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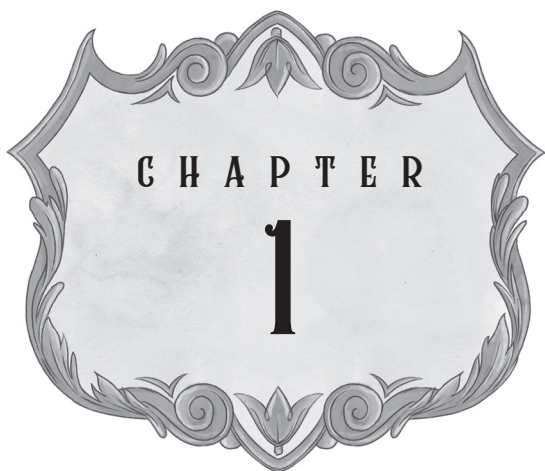
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For Lucy
Dear cousin and dearest friend





CHAPTER
1

All was quiet in Mr Browning's Emporium of Strange and Magical Things when a highwayman burst through the door. His cape swirled like a black sail, his mask was a dark slash across his eyes, and a pair of silver pistols gleamed in his hands.

'Stand and deliver, your money or your life,' he roared.

Mr Browning's granddaughter, Bramble Browning, dropped her waxed polishing-cloth on the counter and jumped. The bell that was mounted above the door continued to sing, drowning out the ragged

hitch of Bramble's breath. Yet as she looked at the outlaw, relief spread through her; the mask was just a strip of black fabric, the guns were merely painted wood, and most importantly, the man behind the mask was not a man at all, but a twelve-year-old boy called Ernest.

Her best friend.

She threw her cloth, smacking him square in the chest. 'Ernest! You scared the life out of me.'

'You got me, Bram. I'm hit. I'm hit.' He stumbled to the ground, grabbing his chest as if he were shot.

Bram rolled her eyes. 'When will you stop with all this highwayman nonsense? Honestly! What if we'd had customers? What if Grandpa had been here?' She winced at how much she sounded like her older sister, Lena, as if fun wasn't allowed. But it was the first time Grandpa had asked Bram to open up shop on her own, and she didn't want to let him down.

Ernest scooped up the cloth and handed it back. His deep brown skin and black curls gleamed in the morning light that slanted through the large arched window.

'Firstly, Gramps loves me.' Ernest straightened his mask. 'I happen to know he thinks my interest in highwaymen is adorable.'

‘He thinks it’s ridiculous,’ Bram muttered.

Grandpa made no secret of the fact he thought highwaymen were villainous thugs, certainly not the celebrities Ernest seemed to think they were. Bram never paid much attention to them either. Why would she care about people who robbed others? Besides, Grandpa refused to have any of the ‘*Wanted, dead or alive*’ posters in the shop.

‘And secondly,’ Ernest said, ‘I checked that you were alone through the window. You looked kind of sad.’

‘So you thought you’d cheer me up by giving me a heart attack?’

Ignoring her, he twirled around, letting his cape flutter out like the skirt of a dancing girl. ‘Do you like it? It’s just a petticoat I found in the shop.’

Ernest’s ma ran the dressmaker’s shop next door. Bram dreaded to think how much trouble he’d be in when she found one of the petticoats missing.

‘Yeah, it looks great,’ she admitted. He was a dab hand at stitching and fiddling with clothes.

Nipping around the counter to examine the costume more thoroughly, she pulled out the cloak to find the shape of a mask neatly snipped from one of its corners.

She couldn't stop the laughter from bubbling up. 'Does your ma know you've stolen this for your dressing-up box?'

'Dressing-up box?' he said, pretending to be angry. 'Not only am I a highwayman, I'm Diamond Jack, the bravest outlaw in all the land.' He thrust one of his toy guns upwards. 'Stealing from the rich to feed the poor.'

'Stealing from the rich to feed the poor? I don't think that's true.' It was a nice idea, but Bram was pretty sure that outlaw highwaymen kept the loot for themselves.

But Ernest nodded so fiercely his mask slipped. 'It *is* true, Bram, it is! Most highwaymen are only in it to get rich, I agree, but not Diamond Jack. He's a good'un.' He straightened his mask and waved his pistol. 'Sworn to protect the people and the one true queen.'

Bram had heard a rumour that Diamond Jack supported Queen Georgina, although that alone didn't make him a 'good'un' as Ernest claimed. But she dipped into a curtsy anyway.

'All hail, Queen Georgina.'

Playing along felt like the right thing to do, for she supported the young queen. Queen Georgina had sadly fallen ill several years earlier and had since been

replaced by her younger sister, Lavinia, the Princess Regent. Bram disliked the Princess Regent. As soon as Queen Georgina had fallen ill and moved to the royal hospital on Rosemary Hill, Lavinia had used her powers to raise the price of food and rent, making the poor even poorer.

The sound of high heels clicking against the stairs caused them both to startle.

‘Lena,’ Ernest whispered, tucking his toy guns into his belt.

‘Let’s see how brave you are when my sister’s here,’ Bram said with a chuckle.

Lena emerged from the door that came from the small flat above the emporium where she and Bramble lived with Grandpa. Lena was sixteen, four years older than Bram, a fact which she loved to remind Bram of. But today, dressed in Mama’s favourite velvet gown and a matching pink bonnet that tamed her brown curls, she looked at least twenty. Bram tucked her own hazel ringlets beneath her straw hat, suddenly feeling very young and foolish.

Lena was staying the night with Aunt Jane, who lived in the neighbouring town. She carried a small chatelaine bag with some coins inside. Bram couldn’t

tell if she'd dabbed a little of Mama's rouge on her cheeks, or if she was simply reddening with annoyance. Her sister also shared Grandpa's dislike for highwaymen.

Just as Bram expected, Lena made a noise that sounded like *humph*. 'I've already told you, Ernest, no highwaymen in the shop.' Her blue eyes flashed.

Bram prickled at her sister's tone – only *she* was allowed to tell Ernest off, he was her friend after all. 'He was just showing me his costume, no harm done.'

'No harm done?' She shoved her hands on her hips. 'Grandpa left you in charge and you're already playing daft games with your friends.'

Guilt nipped at Bram's stomach. Guilt and irritation – it wasn't *her* fault Ernest had turned up looking like this.

'I'm not just any old highwayman,' Ernest said, frowning. 'I'm Diamond Jack, and you can't be mean to Diamond Jack. He's a national treasure.'

Lena's nostrils flared. 'In case you've forgotten, Diamond Jack is dead. He died a year ago.'

'Disappeared, Lena. *Disappeared*,' he said. 'Everyone needs a holiday, even the Diamond. But he'll be back.'

Lena pinched the bridge of her nose as if staving off a headache and said, 'Look, I just don't want any silliness in the emporium. It's a business, not a playground.'

'What? No silliness in this extremely serious place?' Ernest gestured to the walls and shelves. Every surface was cluttered with bizarre knick-knacks. There was a mirror that gifted the gazer extra beauty (it didn't), magic boxes that couldn't be opened (they could) and possessed candles that fizzed and sparked when lit (they really did, but only because Grandpa had sprinkled them with flint).

'Less of the sarcasm,' Lena said. 'Magic is a serious business indeed.'

Ernest scoffed. 'You know that nothing here is actually enchanted, right? *Real* magic is dead. It died out years ago. But do you know who *isn't* dead?' He thumped his chest. 'Diamond Jack!'

Rolling her eyes, Lena switched her attention back to Bram. 'Grandpa won't be long. He had some errands to run this morning, that's all.' Her voice softened as she took Bram's hand. 'I need to catch my train so you'll be on your own for about an hour or so.'

'I know,' Bram replied.

Lena had already told her this about ten times yesterday, and about three times at breakfast. Since their parents died a year ago in a riding accident, Lena had become less of a sister and more of an overprotective governess. Bram knew it was because she cared, but sometimes it felt a little suffocating. The funny thing was, Bram had barely seen Lena before their parents' death. She was always off doing her own thing, whereas now, she was like a second shadow.

'It should be quiet.' Lena gestured outside; but for a few lamp posts and dried-up leaves skittering in the breeze, the street was empty. The shops that tended to get busy, like the butcher's and the baker's, hadn't woken up yet. Their brightly coloured awnings sat like heavy eyelids above their panes.

'I know,' Bram repeated, though she gave Lena's hand a squeeze, not wanting to appear rude.

'I'll be back on the first train tomorrow morning.'

Bram nodded. There are only so many times you can say *I know*, she decided.

Lena wagged a gloved finger at her. 'No closing up shop before Grandpa's home, no playing in the street, no joining in Ernest's silly highwayman games, and absolutely no going in the garden shed. Agreed?'

Bram nodded. It was easier to just agree. Lena pulled her into a hug and Bram let the soothing scent of her lavender hair oil fill her nose.

‘Bye, Lena,’ she said.

As Lena walked from the shop, Ernest threw his arms wide. ‘Where’s my hug?’

The door slammed, causing the bell to jangle.

Ernest slumped. ‘Your sister really doesn’t like me, does she?’

‘It’s just because of your costume.’ She sighed. ‘And you know what she’s like, she worries about every little thing since . . .’ Her sentence faded from her lips. She didn’t need to say it – they both knew what she was talking about. Her fingers toyed with her necklace, a delicate chain threaded through a silver locket; it had been a gift from her parents and since their death, she hadn’t taken it off once. Yet for all her love of it, she hadn’t been able to open it. Inside were two miniature paintings of her parents, and she knew that gazing upon their smiling faces would simply be too much to bear.

Just then, Bram felt a strange pulling sensation in her stomach. At first, she thought it was grief, but it was different from anything she’d ever felt before, like

a fishing line hooking her belly. She glanced down, scowling.

‘Are you OK?’ Ernest asked.

‘Yeah. Just hungry.’ It was a lie, but she didn’t want to alarm her friend.

‘Have you checked Cornelius this morning?’ he asked.

‘Not yet.’

‘What if Gramps left biscuits?’

‘He might have.’ She glanced at the stag’s head mounted behind the counter. He wasn’t a real stag’s head, just some soft velveteen fabric topped with wooden antlers. In his mouth, Grandpa used to leave Bram secret notes or scribbled maps telling her where the freshly baked cookies were hidden.

‘You can check, if you like,’ she said, distracted.

That strange sensation was strengthening, and it seemed to be pulling her towards the kitchen at the back of the shop.

‘Not likely,’ Ernest muttered. ‘He looks like he can still bite.’

Confused but curious, Bram headed to the kitchen. It was exactly as she had left it. Toast crumbs scattered on the table, copper kettle humming on the range,

plates piled in the sink waiting to be washed. But still the tugging sensation grew. It was coaxing her towards the back garden, she was sure of it.

‘Time for a cuppa already?’ Ernest said.

Ignoring him, she crossed to the back door where the sensation swelled until she felt like a fish being reeled in. Was magic at work? But that was impossible, like Ernest said – magic was dead. It had been for centuries.

So what was pulling her?

Her eyes landed on the shed and a feeling of warmth exploded in her tummy and spread throughout her veins.

‘Jackpot,’ Bram whispered.

‘Jackpot?’ Ernest said, excited. ‘What jackpot?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘But we’re about to find out.’