

THE
HOWLING
HAG
MYSTERY
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For Pam and Ed

Also by Nicki Thornton

The Last Chance Hotel
The Bad Luck Lighthouse
The Cut-Throat Cafe



PART ONE



1. DENY EVERYTHING

Raven Charming knew there was only one Golden Rule in life.

If anything strange happened – unexpected good luck, objects moving by themselves, the blossoming of inexplicable smells – Mum said just to remember the Golden Rule: Deny Everything.

Which wasn't always easy to follow, particularly when you had a sister like Rookery. Luckily for Raven, most people believed that everything about witches belonged in fairy tales.



Mum was the wisest person Raven knew. She had a busy and important job finding obscure cures for unfortunate people. Raven never liked to bother Mum, not with the sort of unimportant questions she puzzled over. How had Henry VIII's sixth wife died? Where was the second of her lucky polka-dot socks? Was there a spell to get rid of freckles? Or how to stop new boys firing jets of cold water at you as you cycled past . . .

This was the one bothering Raven right now as she prepared to cycle up to Grandpa Knox's after school: how to deal with the new threat in town? The annoying boy who would be waiting on the shadowy side of the Howling Hag Inn with his beaming grin and deadly accuracy with a water gun.

Raven pedalled furiously as she left Twinhills School. With its red-painted metal and glass structure and pointy roof, the school sat brashly in the middle of the sleepy high street. It sprawled with confidence, taking up more than its fair share of room among the snug cottages either side that looked as if they had huddled up closer to make space.

She flew past her head teacher's overly orderly house, which always gave her the shivers, and by the time she got to the Howling Hag she was really moving. The pretty inn at the centre of Twinhills

was made of bricks the colour of butter, with a low roof and tiny windows. Pretty, except for the unfortunately ugly pub sign of a hideous wart-faced old woman with a black cat and a broomstick. At least it offered chips, even on a Sunday.

As she reached the Howling Hag she braced herself for the jet of icy water she knew was coming. Then, right at the last second, Raven changed her mind and put on the brakes hard.

Last night she'd broken one of her own golden rules and interrupted Mum at her big, cluttered desk, glasses perched on the end of her nose, poring over a load of old books and scrolls as she tried to work out how to turn chocolate cutlery back into silver. Finch Charming had removed her glasses and chewed on one of the ends, considering Raven's question.

'The new boy is squirting water at you? The one whose lovely mum and dad have taken over the village inn? They brought a whole pizza to the youth club on Friday.' Mum had put her glasses on top of her head, knocking her topknot at a precarious angle. 'He's new in Twinhills. He's probably doing it to get your attention. Maybe just try to be friendly?'

'Friendly? With the person who is squirting water at me?' Raven had repeated, just to be clear that she

had not misunderstood, and hoping Mum might tell her she needed a biscuit to cheer herself up. Finch Charming was the sort of mother who was as likely to find a stray twig tied up in her hair as a fresh packet of extra strong peppermints in her pocket. But she could be a little strict about biscuits.

‘I think being friendly would be the nice thing to do,’ Mum had nodded, and gone back to studying a scratchy parchment.

As well as being the wisest person Raven knew, one of Mum’s amazing qualities was how nice she was to everyone. Her job as a curse breaker meant she spent her days helping misguided sorcerers out of tricky situations. Some could get pretty cross when their magic backfired horribly and she was well practised at looking past the bad in people.

But Mum had not been there on Mortimer Scratch’s first day at school, when he had stood by Miss Sunny to say hello. Henry Figgins had chortled and said he thought *Snortimer* was a funny name. An answering snigger had gone around the class.

At first break, Henry had appeared with a bloody nose. When he was being patched up by Mrs Maudlin, the school receptionist and the one who had the enviable responsibility of dishing out all the bandages and plasters from the first aid box, Henry

had been strangely quiet about what had happened, mumbling something about having tripped.

So Raven had to find her bravery to screech to a glaring stop right in front of the annoying new boy. Annoying in many ways, not least because he was an extraordinarily good shot. The whispering in Twinhills said the Scratches moved around a lot, mostly to keep their son out of trouble.

‘Oh, hello. My name’s Mortimer.’

‘I know who you are, you’re in my class at school,’ retorted Raven, concentrating on Mum’s advice that if you sound brave, no one knows how you feel inside. How it really felt was as if a little black hole had opened inside her and it was sucking in all her courage. ‘What I want to know is why you are squirting water at me.’

He was lean and wiry; taller than Raven, which was true of most people in her class. His hair was dark, possibly even glossier than Rookery’s. Raven felt her own name gave an expectation that she should have hair that was dark and straight, like beautiful wings. But that hair had been given to her sister. When she said her name, people tended to repeat it in a certain way – *Raven?* – as if she had somehow got her own name wrong. Because her own hair was annoyingly both fluffy and curly. If

anyone had called her after her actual hair she'd have ended up with a name like Alpaca.

The annoying boy had frozen with the water gun in his hand, drops drizzling guiltily from its nozzle. He shifted his arms behind his back, as if that would make the huge, orange water gun invisible. 'What *I* want to know is –' he leant forward and dropped his voice to a whisper – 'how do I meet the witch?'

Raven felt the world spin. This was truly the first time she had ever had to Deny Everything and it gave her a prickling sweatiness that had nothing at all to do with the cycling. A thought had flashed through her mind: he couldn't possibly mean her sister. Could he?