

"Non-stop, endlessly
inventive fun."

Sinéad O'Hart



THE
TOWER
AT THE
END
OF TIME

Amy Sparkes

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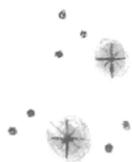
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For Tabitha

Dear friends,

There's something important I need to tell you.

My days in the House at the Edge of Magic have been the best days of my life. But every journey must come to an end. Even the most extraordinary ones.

I know you'll take care of the most special thing I have in all the world.

And look after my music box, too. It means so much to me.

Please don't try to find me. You know I don't like saying goodbyes.

So, I'll just say thank you. For everything.





CHAPTER 1

If anyone had told Nine a week ago that she would be in a magical house with a hopscotching wizard, a feather-duster-obsessed troll and a stab-first-ask-questions-later wooden spoon, Nine would have laughed in their face. And then picked their pocket.

Yet here she was.

Nine stood in the dark, plum-carpeted hallway of the House at the Edge of Magic, beside Eric the troll – as tall as a man and a half, and like a cross between a tree trunk and a walrus – and a blue and white coat of arms mounted beside the front. It showed two sticks crossed above a large toad, which had a chain-like tongue poking out of its mouth. She had just pulled the tongue out, released it and—

ZA-BAM! Nine had felt a shockwave rock through her body. But it hadn't been enough to shake her smile.

What *was* enough to shake her smile was the sickening lurch which came next.

Nine leaned against the front door. Her brain was surely being sucked out of the top of her skull. Everything hurtled in a direction she didn't understand – but was possibly “up”.

“Lady fine?” said Eric in a wobbly voice, as he clung to the end of the banister.

For a moment Nine saw stars in front of her eyes, then they faded away. There was a strange but relieving sensation of lightness, and Nine caught her breath.

“Lady always fine,” she said determinedly. Because, for the first time in her life, she should feel absolutely fine.

Gone was her old life as a thief for Pockets, the heartless, whiskery old gang-master. Gone was the dingy, rat-infested warehouse cellar, where she lived with the other thieflings. And this new life, in this strange and magical House, had begun.

Except now the House was flying ... and houses really weren't supposed to fly. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more ridiculous it was. She ignored the rising tightness in her chest and wrapped her arm around the precious satchel slung across her body. This was what she wanted, wasn't it? This was freedom. This was escape. This was a flying house. This was – she really, really hoped – *not* a mistake.

“House free!” said Eric.

“Oho!” crowed Flabberghast the wizard, rubbing his palms together in delight as he skipped up the hallway towards Nine. Behind him skittered a wooden spoon with spindly arms and legs, and a face almost entirely made of two bushy, gingery eyebrows and a large moustache. “Three years!” the wizard continued. “Three years I’ve waited for this moment! We’ve visited your world many times, even picked up mortal guests to travel with us, but we’ve never been stuck there for years before! Freedom from the curse! Freedom from your world! Freedom from your dung-ridden streets!”

“Hey.” Nine frowned.

Flabberghast linked elbows with Eric, and the wizard's curly auburn hair bounced about as the two danced around in a circle. Dr Spoon rolled his eyes. Nine looked at the grinning wizard in his indigo pyjamas and fluffy purple slippers and sighed. "Yes, you're welcome."

"Well, naturally, Madam, I am most grateful for your part in the curse-breaking—"

"Which absolutely wouldn't have happened without me."

"—but oh! To travel the realms of magic! To be free once more!" Flabberghast sighed blissfully and his strangely ancient eyes twinkled. Nine couldn't help smiling.

"Now, the Hopscotch Championship is coming up, Madam. That will be our first stop. I've missed three years! And we had best get there early, or we'll never park the House." He wiggled his fingers in excitement. "We should have tea to celebrate." His clapped his hands together again and grinned at Nine.

Eric lolloped contentedly down the long hallway towards the kitchen. Flabberghast followed, pausing to tilt the picture of 'Sir Ignatius

the Permanently Late (1589–1641)', one of the many portraits of his ancestors. It hung crooked for a second, then magically righted itself. Flabberghast chuckled and skipped on into the kitchen.

“Fool of a wizard,” muttered Spoon, shaking his head. “Now the House is on the move, we can finally find Professor Dish! With the curse broken, perhaps she’ll contact me!” He twitched his gingery moustache at Nine, then sprinted up the plum-carpeted staircase to the landing.

Nine had heard so much about Spoon’s long-lost partner in alchemy – how Spoon had one half of the formula to change matter into gold, and Dish had the other. She wondered if they’d ever be reunited, and who exactly they were trying to make the gold for. And if they did make lots of gold, surely they wouldn’t need it all...?

No, I’m not a thief any more!

“You’ll find your room perfectly satisfactory,” came Flabberghast’s voice, dividing Nine from her thoughts. “The room carefully chooses the guest, not the other way around. Make yourself at home.”

“Yes. Home,” murmured Nine, the word unfamiliar on her lips. It didn’t feel like home...

She climbed up the stairs to the main landing, which had dozens of doors of every size and colour – some small as a mousehole, some larger than a carriage archway. The ridiculously high walls were dotted with hundreds of other doors, all the way up to a distant, ornately painted ceiling.

Some of the doors were reached by rickety wooden steps and landings that doubled back on themselves. Other doors were reached by tall ladders or the huge central spiral staircase that seemed to stretch up for ever. And there were some doors that didn’t appear to be reachable at all.

On the right of the main landing, a narrow staircase led to a single small door: Spoon’s room. On the door was painted a yellow circle with a smaller circle inside. There was a faint burning smell coming from within and occasional wisps of curling, orange smoke, which tickled the air and then vanished. Nine paused for a moment, then shrugged. When you had a wooden spoon trying to make gold, this almost counted as perfectly normal.

There was a high-pitched creaking sound. Nine looked up sharply as the turquoise door at the top of a tall ladder opened itself just a fraction. *The room chooses the guest, not the other way around.*

As she climbed up the ladder that led to the room, doubts pounded Nine's mind. What if this room wasn't perfect for her? What if she wasn't perfect for the House? What if she was never meant to be here at all? What if this was all a big mistake—?

“Tea cupboard!” warned a distant wizardy voice. Nine paused, mid-climb.

Tea cupboard? Then she understood: the tea cupboard remained cursed and every time someone touched it, there would be a—

ZAP! Nine was a frog with two bushy tails and extra-long arms, clinging to the ladder rung. She had eight eyes, only two of which were open – the rest popping open one at a time, until Nine could see eight ladders in front of her. Slowly, she became unfrogged as the magic faded, and her eight bulbous froggy eyes were replaced by her own, definitely-just-two, eyes.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to magic,” Nine muttered, as she climbed up the ladder to face the turquoise door. She reached out to push it open, but before her fingers even reached the wood it began – ever so slowly – to creak open wide. In a tangle of excitement and nerves, Nine stepped inside.