods at Burgess & Hawke's, the shop she co-owned with her best friend, Anne, she sometimes found that reality bled into dreams.

Yet, as she stared at the ceiling above her, the dark wooden beams of her bedroom looking unfamiliar in the dim light, memories flashed across her mind, like a candle sputtering in the dark. She thought of the beams of the magical theatre her friend Inigo had

once conjured up for her at the Other Frost Fair, and the *Calhoun*, the magical vessel that had transported her and Anne underwater to the Free Waters over the summer.

Could the voice be a magical one, formed of the same magic she and Anne had encountered over the past year?

Thomasina. Talk to me. Please.

The third time the voice spoke to her, several days later, it became impossible to ignore and to keep writing it off as a dream: it was a pulsing, insistent feeling that reverberated deep in her bones, to the core of her very being, as if it had always been tucked away inside her.

And it felt like magic.

She puzzled over whether it could be the powerful enchantments of the Sea Queen – the magical being that she, Anne and Henry had defeated over the summer. As she'd adjusted to her own Guaire magic – one that had stretched and yawned itself awake inside her, feeling like a gently crackling fire that licked at her insides – she'd soon learned that every different type of magic carried its own sensation.

The voice speaking to her didn't feel evil, or indeed

off in any way. This magic felt like a peculiar blend of friendliness and impatience, like a long-lost friend she'd forgotten about. And Thomasina had seen with her own eyes the magical transformation of the Sea Queen into Jane Mallory, who was now the ward of their kindly new friend, the elderly Mr Dhaliwal.



So: who did the voice belong to?

Thomasina. I know you're there.

The fourth time this voice spoke to her in as many weeks, her eyes flew open, and she stared unseeing into the darkness of her bedroom.

'What?' she whispered.

It felt as if something small and golden was awakening within her, like a bright, feverish hope, as whatever it was spoke again.

Thomasina.

'Who are you?' she hissed. 'Why are you talking to me?'

But the voice didn't reply.

★

Thomasina was so bothered by the voice that she decided to tell Anne about it the following morning. She was startled to see Anne's eyes flash with surprise.

'You've heard it?' Anne said. 'A voice calling your name? Someone's been calling mine too. I thought I was dreaming the first few times – but if you've heard it, it must have been real.'

The pair were in the workroom, a mass of leaflets, pamphlets and hand-scribbled notes stretched out in front of them. Autumn had crept into London.

They had enjoyed dazzling hot sunshine for the past few weeks, and Thomasina's nose and cheeks were dusted with freckles, her porcelain skin burnt red in places. Now that it was mid-September, there was a pinch of change in the air: a slight nip that meant the girls were turning their attention to medicines to help their customers in the darker months that stretched ahead.

Thomasina watched golden sunshine highlight the strands of red in Anne's curly hair, and bring out the amber flecks in her eyes.

'Have you tried replying to the voice?' she said. 'I did, and it felt like whoever it belonged to couldn't hear me.'

'Yes,' Anne said eagerly.

'What does it mean?'

Anne gave a deep sigh, her forehead creasing a little as she gnawed her bottom lip.

'I don't know. It must be something to do with the Guaire magic, I suppose.'

Their eyes met, and a flash of understanding passed between them. That summer, Thomasina and Anne had discovered that Thomasina hailed from a long line of magical beings, through her mother's family,

the Guaires – and that Mother had been concealing a secret twin from her, Thomasina's aunt Morven, who had helped Thomasina claim her magical birthright. Arthur should have had magic too, but because he had died, his Guaire gifts had been absorbed by both Thomasina and Anne.

'It still feels so strange to have this magic within me,' Anne said, with a rueful smile.

'I know what you mean,' Thomasina said, touching her chest, where she felt a small sliver of magic lodged within herself, like a constantly burning candle. 'Anne, we didn't hear the voice before. Why should it appear now?'

'I don't know,' Anne said, shaking her head. 'We have more pressing matters to be concerned about, anyway.'

From the stacks of papers and parchments on the table, she withdrew a single poster, and the girls glared at it.

'Curtis & Bolter have completely copied the sweet honey apples we made last year!' Thomasina said.

'So has Satterwhite's, up by Fleet Street – and customers are flocking to them,' Anne said. 'We have to think of something bigger . . . something different

to show to our customers, to help us stand out from the others. And quickly.'

The bell sounded from the shop outside: their first customer of the day.

'Good morning, Mr Dhaliwal!' they heard Miss Maplethorpe trill.

This was accompanied by a very loud crash that made the pair jump, followed by Miss Maplethorpe and Mr Dhaliwal's voices spilling over one another's.

'Oh dear, I—'

'No need, no need, I'll just—'

'Oh, no, you couldn't possibly—'

'Let me—'

'No—'

'I insist—'

'Shall we just—'

'I think we should go and help them,' Thomasina said in an undertone to Anne.

'Every time he comes into the shop, she breaks something,' Anne replied, rolling her eyes and smiling.

They walked on to the shop floor, and Thomasina gazed around affectionately. Burgess & Hawke's remained her favourite place in the world. As autumn set in, she and Anne had hung dried summer roses

and softly glowing lanterns up on the walls, and Miss Maplethorpe had sourced a large tapestry that depicted a group of wise women creating some medicine in a cauldron together. The air smelled of smoked hot chocolate, which was bubbling from a pot in the corner, and golden-coloured sunlight streamed through the shutters, making the whitewashed walls look warm and welcoming.

Miss Maplethorpe was picking up a cooking pot that was mercifully empty.

'Not a dent on it!' she said with relief. 'Now – I should leave – so much to do today!'

Blushing, and casting a small smile at Mr Dhaliwal, she picked up her selling tray, and left the shop.

'Good morning,' Mr Dhaliwal said to Thomasina and Anne, also blushing. 'I just wanted to – er – that is – I was wondering if you could help me with an ailment I have.'

'Of course,' Thomasina said.

'I've been through a range of physicians myself,' Mr Dhaliwal said, easing himself on to a chair. 'And consulted my own medical textbooks. But I haven't been able to find a single thing that can help. And so I thought I'd turn to the two most enterprising young

people I know, to see if they could think of anything.'

He gave them a gentle smile.

'I don't expect any change, of course – but I thought I might as well ask.'

Thomasina frowned.

'What kind of ailment is it?' she said.

'A constant ache and strain in my leg,' said Mr Dhaliwal. 'I've used poultices, leeches, compressions, tonics . . . you name it. But nothing that has helped.'

'If you've been to physicians, then I don't know if we can help you, Mr Dhaliwal,' Thomasina said apologetically.

'Ah,' Mr Dhaliwal said, leaning forward with a sparkle in his eye. 'That's the thing. We know that Jane was once able to make all sorts of things happen, using magic. I wonder if you've ever thought of using *your* magic to aid people's ailments.'

Thomasina's mouth fell open as Mr Dhaliwal's smile widened. Only Thomasina's mother and aunt knew about their gifts. She suspected, though, that maybe Jane had worked out their secret too – given she and Anne had used their magic to rescue her over the summer.

'I can tell I've shocked you,' he said. 'But I've

always wondered if you two were magical. Jane said as much over the summer, after everything happened. And you've as good as confirmed it by your silence.'

'How on earth have you been able to tell?' Anne demanded.

'I've just had a suspicion,' Mr Dhaliwal said. 'I don't think Jane's fully recovered from what happened to her for years. And given that you were both instrumental in saving her, I've always thought there must be something magical about you too.'

'How much has Jane told you of what happened to her?' Anne said.

'I know a great deal of it, I think,' Mr Dhaliwal said. 'She was, I believe, possessed of some great, strange magic.'

Thomasina felt goosebumps prickle up and down her skin as she remembered the watery lair of the Sea Queen: the massive throne room and palace, as well as the numerous magical underwater creatures that had been under her power, lurking in the River Thames.

'And you believe her?' she whispered.

'We all saw the unnatural waves of the Thames over the summer,' Mr Dhaliwal said. 'And the apparition that arose. Yes, I believe Jane's account of things. And

it makes sense as to why she fell off the face of the earth. And the scars on her neck and the side of her face . . .' he said, trailing off. 'I've never seen anything like them before. They burn gold at night, did you know? Nothing non-magical could make such a thing happen.'

'Do you mind if Anne and I talk to each other in the workroom?' Thomasina said.

'Of course,' Mr Dhaliwal said.

'Thomasina,' Anne whispered, once they'd closed the door behind them. 'There's something whispering to me now. My Guaire magic. It's telling me we can help him. And – truth be told – I want to use it. Especially since we've got so much competition nowadays.'

Thomasina stared at her friend. While she had received the gift of understanding magical languages, Anne had inherited the power of creating magical potions. Since the summer, Thomasina and Anne had discussed their new gifts many times, but they hadn't used them again; they'd both been a little afraid to, having seen how much damage magic could wreak.

'Are you sure it isn't the same voice we've both heard at night?' she hissed.

'No, it's different,' Anne said. 'It sounds like the voices that helped me make the potion over the summer. It's been whispering to me over the past few weeks, trying to help me with our shop's supplies.'

'How could your magic help Mr Dhaliwal?' Thomasina said.

'It's saying we could create a tonic formed from magic, to help ease his pain,' Anne said hesitantly. 'I know we've never done this before, though.'

'Do we have all we need?' Thomasina said. 'To make such a tonic in the first place? I don't fancy completing tasks like we had to do with the Sea Queen . . .'

Anne shook her head.

'I think we do,' she said seriously. 'Can I share my magic with you? So you can hear what it's saying?'

Thomasina nodded. They touched hands, and she closed her eyes. Slowly, she felt Anne's magic – a sensation so different from her own enchantments – pouring into her.

If you take some murk root and add it to some ordinary apple cordial, plus a spell to chant that I will tell you, then this will lessen the gentleman's pain in a matter of minutes, a sing-song voice whispered.

'We might as well try,' Anne said, and Thomasina nodded.

The pair clattered around their workroom shop, sourcing the ingredients. Luckily, a fire was already lit, and once they'd tossed everything together into the cauldron and stirred it several times, Thomasina looked across to find Anne chanting something mysterious under her breath.

'It feels so good to use my magic,' she said, her eyes glowing as she beamed at Thomasina.

Thomasina couldn't help but feel a curious, jealous tug in her heart as she witnessed Anne's magic – couldn't help but think of the awe and majesty of the Sea Queen's power.

How would it feel, to wield magic that was so fearsome?

★

'How does it taste?' Anne said anxiously, once she'd ladled a cup of the tonic for Mr Dhaliwal and handed it to him to drink.

'Very pleasant,' he said.

Just then, the ding of the bell over the shop door announced an arrival, and it was Henry who came into the shop. He'd spent weeks as a captive of the Sea

Queen, and Thomasina was relieved to see now that he looked healthier than ever. He'd caught the sun too: his sandy-coloured hair was bleached brilliantly blond and his cheeks, forehead and nose were quite burnt, but this only served to make his eyes seem a brighter blue.

'Good morning, everyone,' Henry said. 'Did you see that Curtis & Bolter—'

'Yes, we saw they've stolen our honey-apple idea,' Thomasina growled.

'I'm sure theirs are nothing on the honey apples you both create,' he said, as Shadow trotted up to him, purring. Henry bent down to scratch him behind the ear.

'You know,' said Mr Dhaliwal from his chair, 'I do think this tonic is benefiting me very well. It feels most extraordinary – most extraordinary indeed!' he added in a tone of great surprise. 'Like I have something very warm inside my leg. Not unpleasant at all. In fact, rather wonderful! May I buy as much of it as I can?'

Once Mr Dhaliwal had left, Anne turned to Thomasina. 'Now we know it works, we can start using our magic to create potions for our customers,'

she said, grinning broadly. '*That*'s how we're going to succeed. *That*'s how we're going to stand out from all the other sweetmakers. And I'll admit, Thomasina – I'm *so* glad we tried it at last!'

The pair worked hard for the rest of the day, and, when the evening finally rolled around, they closed up the shop. As Thomasina started chopping vegetables to make a stew for their supper, she thought about the curiously thrilling sensation of Anne's magic. How useful it was going to be! She remembered the power she had sensed in it and the sadness it had made her feel as it had gradually worn off over the course of the day.

She was worried her own magic would never again feel quite enough to make her happy.