

THE
BOOKSHOP
AT THE
BACK OF
BEYOND

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Amy Sparkes



WALKER
BOOKS

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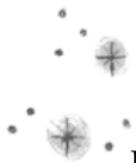
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For Merrianna

Everyone has secrets, do they not?

*Sometimes deep, sometimes dark,
sometimes well-meaning or long forgotten – buried
in hidden places.*

But secrets will sleep and bide their time.

*Because one day, sooner or later, they will wake –
and there will be consequences.*

The secrets will come out to play.

*And those who patiently wait in the shadows, who
watch from the windows,
they gather the secrets.*

And soon ... the game begins.





CHAPTER 1

There was surely a point when life couldn't get much stranger, but Nine wasn't completely convinced she'd reached it yet.

She narrowed her eyes and slowly, carefully, crouched down in the plum-carpeted hallway of the House at the Edge of Magic, facing the front door. The satchel she wore across her body brushed the carpet, her precious music box tinkling inside.

Focus. Just like a cat, Nine was sighting her prey, stalking it quietly, ready to pounce at the right moment. She clenched her fists, stretched her fingers – her pre-pounce ritual.

Nine glared at the little creature, which was almost within reach. It was the size of a small rat,

with large, round eyes and a body that looked like a blue ball of wool. It sat back on its little hind legs, using its front legs to hold – and nibble – a prize of its own. A prize it had stolen from Nine’s plate. But not for long.

Nine was on in three...

Oh, she was going to get her flippin’ toast back.

Two...

If it was the last thing she did.

One...

Nine leapt forwards with the determined spring of an experienced pickpocket, her satchel flapping against her hip. But her target seemed equally determined and experienced. The creature gave an indignant squawk, hastily stuffed the toast in its mouth and scrambled away from Nine’s outstretched fingertips – as she landed face down on the carpet.

Nine turned her head right to see the blue ball of wool on legs scurrying and leaping up the main staircase.

“Oh no you don’t!” she cried, jumping to her feet and making a dash for the stairs.

“Er ... Madam,” came the voice of a young wizard from the other end of the hallway, “is everything under control?”

“Yes, Flabberghast!” snapped Nine, as she half fell up the stairs, the little blue creature escaping her fingertips again. “Perfectly under control!”

“Ah, good, marvellous,” said Flabberghast, his tone a little nervous. He wore indigo pyjamas, a pointy indigo hat and fluffy purple slippers and leaned against the kitchen doorframe.

Nine leapt again at the creature, this time half falling *down* the stairs with a not-entirely-perfectly-under-control thump.

The wizard twisted his mouth doubtfully. “I could simply request that Eric makes some more?”

Nine scowled as the blue ball of wool scurried further up the stairs and onto the main landing. She turned her scowl to Flabberghast and pointed her finger at him. “Nobody,” she said, “steals my toast.” She leapt to her feet once more and hurtled up the plum-carpeted stairs.

The many portraits of Flabberghast’s witch and wizard ancestors – all with the same flared nostrils and silvery-sparkling eyes – passed like a blur as Nine chased the creature to the main landing. When she arrived there, she scanned the area furiously.

Dozens of doors of every size and shape dotted the walls. Some were reachable by criss-crossing

staircases and landings, some by wooden ladders, and others appeared not to be reachable at all. The different floors were linked by a huge central spiral staircase with a rope handrail that snaked its way up to a distant ornately painted ceiling.

“Where *are* you?” whispered Nine through gritted teeth.

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Nine looked up to see the toilet giggling and hopping cheekily across a rickety landing. It had a frustrating habit of wandering about and disappearing, and – sure enough – Nine watched as a door opened and the toilet quickly hopped inside. She tutted and made a mental note of which door it was hiding behind in case she needed it later.

Then came the sound of tiny, toast-stealing, scurrying feet. Nine’s gaze shot to the right: a wobbly flight of stairs, which led to a silver door decorated with a curious golden question mark. Her mother’s old bedroom.

A cold piece of nibbled toast lay outside it, and a small blue ball of wool was now flattening itself almost entirely before sliding under the doorframe and disappearing into the room.

“No! You are *not* going in there!”

Nine ran to the stairs, her satchel thumping against her. She pounded up the steps so fast that they threatened to collapse. She thrust her hand out towards the iron ring handle that formed the dot of the question mark and twisted it sharply to the right.

As she burst through the door, Nine noticed the faintly familiar scent and took a quick, deep breath – but there was no time to dwell on it. She glanced around the room, searching for the creature. Every wall had a narrow bookcase filled with books, and was painted a bold turquoise. Empty picture frames hung on the walls and an unticking golden clock sat silently on a shelf.

A silver flash at the window beside the bed caught Nine’s attention. Outside, the blackness of the World Between Worlds was split by more flashes of silver strands, which rose, twisted together, and then exploded into fading stars. A little fanlight at the top of the window always stayed open – the window Nine had squeezed through once to get into the locked House. A window she had reached by climbing up the footholds and handholds that jutted out of the House’s brickwork. As if her ma had done that before her. . .

“You are absolutely *not* staying in here!” Nine announced to the room.

There was a tiny scrabble of defiance from under the bed. Nine cast her satchel off, causing a tinkle of protest from her precious music box. She dropped flat on her stomach and peered underneath the bed. There were some clothes, a little hooped fishing net on the end of a long wooden handle, and right near the wall, a teapot ... behind which poked out a little blue woolly bottom.

Got you.

Nine slowly moved her arm towards the fishing net until her fingers grasped the handle. One swoop and she would surely catch the creature... Her grip on the net tightened. She fixed her gaze. Her arm muscles tightened in readiness and—

“TEA CUPBOARD!” came Flabberghast’s distant voice.

No! Not the tea—

ZAP!

Nine was turned into a rocking horse with a dragon’s head and a pig’s tail. The blue ball of wool’s bottom turned into a bubble that grew bigger – and bigger.

The spell on the tea cupboard was a thoughtful hangover from the curse placed on the House at the Edge of Magic by Flabberghast’s sister – the very

same one who had imprisoned Flabberghast and the others inside and shrunk it to no more than an ornament when Nine had pickpocketed her bag and found it. The one who had tried on *several* occasions to kill them and who Flabberghast had made quite clear he wanted nothing more to do with. But now the curse had been broken, the witch seemed to have left them in peace, except for the brief reminders every time they touched the cupboard to get some strawberry tea.

The annoying spell began wearing off, as it always did. Nine became more Nine, and the bubble-bottom of the blue creature popped, releasing an eye-watering smell, and in its place once more was its regular woolly rump. The creature poked its head around the teapot. Their eyes met, and the little thing tilted its head on its side, as if it was thinking. Nine frowned, her grasp loosening on the handle of the net. The creature gave two quick sniffs in Nine's direction, and another in the direction of the teapot – and then bolted out of the bedroom door.

Nine gave a frustrated sigh and pulled herself out from the shadows. She sat back on her heels and looked around again at her mother's room. She wasn't sure who was the more astounded – her or

Flabberghast – when she had realised that her mother had once travelled with the House, and that the doorstep Nine vaguely remembered being left on with no more than a music box had not been a workhouse, or any old doorstep, but the House at the Edge of Magic. That had been before Pockets, the whiskery old gang-master, had stolen her away to be one of his pickpocketing thieflings, of course. It all seemed a lifetime ago...

“You had it all worked out for me, Ma,” Nine whispered to herself. “Why did it all go wrong?” Her heart burned to know what had happened.

She had asked Flabberghast so many questions. Some he had answered, some he had avoided. He had met her ma when she was selling flowers on the street, in the mortal world. He had walked past and had an atrocious bout of sneezing. When her ma had passed him a handkerchief, an unexpected friendship had grown quickly between them.

The wizard’s eyes had sparkled, all silvery and soft, when he spoke of the adventures they had shared. When Nine had asked why her ma had left, though, his eyes became dull and sad.

“People leave,” he had said sharply. “They always do in the end.” And he had refused to say any more.

Nine looked at the book that rested on her ma's bed. The golden letters of the title spelled out the title of her own favourite book, the one she always used to borrow from the library back home with Mr Downes, the best librarian in the world. *The Mystery of Wolven Moor*. Nine opened the front cover and traced her fingers over the handwritten name inside. Her ma's name. *Eliza*.

Nine peered again under the bed. Her ma's belongings. Things her ma would actually have touched. She lay down on her stomach again, reached for the fishing net and scooped up the teapot that the blue woolly creature had sniffed at. She brought the net out from under the bed and sat, resting against the iron bedframe. She looked at the delicate white china, decorated with golden stars. Nine stroked it thoughtfully. Had her mother made strawberry tea – the Finest Tea in All the Realms – in this very teapot? Why was it stuffed right underneath the bed? She lifted up the lid, peered inside ... and frowned

Inside were six pieces of ripped parchment. Nine reached into the teapot and pulled out the fragments. She turned them over in her hands. They had nothing written on them ... just pieces of plain parchment.

“Then ... why rip it up?” Nine murmured aloud to the empty room. She rearranged the pieces, fitting them together to form the sheet of parchment. As she slotted the last one into place, her heart skipped a beat. Words appeared in spidery handwriting across the torn fragments:

**Received with thanks,
The SAFEKEEPER**

There was a sharp KNOCKITY-KNOCK on the bedroom door.

Nine jumped – and as she did so, her hand brushed one corner of the torn parchment, dislodging it from the other pieces. Nine stared at the parchment as the letters swiftly vanished from view. She hastily grabbed the pieces and stuffed them back inside the teapot.

Flabberghast’s face peeped round the door, framed by his auburn curls poking out from his pointy, indigo hat.

“Madam? Ah! There you are,” he said, drumming his fingers on the door. He stepped into the room. A silvery light sparkled in his ancient blue eyes as he glanced around. “She was quite ... remarkable. A pity indeed that...”

The sparkle in his eyes faded instantly.

“What?” said Nine softly. She had to tread carefully. Her keen eyes watched him, searching for clues. “Come on. What are you not telling me?”

Flabberghast shrugged and his eyes looked sadder than before. “I suppose everyone has secrets, do they not?”

Nine said nothing, but the image of the torn parchment burned in her mind so strongly she felt Flabberghast would surely see it. She moved her hand slightly in front of the teapot.

What if the torn parchment was a secret Ma had kept from Flabberghast? Should I keep it? Should I say? Should I trust him—?

Flabberghast cleared his throat and brushed down his indigo pyjamas. “Although it was certainly no secret that she was fond of that wretched puffscuttler. The creatures live for decades.”

Nine caught the whiff of something earthy and peppery in the air and her heart sank.

Oh, no...

“I bring warning,” said Flabberghast, uneasily. “Eric is attempting to make up for your stolen breakfast by cooking you some pancakes.”

Nine’s shoulders slumped at the thought of the

grey, lumpy, bone-filled pancakes that the dear housekeeper troll was preparing. “And you didn’t talk him out of it?”

“Well, Madam, you know what he’s like,” said Flabberghast. “He was so pleased to help. And he’s...” The wizard grimaced. “He’s adding a new ingredient.”

Nine sighed. Eric was undoubtedly the best troll and the worst cook she had ever met in her life.

“Your sister has a lot to answer for. I can’t believe she left all his recipe books translated into Dwarvish. We broke the curse on the House fair and square,” Nine grumbled.

“Yes, well, I do not think *fairness* is my sister’s strongest feature.”

“But she is clever,” said Nine, knowing it would annoy the wizard.

“What she is,” Flabberghast said, “is a nightmare.”

Nine felt the teapot, cool against her slightly sweating palm. Flabberghast hadn’t recognised the teapot beside her. She was becoming increasingly convinced her ma hadn’t trusted Flabberghast with whatever this secret was. So perhaps *she* shouldn’t trust him with it, either.

“Madam?” asked Flabberghast, looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and nervousness. “You’re not ... *thinking* again, are you?”

“Well, one of us has to,” Nine retorted. She pushed aside the guilt and the doubt, and picked up her satchel. Then she walked towards the door and grabbed Flabberghast by the sleeve.

“Madam?” said Flabberghast as she dragged him towards the rickety staircase.

“If *I* have to eat the bone pancakes, then *you’re* going to as well.”

And she marched him back down the plum-carpeted staircase, towards the strange, peppery, earthy smell, deliberately ignoring the flash of smug blue wool she could see out of the corner of her eye.



CHAPTER 2

As Nine and Flabberghast made their way downstairs, Nine heard the voices of her odd (and increasing) collection of housemates floating up from the kitchen.

“How much longer will this flamin’ journey take?” grumbled Dr Spoon, who was surely the grumpiest and fiercest wooden spoon in the history of kitchen utensils.

“Flabby lost,” came Eric’s voice. It was followed by the ominous sound of a bone-pancake-laden plate being plonked on the kitchen table.

“For the last time, it’s FLABB-ER-GHAST,” Flabberghast protested loudly over Nine’s shoulder as they came through the kitchen door. “Three syllables,

Eric. Please do keep trying. And I was not lost, I merely chose a creative way to reach our destination.”

“Very creative,” said Nine. “Going backwards was a real stroke of genius.”

Flabberghast huffed. “It wasn’t backwards. It was just ... not entirely forwards. That is very different.”

Nine walked across the kitchen, putting some distance between herself and the squabble. The room was filled with cupboards of all different sizes. There was an archway with a locked wooden door on the right-hand wall, which led to the crypt housing Flabberghast’s relatives, who were (somewhat unnervingly) only Sometimes Dead.

Beside the doorway was a tall hatstand and a bucket that caught orange slime, which dripped in large splats from the ceiling. On the left-hand side was a crockery-filled dresser and a large bricked fireplace with an ominously bubbling cauldron suspended above it. Next to it stood Eric the troll. He looked like a cross between a walrus and a tree trunk, with big, yellow eyes, and a ropey tail dangling behind him. He wore an apron, with a feather duster tucked into the strap.

Nine sat down and hooked her satchel over the back of the chair. She looked at her companion, Bonehead, the gloomy skeleton who up until recently

had lived in a closet in the House under somewhat mysterious circumstances. Bonehead was looking suspiciously at the plate of grey, soggy pancakes steaming on the table in front of them, seeming rather grateful that he didn't need to eat.

“Bonehead!” hissed Nine to the skeleton, glancing over her shoulder at Flabberghast, who had joined the troll at the cauldron. She put a finger to her lips. “Who is the Safekeeper?”

“The Safekeeper? The one in Beyond?” whispered Bonehead, without moving his jaw. “Oooh, now, you don't want to be talking about him.”

“Why not?” Nine whispered back. “Who is he?”

Dr Spoon was pacing around the kitchen on his spindly little legs, his moustache twitching with frustration. At the sight of their muttering, however, he bounded over to the table and leapt over the plate of pancakes. He stood in front of Nine on the table, frowning so his bushy, ginger eyebrows met in the middle, and narrowed his eyes at Nine. “What the devil are you up to now, lass?”

“Nothing! Nothing,” said Nine.

Flabberghast headed back towards the table, and Nine, Bonehead and Spoon moved hastily apart. “Matters are worse than I thought,” the wizard

muttered, leaning on the table and lowering his voice. “I believe Eric is now attempting porridge.”

Spoon groaned and put his face in his little hands.

“When we get to Beyond, all shall be well. He can buy a new cookbook. There’s an ... interesting bookshop there,” said Flabberghast.

“Interesting?” said Nine suspiciously, who was getting to know the real meaning of words in the magical world. “Interesting as in fascinating, or interesting as in it’s-going-to-try-to-kill-us?”

Flabberghast waved a hand dismissively. “Who knows, Madam! One or the other. Possibly both. Do not forget, we were trapped in the House for three years. A great deal can happen in three years.”

“I tell you what’s *not* happened in three years, lad,” said Spoon, “and that’s discovering the formula to make gold. I need my partner, Professor Dish, to put the formula together. We owe that formula, and our heads will roll if we don’t deliver.”

Flabberghast raised his hands in surrender. “I appreciate there has been a slight delay—”

“Three years trapped in a shrunken, cursed house, lad!”

“We are heading to Beyond as swiftly as possible, Dr Spoon—”

“Now we’ve finished going Not Entirely Forwards,” muttered Nine.

“I would never have hitched a ride if I had known,” grumbled Spoon. “We only split up because we were running out of time to deliver the gold and the flamin’ formula wouldn’t work! We were so close but we are still missing the ingredient that activates it!”

“Activates it?” said Nine.

Spoon seemed thrown for a moment. “It’s a ... technical term. We thought searching for it in different directions would work. I just hope Dish did nae end up trapped in a flamin’ House, too!”

Flabberghast squirmed a little. “Dr Spoon, we will find Professor Dish with utmost urgency. The Asking Stone at the Tower at the End of Time cannot lie. If it told us the Professor was in Beyond, then she must be there.”

Spoon hopped onto Flabberghast’s shoulder and tugged a handful of the wizard’s auburn curls. “And the Stone didn’t just tell us that news, did it? That turnip-head of a wizard, Gazillion the Unstoppable, also asked the Stone where Dish was.”

“That was odd. Why do you think Gazillion was interested?” said Nine.

“I told you, Madam, I do not know!” said Flabberghast.

“And at the Hopscotch Championship, why was he whispering to your aunt – that Ophidia the Unpredictable?” asked Nine.

“I do not know!”

“It must be something to do with Professor Dish, or why would Ophidia disappear in such a hurry?”

“MADAM! I DO NOT KNOW!” Flabberghast cried in exasperation. “We shall just have to hope we do not bump into either of them in Beyond.”

“Tell you what *I* don’t know, lad,” grumbled Spoon, “and that’s what you keep under that pointy hat, because I’m flamin’ sure it isn’t a brain!” Flabberghast gave an indignant huff.

Bonehead wiggled his skeleton fingers excitedly. “Well, it’s all rather intriguing, if you ask me,” he boomed. “Not that anyone does ask you when you’re dead.”

Eric trundled over and, with a wonky-tusky smile, plonked a large tureen of porridge on the table. Nine watched as green bubbles rose to the surface and popped with a deeply unpleasant smell. Bonehead followed her gaze.

“Of course, being dead does have its advantages,” the skeleton added.

Suddenly, Nine felt a familiar strange feeling, like her brain was being sucked down through her body and out through her feet. She clutched the kitchen table, feeling sick and dizzy.

“Brace yourself, everyone!” cried Flabberghast. “We’re landing!”

“Ooh,” said Bonehead. “Here we go. Hold on to your skulls!”

Everything was moving too fast, hurtling in a direction Nine didn’t understand but was quite possibly down, at a ridiculously fast pace. She closed her eyes until there was a little THUD.

And the dizziness stopped.

Spoon jumped down from Flabberghast’s shoulder. “We find Dish, we leave,” he said, skittering towards the front door, beckoning the others to follow.

Nine picked up her satchel and poked her head through the strap, swinging it across her body. She dashed towards Eric, grabbed his long-nailed hand and pulled him towards the front door, feeling a small tingle of excitement in her stomach. Bonehead followed them.

“Ah, yes. We shall indeed leave... After we have completed our shopping task, that is,” Flabberghast

said quietly, as he slid between Spoon and the front door.

“Shopping task?” asked Nine.

“It’s the law of Beyond,” said Flabberghast, shrugging. “It was the idea of Affluenza the Stonkingly Ridiculously Wealthy when she was chair of the Beyond Committee. Every household must buy or trade something from every single shop – otherwise your house is not permitted to leave.”

“Not permitted? Or else what?” said Nine.

“If you attempt a counter-spell to sneak off early, then it rather regretfully backfires and your house is stuck to the ground for a month. The parking charges are unbelievable! And even worse, anyone who is caught must clean out the public chamber pots every single day.” Flabberghast pulled a face.

Nine couldn’t help a little smile. “You tried to sneak off early once, didn’t you?”

“I refuse to discuss the matter,” said Flabberghast and sniffed haughtily.

“Eric shop!” said Eric, pulling the front pocket of his apron inside out. “Sweets gone! Buy sweets!”

“Indeed,” said Flabberghast. “You take the sweet shop, Eric.” He cleared his throat. “And, um, might

I suggest you visit the bookshop? Perhaps you'd like to find a few new recipes?"

As Eric pulled out his feather duster from his apron strap and leaned it against the wall, the wizard moved towards an umbrella stand by the door and stretched out his hand. "Cloak."

A blue arm shot out of the umbrella stand, holding an indigo, star-speckled cloak in its blue fingers. Nine stared at it. She had always wondered who – or what – that arm actually belonged to. There were still so many questions about this mysterious, magical House.

"Blimey, your House is a bit rusty with the ol' landing, ain't it?" said a gruff female voice from behind.

Nine turned to see the newest member of the household: Cascadia Spout, the gargoyle. She waddled down the stairs towards them. She was a mottled grey colour, with small wings, chunky, short legs and a bulbous nose.

"Found me room," said Cas. "Nice little spot at the top of a tower. Even got me own ledge outside the window."

Flabberghast reached deep inside his cloak and pulled out a handful of little purple drawstring bags which jingled hopefully.

“Marvellous. Now, listen. You will all require these,” he said, handing a bag to Eric, Spoon, Nine and Cas.

Nine’s eyes lit up as she stared at the bag in her hand. She squigged it around, listening to the dull clanking of coins. What she would have given to hold a bag like this when she was a pickpocket in her days before the House! She tucked the bag inside her satchel.

“The priority, of course, is to discover the whereabouts of Professor Dish and rescue her. We must make enquiries carefully. I do not know the involvement of my aunt, Ophidia the Unpredictable, though I’m very sure we want to find that dish before she does, if indeed that is what she seeks.”

“We gathered that,” said Nine.

“And she’s not called the Unpredictable for nothing!”

“We gathered that, too,” said Nine.

“I dearly hope I can find an answer to restoring my magic, but we must also decide who is going to buy what from where,” continued Flabberghast. “The last thing we want to do once we’ve found the Professor is be trapped here because everybody bought sweets, and nobody bought socks!”

“Socks?” boomed Bonehead joyfully. “I haven’t

worn socks for years. Of course, nobody thinks about your feet when you're dead. Your toes all chilly in winter..."

"Good!" exploded Spoon, in a voice that suggested there was nothing good about it at all. "Now do you think we could actually get on with finding Professor Dish? That's what we're here for! Not flamin' socks!"

"And I wholeheartedly agree," said Flabberghast, dropping a little purple purse of coins into the skeleton's bony hand. Then he moved sharply to the front door and cleared his throat. "Friends!" he announced dramatically, flinging open the front door. "Welcome to Beyond."



CHAPTER 3

The first thing Nine noticed was that there was a tiny wicker shopping basket the size of a matchbox floating outside the door, level with her eyes. Its little handles were flopped by its sides.

The second thing she noticed were the magnificent houses that surrounded them closely everywhere. It was like they had landed in the middle of a crowded street, except there was hardly any space between the buildings.

Some were more like overbearing castles, built of black or grey stone, with tall towers and arrow-slit windows – and some even had a drawbridge. Others seemed to be built of smooth, polished marble – gleaming and spotless and twice as tall as the House

at the Edge of Magic. All of them had turrets and towers and windows ... and looked a darn sight better than their House.

Nine quickly glanced back at their own eleven-storeyed home – rickety, wonky, with rooms jutting out everywhere, like they’d been slapped on in a hurry by an architect who was blindfolded and probably half-asleep.

Still, she wasn’t sure she’d change it.

“This is the House Park,” explained Flabberghast, standing next to Nine. “Everybody always polishes up their houses before they arrive.”

“Almost everyone,” said Nine. She glanced up at the ramshackle House.

“Our House is magnificent just the way it is,” said Flabberghast, lifting his nose further into the air. A wonky roof tile fell off and dropped by Nine’s feet.

Flabberghast stared at the tile and sighed defeatedly. He pushed a couple of dark brown coins into Nine’s hands. “These are called yonders, Madam. Would you be so good as to arrange the parking ticket? The meter’s over there.” He waved his arm in the direction of what looked like a bronze statue of a dragon sitting on top of a stone pedestal. “And don’t annoy it, or it’ll give us a fine.”

“How do you annoy a parking meter?”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way, Madam,” Flabberghast said curtly.

Nine snorted. The floating basket stayed hovering at the front door as Nine began to move towards the meter, when Cascadia crashed into the back of Nine’s knees.

“Blimey,” she said, pointing with a stony hand towards a particularly austere-looking black castle with jagged spearheads lining the turrets. “I spent years of me life sittin’ on that one!” Cas rubbed her stony backside and seemed to wince at the memory. “I tell you, I don’t fancy bumpin’ into Malissa the Unnecessarily Spiteful.”

“Can’t think why,” said Nine. “She sounds lovely.”

“Hurry up, lass!” bellowed Spoon from behind.

“All right!” said Nine, marching on towards the parking meter. The little bronze dragon statue was half as tall as Nine, but sitting on the pedestal brought it up to her eye height. It was sitting on its hind legs, its tail wrapped around itself, and had its eyes firmly shut. A black cloak rested on the ground behind it. Nine wondered how exactly she was meant to pay for parking. Tentatively, she reached out a finger and prodded it. The bronze statue opened one eye.

“No,” said the dragon. “It’s too busy. I want a nap.”

“But I need a ticket,” said Nine, prodding the statue in the ribs.

“Stop it! That tickles! I can fine you, you know.”

Nine sighed. “I just want a parking ticket.”

“And I just want a nap. My belly’s absolutely full. Makes me all sleepy.” The dragon yawned.

“BUT I NEED A TICKET.” She prodded the statue again.

“All right, all right! One last ticket! And, in return, you pick up that cloak on the ground there and put it over me. It’s blown off again.”

“Fine,” said Nine.

“Coins,” said the dragon, opening its mouth.

Cautiously, Nine dropped the yonders Flabberghast had given her inside the creature’s mouth. It swallowed them with a big gulp, followed by a clinking of metal as the coins landed in its stomach.

The dragon squirmed a little, as if it was trying to get in the right position for something.

“Where’s my ticket?” said Nine.

“Hang on, it’s coming,” said the dragon. “It’s coming...” It squirmed again, then opened its stony jaws and let out an enormous burp. As it did so, a little

ticket came flying out of its mouth. Nine grabbed it quickly before it fell to the ground.

“That’s disgusting,” said Nine, holding the ticket with the tips of her fingers.

The dragon shrugged. “That’s business. Cloak.”

Nine picked up the cloak and threw it over the dragon. It had a handwritten sign on it saying OUT OF ORDER. Underneath the cloth, the dragon immediately began to snore.

Nine marched back to Flabberghast, who tucked the ticket under the doorknocker before turning back to her with a grin. “Now we can... Ohhhhhh dear.” His grin fell.

“Now what?” roared Spoon, jumping up and down on the spot with his spindly legs.

“That house over there,” said Flabberghast. “It belongs to my Aunt Ophidia. She’s here!”

Nine followed his gaze to a narrow, overbearing house built of blood-red granite. Three tall, spiky towers with narrow windows made the house look like a rather unfriendly trident.

“Then there’s even less time to lose!” said Spoon. “I tell you, lad, if I had my sword, it would be poking your backside right now. LET’S FIND PROFESSOR DISH.”

Flabberghast nodded. “I suggest finding you a new sword would be a good starting point. I rather think it might come in handy. And I must visit the apothecary to see if there are any solutions to restoring my magic.”

“If we split up, we’ll be quicker,” said Nine. “We can ask after Dish and get something from each shop as we go.”

“Agreed,” said Flabberghast. They moved swiftly through the House Park, marching through alleys made between the towering, turreted houses – the little shopping basket following close behind. “Dr Spoon, you come with me, and I shall show you the blacksmith. She’s based near the apothecary, the Cloaks & Jokes shop, and the Finest Tea Shop in All the Realms, so we shall start there and then go on to Locke Street.”

“What about me?” said Nine.

“Eric sweets?” rumbled the troll, looking at Nine with hopeful yellow eyes. “Lady come?”

Nine smiled at the thought of a sweet shop, particularly one with a delighted troll in it. “Expect I could manage that.” But as much as she wanted to go, her mind was turning to the Safekeeper. Who was he? Where was he? And what was he keeping safe for her ma?

“Splendid,” said Flabberghast, crashing through her thoughts. “And, Madam, you and Eric cover the candlemakers, the Secret Shop of Secrets and the bookshop.” He pointed at Nine, his tone suddenly serious. “And whatever you do, Madam, do *not* buy any candle that speaks, regardless of what it tells you.”

“Speaks? Candles don’t speak!”

“Precisely,” said Flabberghast, as if the matter was closed.

“I shall take the sock shop,” said Bonehead. He wiggled his bony fingers excitedly.

“And, Miss Spout, if you would be so good as to accompany him to Harkdark Street, Sevenstar Lane and Yonder Alley. I suggest you consider buying something like a hat and a toilet brush.”

“Not that we’ll ever catch the toilet,” muttered Nine. “Why *does* it wander about?”

“Who knows?” said Flabberghast. “I’m not even entirely sure what it’s doing in the House.”

“And what do I want a hat for?” blurted out Cas, as they scurried down between a square, white-marbled house with balconies and a rather tall, narrow stone tower.

“So we may leave,” said Flabberghast tightly. “And whatever you do, don’t buy a dreadful one

with flowers. They irritate my nasal lining. Ah, here we are.”

Nine’s eyes opened wide as she stared at Beyond. There were dozens of buildings in clusters together, separated by little alleyways with cobbled stones. But they weren’t normal-looking buildings. They were brightly coloured – and shaped like items. Nine could see a black boot-shaped building with windows; a bottle-shaped building made of green glass with pink smoke wisping out of its top; a transparent hourglass-shaped shop which suddenly flipped over, sending all its customers sliding through the funnel back to the bottom; and a tall white building with a flame roaring on its roof towering in the distance.

Between all these marvellous shops, hundreds of witches and wizards of all ages bustled around in a glorious swirl of colourful cloaks. There were other magical folk, too – Nine was sure she spotted a griffin disappearing into the hourglass – and everyone was followed by a floating shopping basket of various sizes, stacked high with magical things.

“Be mindful when you enquire after Professor Dish,” said Flabberghast, interrupting Nine’s amazement. “You never know who is listening and we do not wish to bump into my Aunt Ophidia. She will

be here shopping in every single shop, just like us. We shall take the basket first, and meet here again within the hour and exchange our news. Good luck!” He nodded curtly and marched off down an alley on the right with Spoon skittering along beside him.

Bonehead began to stride away, the basket floating behind, but Nine grabbed his bony arm and pulled him back. “Wait! The Safekeeper!” she hissed. “You said he was in Beyond. Who is he? What does he do?”

“I thought that would be obvious. I have no brain and it’s even obvious to me.” Bonehead leaned towards her. “He keeps things safe, of course.” He lowered his voice ominously. “For a price. Things that are important – yet dangerous. Rather like him, I suppose.”

Nine frowned. Why would her ma have something dangerous? “Where can I find him?”

“Haven’t the foggiest. He moves around, from location to location. That’s how he keeps things safe. But I wouldn’t find him if I were you. Trouble awaits, without a doubt.” Nine sighed in frustration as Bonehead leaned away from her again and wiggled his fingers. “I am rather excited about the socks. They might have fluffy ones.” He strode away down the street.

Cas looked at Nine. “Course, us gargoyles know a thing or two what we’re not meant to,” she said. “Very good at sittin’ still and hearin’ stuff and not bein’ noticed. I’ll make enquiries about your Safekeeper.”

“Really? Thank you, Cas,” said Nine.

“Come, Cascadia!” the skeleton boomed over his bony shoulder. “You must buy a hat.”

“Me head’s made of stone! Not exactly a problem if it gets wet, is it?” Cas muttered, but she scuttled after him, trying determinedly to keep up on her short, stony legs.

Nine turned to Eric after the others disappeared into the crowd. He had pulled his tail forwards and was wringing it.

“Keeper? Danger things?” said the troll, with big, worried eyes.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nine said. She gave him a smile. “Eric sweets?”

Eric gave a wonky-tusky smile, but his eyes still looked worried. “Eric sweets.”

He trundled away over the cobbled stones and Nine followed behind.

Important and dangerous.

What *had* her ma left behind?



Three ornate glass jars filled with various sweets (candy canes, round candies, and chocolates) are arranged in a row. Below them, the word "CHAPTER" is written in a bold, serif font, and the number "4" is written in a large, stylized font. The text is framed by decorative flourishes and small stars.

CHAPTER 4

He pointed his long fingernail towards a shop that was bulbous in shape, with two side extensions like the twisted corners of a sweet wrapper. The building was garishly painted with wide stripes of blue, red, brown, green and orange. It looked like someone was still deciding which colour it should be – or what flavour. There was a little skip in the troll’s step as he clapped his huge, bark-like hands together and headed for the round shop door in the middle.

“How do we get in? There’s no door handle,” said Nine. She went to peer through the tiny sweet-shaped window in the door...

Suddenly, an O-shaped mouth opened up in the middle of the door and sucked them inside with a

noisy, slurping sound. Nine had barely regained her balance as the door-mouth closed back up behind them and made a satisfied “mmmmm”. Nine’s eyes widened as she looked around.

Every spare inch of every wall was lined with shelves of tall jars, packed full of sweets of every colour and shape. A blue-and-white striped counter stood in front of one of the walls, packed with more jars of sweets, and behind it stood a bald, older wizard in a blue robe, with a silvery beard so bushy it was twice as wide as his face. He gave a big grin, showing a flash of shiny too-white teeth that couldn’t possibly be real.

“Customers! Customers! Welcome, friends!” said the wizard, dashing out from behind the counter more quickly than was strictly necessary, his robe flapping around him. “Aniseed the Regretfully Toothless at your service!” He thrust a pink-and-white striped paper bag into Nine’s hands, and another into Eric’s, whose palms were already outstretched and waiting.

Nine froze awkwardly as the wizard darted around them, peering over their shoulders, then rushing in front of them and staring at their eyes. Eric just stood there grinning, his hands clasping his sweet bag happily.

“Hmm, let me think! Let me think! The perfect sweet for you...” The wizard examined Eric thoughtfully, then closed his bright, blue eyes and frowned in concentration, with his fingertips to his temples.

Eric jiggled on the spot, his wide eyes glancing hopefully at the jar of brown-and-white stripy sweets on a high shelf.

“Is he trying to read your mind?” Nine said to the troll, feeling her shoulders tense. “Can he *do* that?”

One of the wizard’s eyes peeped open a crack and followed Eric’s gaze. Then both of his eyes flew open.

“Of course, of course! I have just the one!” He twisted his wrist, and there was a crackle of pale blue lightning from his fingers. Nine jumped as the lid went spinning off the jar of brown-and-white stripy sweets. Another wrist-twist and a torrent of sweets flew out of the jar, arching down towards the paper bag in Eric’s grasp.

Nine eyed the wizard suspiciously but the troll gave a squeak of joy. “Best sweet! Best sweet! Eric love!”

“Of course you do, my friend! Of course! Have more, have more!” Aniseed the Regretfully Toothless grabbed another stripy bag from the counter.

Eric nodded excitedly, but Nine moved slightly in front of him.

“We have other shops to visit, thank you very much,” she said sharply.

“Of course, of course!” said the wizard, still flashing his too-white-to-be-real teeth, although Nine’s sharp, pickpocket sight noticed how his left eye narrowed and twitched very slightly. “And what shall you have, I wonder? Let me think, let me think!” The wizard and his beard swept directly in front of Nine, his blue eyes staring deeply into Nine’s brown ones.

“No-no. You’re not reading *my* mind,” she said firmly, staring back at the wizard.

The wizard screwed his eyes shut, frowned in concentration and put his fingertips to his temples.

“Let me think... The perfect sweet! The perfect sweet!”

Just in case Aniseed the Regretfully Toothless really was reading her mind, Nine glanced at every jar she could see. They all looked wonderful and exciting. She wanted them all and this made her feel smug. She looked back at the wizard just in time to see a peeking eye slam shut, then both eyes fly open.

“Everything! Everything for you!”

Nine rolled her eyes.

There were twists of the wrist, crackles of blue

lightning, then rainbow streams of sweets arched down from all the jars, fighting and shoving their way into the pink-and-white bag in Nine's hand.

"Lady lucky!" said Eric next to her, still grinning.

The last few sweets tussled their way into Nine's bag. Nine jumped as another crackle made the top of her paper bag twist at the corners and roll itself down, safely sealed. The rainbow streams of sweets sped back to their jars and all the lids quickly twisted back on. There was silence and stillness in the shop. Except for the wizard, who rubbed his hands together.

"Come, come, my friends," he said joyfully. "That will be two yonders each!"

Nine glared at Aniseed the Regretfully Toothless suspiciously. She opened her satchel, put in the bag of sweets and fumbled around for the little purse Flabberghast had given her. As she did, her fingertips brushed her precious music box and ... something else. Something soft. She frowned for a second, then remembered. It was a little velvet pouch she had pickpocketed from another witch when they had been to the Hopscotch Championship. Her fingers closed around it briefly. The miniature sapphire skull that had once been inside it had been lost at the championship, but the little pouch still held a tiny

bottle with blue smoke swirling inside and a couple of coins.

“Thank you, thank you!” the wizard chortled as Eric handed over his coins, breaking Nine’s thoughts. Nine pulled out the purse, took out two dark brown yonders and dropped them into the wizard’s hand.

“Thank you, thank you! Enjoy your sweets!”

“Eric will! Love sweets!” The troll grinned as he trundled towards the door.

“Wait! We need to ask about Dish!” Nine whispered to him, then turned to look at the wizard warily. “Before we go, I have a question. We’re looking for a dish—”

The wizard’s jovial expression dropped suddenly. His face darkened as he stared at Nine. “I have not seen her, I have not heard of her,” he said in a low voice. “And if I had, I would not speak of it. Ophidia the Unpredictable is not a foe I would choose.”

Nine felt prickles of unease run up and down her back. “I didn’t mention Ophidia the Unpredictable. You *do* know of Professor Dish! Where is she?”

There was a flash of panic in Aniseed’s eyes. “Come again soon, friends!” said the wizard in an overly loud and merry voice. He put one hand on the counter and leapt over it, his beard swishing wildly.

He pushed urgently at Nine's back, steering her to the round door, which Eric now held open. He bundled them both out, flashing them one last, glittering smile. "You are most welcome any time! Any time!"

And he slammed the door in their faces and flipped the door sign to CLOSED, as a slatted wooden blind unrolled swiftly down the window.

Eric's happy face fell, and he looked at Nine with worried, yellow eyes. "Trouble?" he said in a wobbly voice. He pulled out a sweet and pushed it into Nine's hand.

"Trouble," Nine said to him. "I don't think finding Dish is going to be as easy as we thought. But we must find her before Ophidia the Unpredictable does. Let's try the candlemaker's. Come on."