

PROLOGUE

Once there was a family who followed the North Star across the ocean. Its bright light led them away from war-torn lands and promised new fields and forests to call their own. But the family sailed too far. To an island in the cold north, far from the light of the sun.

There, only the moon shone, and the wind always blew, and the ocean always churned, and the snow and ice always fell. Only the people of the hills knew how to live there, and they were a dangerous people, of old magic and grudges that never went unpunished. So the family built their house far from the hills, in the valley under the stars. But the stars were jealous and swept down from the sky and tore the house apart. So they built another by the sea, but the ocean decided to

claim it for its own and washed it away. So they built another in the slopes of a hill. But this was grey wolf territory and every night they came scratching at the door. So they built another high up the mountain, but the frost watched the happy family and wanted to join them, so it crept in under their windows, crawled under the doors, seeped in through the roof, until the house turned to ice.

At last, the oldest son travelled six days and six nights to ask the people in the hills for their help. He arrived cold and hungry and hardly able to stand. And the people from the hills took pity on the young, frail boy, and so weaved their magic into four gifts, one for each of the family. For the mother they made a fire poker that could conjure a fire that would never go out, keeping the snow and frost at bay. For the father they crafted a lantern that once lit could control the tides, protecting them from the temperamental sea. For the girl they built a weathervane that could channel the wind and lightning to protect against the mischievous stars. And finally, for the boy, they made a door knocker that could summon the animals of the earth for protection from the wolves.

The people of the hills gave these gifts willingly. But they issued a warning, too.

“Use these gifts wisely,” they said. “For like you,

these gifts are stronger together. Remember, we can ask for their return at any time.”

The family were grateful. Barely daring to hope, they built a new house, in the valley this time. And with all four gifts united under one roof their powers began to grow. Soon the family could wield near complete control over the elements.

But magic is dangerous; it whispers to those who would be good and strong and makes them weak and unwise. The mother came to believe the small wooden house wasn't good enough for them. She wanted more. So the family went to the forest for trees to build more floors and bigger bedrooms.

But that wasn't enough. The boy wanted stables for his horses. So they went back to the forest to build them.

And then the daughter wanted a grand hall to dance in. So they emptied the quarries of stone to build a floor fit for a thousand kings to dance across.

And soon after the father wanted an atrium that looked up into the bright skies and darkest nights that unfolded on the edge of the world. So they emptied the beaches of sand to make a giant glass ceiling.

And after all that, the valley was stripped bare until not a hare, rabbit or fox was left.

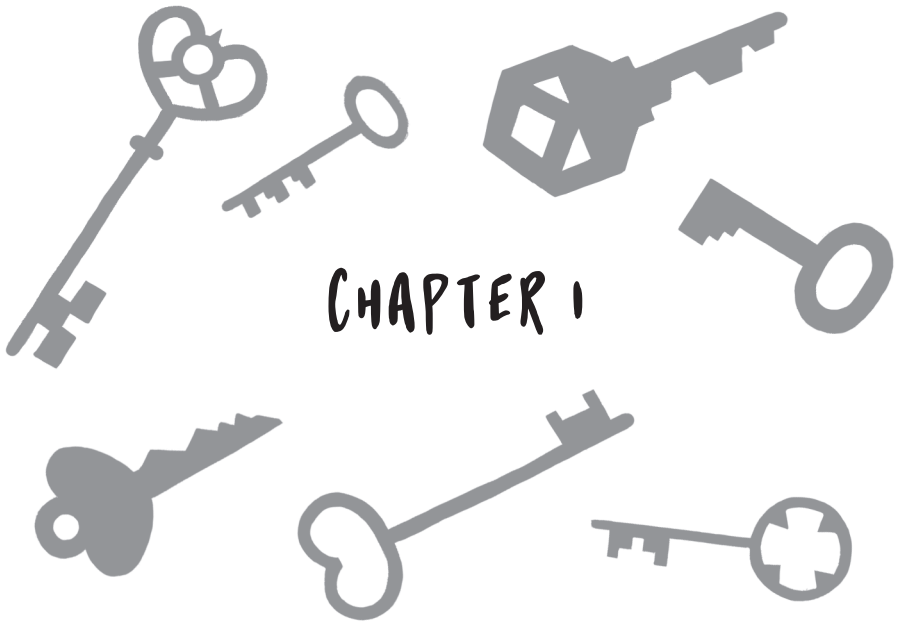
The people from the hills had watched as their

gifts were misused. Finally, they realized enough was enough. So they called to the wolves from the hills and howled to the depths of the ocean and cried to the stars and the ice to take back the house their gifts had helped build.

But the magic in the house was strong and the family knew how to wield it. The wolves could not get past the door. The waves could not reach the house and the falling stars and ice could not break through the roof.

At last, they called the black birds of the north to gather the North Wind. And the North Wind, once gentle and welcoming, turned against the family. It pulled apart the house. As they fled, each member of the family took their gift, before going their separate ways to follow the North Star again.

But the people from the hill do not forgive or forget so easily. They cursed the family to be rootless as they once were, chased by the birds of the north, who would bring misfortune to any place they came to call home for so long as they held on to magic. Until, united again with their true strength, they could bring the curse to a close.



CHAPTER 1

It was past midnight when we first arrived at Verity Close. The moon hung big and bright in the sky and the street was lined with a parade of foxes, their golden eyes glinting in the darkness. Like they had been waiting for us. The close was quiet otherwise. With curtains drawn across every window – every window but one. One bedroom light lit the shadowy street. Someone was watching us, then. Wondering who could possibly be moving in this late. I could tell strangers were unusual here. Because Verity Close was a nice normal neighbourhood. Like one you would draw in a picture. Identical, neat three-bedroom houses all lined in a row, each with a pink magnolia tree in the front garden. There was only one house

out of place, the one at the end of the street. The one that would be ours.

Even from our van I could see a garden filled with junk, tiles missing from the roof and a cracked window covered with newspaper. But I didn't care about that. I didn't even care that we had driven all day without stopping. That Dad's face was lined with worry and Mum's knuckles were white and still gripped to the steering wheel. I only cared about one thing.

"Are we safe now?" I asked Mum.

She didn't reply right away. Her eyes darted nervously to the rear-view mirror before she asked,

"Can you see anything, Noah?"

I wiped a clean spot on the fogged-up back window. We had lost the black birds from the north over the Tyne Bridge. That didn't mean we were safe though. We could only outrun our bad luck for so long. But under the amber street lights the world was still.

"I need a wee," my brother, Billy, whispered.

Mum turned to us and the van let out a little groan. It was a small miracle we had been able to fit everything in this time. Despite being expert packers and not owning anything but what Mum called "the essentials", we still had four large suitcases, Dad's toolbox and one bag each filled with our emergency kit. Or in Billy's case, three mega tubes of Smarties

and a ferret named Arnold. And strapped to the roof was Mum's special wooden trunk. It was very old and had been in our family for generations. In every home we'd lived in, it had been hidden away and kept locked. Mum wore the little silver key to it around her neck. She was fiddling with it now.

"OK. Are you ready to see your new home?" Mum asked, putting on her overly bright happy voice that made her sound like a children's TV presenter.

Billy and I nodded. Dad said nothing. All the way here Mum had talked about how great this place would be. That things would be different here. But I'd heard it all before. I was only twelve but I'd already lived in twelve different homes. And even Dad, who usually joined in to cheer us up, seemed to think this was one too many moves, and had spent the journey in silence.

I looked at the boarded-up door and newspaper-covered window again. I thought about our last place, a trailer on the edge of a lake. We'd had a big 50-inch TV and a deck for barbecues. This new place looked dark and dingy and there was no deck. But I could see how nervous Billy was, so I tried to copy Mum's TV presenter smile.

"Let's go," I said.

The house was worse up close. The garden was

filled with cat poo and on the door in dirty numbers was the number thirteen. Thirteen! The unluckiest number of them all. It was a very bad sign.

“It’s just a bit dirty,” Mum said, catching my eye.

She rubbed at the number with the cuff of her jacket. The thirteen turned into an eighteen. I let out a long sigh of relief. I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding my breath. Billy reached out and squeezed my hand. He always knew when I was most afraid. If Billy were an animal, he would be an octopus. The octopus has amazing senses even though they’re completely deaf. Instead they’re able to feel and taste danger before it ever arrives. Just like Billy, who has a sixth sense for when I’m upset, no matter how hard I try to hide it. I squeezed his slightly sticky hand back and Billy signed, “Got you, brother.”

Billy’s partially deaf, and even though he can hear pretty well with his hearing aids, he likes to sign when he’s around a lot of people, or when he’s nervous. And arriving in the dead of night to a strange tumbledown house was making us both nervous. Mum rattled the key in the lock and the front door swung open with a groan.

Inside was worse than I had imagined. When Mum flicked on the light, I could see floorboards sticking out at odd angles, a grey stain on the ceiling

and yellowed peeling wallpaper. And the whole house smelt of old cigarettes and pee. I wrinkled my nose.

“It needs a little work doing,” Mum said, still cheerful. “The last person to live here let it go a bit before he. . .” She stopped short.

I knew what she was going to say: before he died. This was a dead person’s house. I hugged my duffel bag and thought again of our shiny, clean trailer by the water.

“We just need to use a bit of imagination. Bit of new paint. Some furniture. Your dad can fix anything, isn’t that right?” Mum said, turning to Dad.

But Dad only grunted before he walked back to the car to unpack our things. I saw Mum’s smile slip for a moment.

“Let’s check out the rest,” I said to cheer her up.

Mum’s face lit up again and she grabbed my and Billy’s hands.

“You’ve got to see the best bit,” she said as she pulled us into the hallway. “Stairs.”

Billy’s eyes lit up.

“We have *stairs*,” he said excitedly before flying up them.

We followed Billy up to the big bedroom at the front of the house. He was spinning across the floor, his arms wide.

“We could fit three bunk beds in here, or two proper beds and a sofa. Or a whole wall of beanbags!” he said breathlessly.

“Actually, I was thinking just one bed. Noah’s,” Mum said from behind me.

“I get my own room?” I said.

Me and Billy had always shared a room. Which had been fun at first, but not so great when you’re twelve years old and your younger brother’s eight and must pee at least ten times a night.

“But what about me?” Billy whined.

“Well, I was thinking, since you’re so small, we could put you in the cupboard,” Mum said.

“I don’t wanna go in a cupboard! Noah, don’t let her put me in a cupboard,” Billy said.

He’s not very good at telling when people are teasing.

“Just show him his room already,” Dad said, hauling Mum’s heavy trunk up the stairs.

Billy bounced off with Mum to the room at the end of the corridor, where I could hear his gasps of “whoa” and “awesome” and “I can see the kitchen from the hole in the floor.” I stayed in the big room, taking in the moonlight coming through the window. My very own room. Maybe, I thought, just maybe, 18 Verity Close wasn’t so bad after all. I knew that was

a dangerous thought to have. I couldn't let myself get used to this place. In the end, no matter where we went, we could never stay longer than a year. And even that was pushing it. Sometimes the curse chased us down sooner. But no matter when it happened, it was always the same way. First came the bad omens. Like black cats crossing your path, mirrors breaking or strange weather like snow in summer. But they're subtle and easily missed or ignored. So sometimes it wasn't until we saw the black birds from the north that we knew we were in danger. Because after the birds came the accidents.

"How long do you think we'll stay this time?" I asked Dad as he pumped up my inflatable mattress.

But Dad didn't answer.

That night Billy crawled into my bed.

"Don't you like your new room?" I said.

"Yes, it's great. Mum says I can paint it whatever colour I like, so I'm going to paint it yellow. It'll be like living in the middle of the sun," Billy said. He tugged the sleeping bag off me and over himself. "I just thought you might be lonely."

"Billy, you know we can't get to like this place too much, right?" I said, yanking the sleeping bag back. "Because we'll have to move again soon."

“Maybe we won’t. Maybe this time it’ll be different,” Billy said, his hot breath tickling the back of my neck.

“It won’t be,” I said.

“Why not?”

“You know why not,” I said.

Every time we moved Billy would have to be told again. Every first night in a new place he would ask for the story. But tonight, for some reason, I didn’t want to tell it.

“Go to sleep,” I said.

“I can’t, not until you tell the story,” Billy said, putting his little arms around my neck.

“If I do, then will you go to sleep?”

Billy nodded.

“OK,” I sighed, turning over and pulling the sleeping bag tight around us. “Once there was a family who followed the North Star across the ocean. . .”

And I began to tell the story that Mum had told us a thousand times and her mother had told her a thousand more. The one that every Bradley knew by heart.

As I spoke, Billy’s breathing became soft and even. “But the people from the hill do not forgive or forget so easily. They cursed the family to be rootless as they once were, chased by the birds of the north, who

would bring misfortune to any place they came to call home for so long as they held on to magic. Until, united again with their true strength, they could bring the curse to a close,” I finished, to the sound of Billy’s snores.

I couldn’t fall asleep. From my window I could see the shadows shift in the garden. The bushes rustled. Twigs snapped, and as a thin cloud passed across the moon, I could see the glint of eyes watching. All around the house, the foxes had gathered. They knew, just like all animals knew, that we weren’t another ordinary family moving in. That we weren’t like the other neighbours, tucked up tight in their beds, dreaming of jobs and school and breakfast, and all the other ordinary things normal people dream of. No, we were the Bradley family and we were different.