"A wonder-filled book that revels in magic and mayhem." Abi Elphinstone

TTYY

Amy Sparkes

A

THE HOUSE AT THE EDGE OF





## **Amy Sparkes**



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

> First published 2021 by Walker Books Ltd 87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

> > 24681097531

Text © 2021 Amy Sparkes Cover and interior illustration © 2021 Ben Mantle

The right of Amy Sparkes to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Berkeley Oldstyle

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

> British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

> > ISBN 978-1-4063-9531-0

www.walker.co.uk

5% of the author royalties for this book will be donated to ICP Support www.icpsupport.org Reg. charity number: 1146449





To Whoever Reads This Note,

My name is Nine and I need you to do me a favour.

Go down Whinney's Passage until you reach the tumbledown terrace. Knock on the third door and say, "No strawberries today".

Tell Pockets that Nine sent you. Tell the old weasel-faced devil he will never see me again. Why? Because he's wrong – sometimes life does bring you strawberries. Sometimes you are a whisper away from magic without even realising it.

And that's exactly what happened to me.

Nine





**N** ine crouched down behind the stacked fish crates at the bustling market. *Dead fish always look so surprised*, she thought. *Surprised to be dead? Surprised to be caught?* Well, no one would surprise Nine, anyway. She had no intention of being caught, or of dying, thank you very much. Even though she ran the risk of both every day of her life.

Nine brushed her fingertips against the empty satchel slung across her body. It wouldn't be empty for long.

## Focus.

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat, then opened them again. Just like a cat: sighting her prey, stalking it quietly, pouncing at the right moment. But instead of bringing a mouse back to her owner, Nine was after a different type of gift.

She was falling out of favour with Pockets, the old gang-master. She needed to prove herself to him. Prove she was worth the roof over her head and the pathetic amount of food the old devil gave her each day. And this was her opportunity.

Everyone was busy at the market, moving and chatting. It was the perfect place for a pounce. Barrows rattled, traders shouted, wagons rolled. A shawl-wrapped fishwife was at the far end of her stall, yelling to the crowd about the Catch of the Day, which, as far as Nine was concerned, was just an extra-large, extra-surprised-looking fish. Nine ducked down behind the crates and peered around. A horse and cart clattered over the cobbles, obscuring her view. When it passed, she smiled.

Her prey. A young lady stood with her back to Nine. She guessed, by her height and build, that the lady was only a few years older than herself, but she was beautifully dressed. She had a puffedout scarlet dress and, more importantly, a fancy, beaded handbag.

Nine's senses were on alert. Her muscles tensed. She moved into position, clenched her fists, stretched her fingers – her pre-pounce ritual.

The scarlet lady was heading for the fabric shop across the street. Perfect. When she went to open the door – that moment of distraction – Nine would crash into her and snatch the bag.

She was on in *three*...

Oh, she loved the thrill.

Two...

Focus on the prey.

One...

The young lady was nearly at the door...

*Go!* Nine sprinted over the cobbles, aiming for her prize—

THWACK. Nine ran straight into her, clasped the bag—

The shopkeeper opened the door right at that moment and his eyes fell on Nine and her outstretched hand. *No*! This was not good. Nine released the handbag. This was *definitely*  not good. The scarlet-dress lady shrieked and stumbled backwards.

With a flash of panic, Nine dashed back towards the fish baskets. She could duck and weave through the crates and—

"HEY!"

Nine gasped as two large hands slammed down on her shoulders.

"I saw that, missy. What's your game?" growled the shopkeeper in a deep voice.

"It's called 'catch'," said Nine. Then she twisted around, grabbed the Catch of the Day and threw it at his face. The shopkeeper staggered backwards, looking even more surprised than the fish. Nine shoved over the piled-up fish crates as hard as she could – dead fish oozing like spilled guts across the street – and the shopkeeper crashed into the stall. Nine took a moment to appreciate the fishwife pounding him with a prize lobster, then ran through the streets, dodging people, horses, the huge steaming piles of—

*Squelch*. Nine stopped, looked down at her filth-caked shoe and wrinkled her nose.

"Oi!" Looking back, she saw the lobster-beaten shopkeeper running towards her. She huffed, then bolted as fast as she could through the market. She needed to disappear – to find protective walls to hide behind until he gave up the chase. Nine darted past shop windows and houses, longing for a glimpse of the one place she could go, the one place where she would always be safe.

*Ah*! And there it was! Her muscles relaxed just a little. The tall, somewhat derelict building was the safest place in the world. Two of its windows were now boarded up, roof tiles were missing, but its faded, peeling blue door was ajar and waiting.

Nine quickly glanced over her shoulder, and saw the shopkeeper still pushing past people and dodging stray dogs. A tiny smile escaped her, and Nine pushed open the door and slipped inside the library. The hinge squeaked as she closed the door behind her.

*Shhh*. She mustn't be heard. Mustn't be seen. While she was here she would creep in, snatch a book and leave unnoticed. It was good practice, after all. A damp, musty smell hung in the air. A handful of ladies and gentlemen were dotted around the silent room, flicking through books and magazines, their backs towards her. No sign of the librarian. So far, so good.

Nine stepped forward. A floorboard creaked. She held her breath. Nothing.

She crept towards her favourite, but halfempty, shelf: mystery tales. Stories where answers were hidden and secrets unravelled and where, perhaps, for a moment, anything was possible. She trailed her fingertips across the soft, dark binding of the books as she passed.

She loved books. One of the older thieflings had taught her to read before he'd flown the Nest. He was the only one in the Nest who had treated Nine as a person, rather than the muck now smeared on her shoe. Nine was so grateful. Inside every book was a world: a world to which she could escape.

Her fingers stopped at a brown spine with gold lettering. *The Mystery of Wolven Moor* by Horatio Piddlewick. She stretched her fingers around the book, eased it out gently, silently and"Caught you," whispered a man's voice in her ear.

Nine's heart leapt into her mouth, her fingers fumbled at the book and it fell towards the floor. A hand shot out and caught it.

Nine put her hands on her hips and whirled around to face a ginger-haired librarian, who stood tall and proud. "What?! No! I was silent as the grave, Mr Downes!"

The librarian's eyes twinkled joyously behind his horn-rimmed spectacles as he waggled a finger. "Ah, the floorboard creaked." Nine rolled her eyes as Mr Downes reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a small notebook. He tucked the library book under his arm and turned to a heavily marked page in the notebook. "I believe the score is ... yes, twelve points to me, five to you." He beamed at Nine, then frowned suddenly and wrinkled his nose. "What *is* that smell?"

Nine tucked her filth-caked shoe behind her other leg. "Can't smell anything."

"Hmmm," said Mr Downes, twisting his mouth

to one side. He untucked the book and glanced at the cover. "*The Mystery of Wolven Moor*?"

"I've read it three times already. You really need to get some new books."

The joyful look in the librarian's eyes faded away and worry lined his face. "You know the library cannot buy new books. There's not even enough to repair the building. It's a miracle we're still open!"

"Well, then," said Nine quietly, snatching the book back and marching for the front door. "This one will have to do."

"Nine," hissed Mr Downes as he scurried along beside her, "must I keep reminding you? Without a guardian's signature and a disclosed address, you cannot have an account, and if you do not have an account, you are *not* permitted to borrow books from this library."

"It's for a friend."

"And this *friend*, I presume, also does not have an account and is not permitted to—"

Nine stopped just before she reached the front door. "You going to let me take it or not?"

Mr Downes looked at Nine and raised a gingery eyebrow. "One week."

Nine tucked the book into her satchel, gave the librarian a wink and walked out the door, smiling at the noisy, exasperated sigh from Mr Downes as she left.



As she stepped outside a grey-bearded man, staring down at the ground, almost walked into her. A protest was on the tip of her tongue, but Nine held it back, watching as he disappeared into the pawn shop across the road. Moments later he reappeared with a spring in his step and, Nine reckoned, a good deal richer.

She kicked herself for not grabbing whatever valuable thing he'd been carrying before he went in. Pockets would have been pleased with her, for once. What had the man pawned? A family heirloom, perhaps? She thought of her most treasured possession – a little, worthless, silvery music box – the only thing in the world that was truly hers. At least it was only on Pockets' shelf and not in a pawn shop window.

Pockets. Focus.

Back to the market she went, her hunter's eyes searching for the perfect gift for the old man. The market was beginning to wind down for the day: the traders were shifting crates and loading carts as the last customers milled around the street. There was the young lady in scarlet again, clutching her little beaded bag – that lovely, unusual bag. What treasures were inside? Gold? Jewellery? Nine smiled. A second chance was a rare gift. This time she wouldn't mess it up. This time she would show the old devil how good she really was.

Just like a cat: sighting her prey, stalking it quietly, pouncing at the right moment. Nine moved into position, clenched her fists, stretched her fingers.

She was on in *three*... Oh, she hated her life. *Two*... But she loved this thrill. *One*...

Focus on the prey.

And – *GO*!

She dashed for the scarlet lady and grabbed her handbag, closing her fingers around the silky, expensive strap. But the lady held tight – she was ready this time.

Unfamiliar voices shouted.

"Oi!"

"Hey, you!"

Nine panicked and tugged. This really was turning into a rotten day.

Something like a small, dark ornament flew out from the bag and tumbled across the cobbles. Nine saw her chance – she released her grip, grabbed the object from the ground and ran.

Shouts and curses rang out behind her, but Nine only had eyes and ears for what was ahead. She sprinted over the cobbles, her satchel bouncing on her hip. She darted between carts, people—

"Thief!" shouted an angry voice behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder as she ran.

A ruddy-cheeked butcher with a blood-stained apron was only a stone's throw away. In a second he'd be right on top of—

THUD. She collided with a large barrel rolled by a lanky boy. The ground fell away from her feet as she flew over the barrel and crash-landed on the cobbles on the other side. Her left hand instinctively opened with the blow and the little dark object went spinning away.

Sprawled on the ground, Nine's eyes searched desperately for her prize. There – on the stones, just within reach. Nine stretched out her fingers...

The lanky boy swore at her and rolled the barrel on, accidentally kicking the object farther away. Nine watched as it skipped across the cobbles, coming to rest between the hooves of a restless horse.

"Oi, you!" came the butcher's voice. Nine scowled. The man was nearly on her. She glanced at the prize beneath the horse. Definitely some kind of ornament, sure to be valuable. She would *not* lose this. The blood-stained apron filled her vision, a hand extended to grab her-

Nine rolled out of reach and scrabbled to her feet. She dashed towards the horse and cart, the butcher right behind her.

His angry fingers clawed at her and Nine threw herself to the ground, hearing her jacket tear as she twisted out of his grasp. She rolled between the horse's stamping hooves, snatching the ornament as she went. "Got you!" she whispered.

Nine stood up with the horse and cart safely between her and the butcher. As he turned to run around the horse, Nine stuffed the ornament into her satchel and headed for the nearest alley.



The more she twisted and turned through the maze of narrow streets, the quieter the noise from the market. The shouts of the butcher were faint and infrequent now. Chest aching, she slowed to a walk until she reached a lifeless, dead-end alley. High, brick walls with occasional gates marked the back yards of houses on each side.

Not the sort of place a person would, or probably should, linger.

Nine promised herself a moment to catch her breath, then she'd head back to Pockets. To show the old devil exactly what she was worth.

She sat on the ground, reached into her satchel for the valuable ornament and pulled out her prize...

A house.

A house? Small enough to sit in the palm of her hand; like a dolls' house from a dolls' house – but stranger. Its four narrow storeys were dotted with tiny windows and odd corners, that jutted out here and there. Tall, round towers capped with pointy spires stood on both sides. There was a slightly wonky chimney on top of a tiled roof and, at the bottom, a double-fronted blue door with a tiny doorknocker.

Nine stroked the door wistfully. A house. A home. What would it be like to live in a house, instead of Pockets' stinking Nest? She hooked her grubby little finger under the miniscule doorknocker ring, then let it fall back on the door. It made the tiniest little tap.

"Nobody's home," she said softly as she stood up. The uproar in the market would have died down now. She could probably head back to—

A tingling, buzzing feeling tickled Nine's palm. *Odd*. She glanced down. The little house was vibrating in her hand. Nine watched as it shook more strongly, the little doorknocker now clinking against the door. She plonked it straight down on the ground and stepped backwards. The house began rocking violently from side to side. Then, with a whoosh, it started growing – growing?! – upwards and outwards.

Nine stared as the house filled every available gap in the alley, its shape contorting, lengthening and repeatedly rearranging itself to fit every inch of space. Storeys poked out above the rooftops of the other buildings until the house became an unbalanced, oddly shaped eight – nine – ten – *eleven*-storey building, surely threatening to topple over at any moment.

Nine stared in shocked silence, trying to make sense of what had happened. Her eyes tracked the

house from the blue front door with its not-sotiny doorknocker right in front of her, up through the eleven wonky, squished-up storeys, all the way to the top.

The house was a copy of the little ornament, but now with new higgledy-piggledy floors and windows. Something strangely stump-like was poking out oddly from the side of the roof. It was still shaking from side to side until there was a little *pop!* and a wonky chimney shot up.

"What the—?" began Nine, but she didn't get any further. At that moment the front door opened. And there, framed by the doorway, stood a huge, ugly creature – like a cross between a walrus and a tree trunk – head and shoulders above the tallest man and twice as wide. It had bark-like grey skin, a ropey tail dangling between its legs, big yellow eyes, two tusk-like teeth...

And was wearing a white, frilly apron with a feather duster tucked into the side.

"Wh—?" said Nine, staring at the creature. Her legs had apparently forgotten how to move. "You late," rumbled the thing. "We waiting."

And with a large, rough hand, it grabbed Nine by the collar, pulled her inside and slammed the door behind her.