



## Chapter One The Poacher's Pocket

THE PRISON BELL STARTED CLANGING JUST after teatime.

It was a low, monotonous *dong . . . dong . . .* like the bell was taking a breath in between short bursts of gossip.

Inside the Poacher's Pocket inn, the gossip began blazing as brightly as the fires.

Betty Widdershins stopped sweeping and glanced up in alarm as murmurs rippled through the pub. Her older sister, Felicity – whom everyone knew as Fliss – looked up from the spilled beer she'd been wiping up on the bar and caught Betty's eye. The bell was a warning: keep off the streets. Stay inside. *Lock your doors.* Fliss set down her cloth and began serving the regulars who were flocking to top up their drinks. Wagging tongues made customers thirsty.

'Someone's escaped, haven't they?' asked a scowling Charlie, the youngest Widdershins girl. She was sitting at



the bar, poking unenthusiastically at a lacy ruffle on the dress she was wearing.

'Yes,' Betty replied. She cast her mind back, thinking of other times when the bell had rung. Living so near to the prison just across the marshes was one of the worst things about Crowstone. And, while escapes were rare, they still happened, and sent the place into turmoil every time.

'It's a right racket!' Charlie complained, sticking her fingers in her ears.

'That it is!' The girls' granny, Bunny Widdershins, banged down a pint of Speckled Pig bad-temperedly, slopping beer over a grizzle-haired customer's hands. 'This is the last thing we need today of all days!' She gave the customer a withering look. 'And I thought I told you to smarten up, Fingerty? It's bad enough that we're surrounded by riff-raff on the outside, let alone having our customers looking like scruff-bags, too!'

'I did!' Fingerty protested with an injured look, but even so he pulled a comb from his top pocket and began tugging it through his straggly hair as Bunny stomped off, probably for a crafty puff of her pipe.

Fliss slid a nip of port next to Fingerty's glass with a small smile. 'On the house,' she said. 'Don't tell Granny.' Fingerty smacked his lips, his grumpy expression softening.

Betty leaned the broomstick against the nearest fireplace and looked around, trying to imagine the pub through a stranger's eyes. It was difficult, for the Widdershins not only worked at the Poacher's Pocket, they lived there, too. Betty

was so used to its shabbiness that half the time she barely noticed the threadbare carpets and peeling wallpaper. But today the tired interior stuck out like a robin among crows.

She brushed a hand across her damp forehead. It was rather too warm for all the fires to be lit, but Granny had insisted on it to make the place feel cosier. Betty and her sisters had been hard at work all day, topping up firewood, sweeping the floors and polishing the brassware until it gleamed. Fliss had even baked in order to fill the place with a homely smell. So far so good . . . except for Granny's mood souring the atmosphere.

Betty approached Charlie, who was now hovering by the steamed-up window for the third time in ten minutes.

'Granny shouldn't talk to customers like that,' Charlie said. 'Or we'll have none left!'

Betty snorted. 'You reckon? The Snooty Fox is nearly two miles away, and their beer's double the price!' She leaned closer to the glass, wiping a clear patch to peer through.

'They should've been here by now.'

'Wish they'd hurry up so I can take off this rotten dress!' Charlie muttered, fidgeting furiously. 'Posh clothes are so ITCHY!'

'At least it makes a change from nits,' said Betty.

Charlie grinned, her freckled nose crinkling. For once, she looked presentable, with her brown hair neatly brushed and in two glossy pigtails tied with ribbons. Betty knew it wouldn't last.