

THE  
FLOATING  
WITCH  
MYSTERY  
NICKI THORNTON



2 PALMER STREET, FROME, SOMERSET BA11 1DS

Text © Nicki Thornton 2023  
Illustrations © Héloïse Mab 2023

First published in Great Britain in 2023  
Chicken House  
2 Palmer Street  
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
United Kingdom  
[www.chickenhousebooks.com](http://www.chickenhousebooks.com)

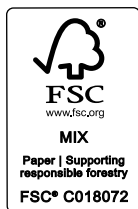
Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,  
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells  
Cover and inside illustrations by Héloïse Mab  
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd  
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 1 0 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-915026-54-5  
eISBN 978-1-915947-07-9

*For Ian, Geoff, Nicky and Steve –  
all my lovely extended family who are some of my  
best supporters. Thanks guys! Much appreciated  
and could not do it without you.*

Also by Nicki Thornton

*The Last Chance Hotel*  
*The Bad Luck Lighthouse*  
*The Cut-Throat Café*  
*The Howling Hag Mystery*  
*The Poisoned Pie Mystery*

# PART ONE



## 1. THE FLOATING WITCH

Veena Vale was determined to do her own little bit of magic. She wanted to make a witch appear.

Sitting on the very edge of the pointy end of Sleeford Island, listening to the roar of the weir, Veena cowered into her waterproof coat and thought she might long to magic the rain away. But she had far more important things to wish for. And it was easier to ignore the rain, even though it was running down her nose, than to ignore the feeling that everything here was different and wrong.



Veena focused. She pictured the *Floating Witch*, a long, lush green boat painted with flowers along the sides, arriving. Right on the slow curve of the River Slee, right on that bit where the willows wept so low their tresses nearly met across the water, just before the river divided in two and met itself again on the other side of Sleeford Island. She could do it. She could make this little bit of magic happen. Veena screwed her eyes up tight.

She focused on knowing Hetty Dimple and her boatload of magic arriving would make all the difference. With magic, things would start to go right.

‘I will make Hetty Dimple appear – now!’ she said aloud, as if casting a spell. She opened her eyes.

The River Slee stayed resolutely empty: no rain-forest-green barge, no Hetty Dimple. No travelling cat. No Nightshade. No hope of magic. Just a flock of large orange-beaked grey geese bobbing, unbothered by the rain.

When you lived in a tiny river community, you learnt to ignore the rain. Winter was mostly a case of huddling together and hoping the river didn’t get too high. Summer brought more than just the return of Hetty in the *Floating Witch*; it brought plenty of slow-moving boats through Sleeford Lock. That meant customers.

Veena shifted her gaze away from the river towards the much-loved and famous Sleeford Island cafe, Iced and Sliced – the big draw to Sleeford Lock.

If things were normal, Veena would be looking at a trickle of visitors here for ice cream and cake. If it were sunny there would be a steady stream. By high summer, a flood. But today it was just two grey geese pecking at the grass.

Lorna, their bouncy, brilliant cafe owner, unstop-pably bubbly and genius with cakes, had been away most of the winter. When she'd returned, instead of the wonderful aroma of baking and boundless cake ideas to bring customers flocking, Lorna delivered a bombshell. She wasn't going to open her cafe. She didn't even want people on the island. And Lorna had simply shut her door.

This left all the other islanders helplessly staring at each other, not quite able to believe it, not quite sure what had happened and not knowing what to do. Visitors to the cafe were vital for the survival of the bookshop, Poppy Vale's, that Veena ran with her mum, and the florist next door, Bloom n Grow.

Then this morning Veena's mum had dropped another bombshell right into their small, dry, money-saving breakfast.



‘You may as well know,’ Mum had struggled to say the words, ‘without the cafe I don’t think we can keep going. Hope for a miracle, Veena, or we will have to move away from Sleaford Lock.’

Across at the cafe, where there should be a bright welcome and an offer of Lorna’s famous HIGH TEAS ON THE HIGH SEAS, there was still just a dismal sign reading CLOSED.

But Veena refused to even think about not living here, where she knew the places to watch out for visiting wildlife. She refused to consider what it would be like not waking to the rushing sound of the river and the morning call of birds welcoming a new day. Not helping people find just the right book. It was impossible to imagine living anywhere not surrounded by water and books.

So here was Veena, concentrating her thoughts on conjuring Hetty’s return and seeing the prow of the *Floating Witch*. Because Hetty Dimple would know what to do. Witches always had ideas. Instead, she felt a punch on her upper arm. Veena turned to look up at a tall girl with smooth blonde hair and a cross face. Octavia threw herself down alongside Veena on the bank. Not smart, as Octavia was wearing white jeans and the grass was very lush and green and very wet.

‘Knew I’d find you here! Getting out of your share of jobs!’

Octavia’s tone was always a little bossy, even though Veena felt that being two years older and quite a bit taller hardly meant Octavia should automatically be in charge. The years did seem to be stretching between them of late.

‘I’m watching for Hetty,’ Veena said. ‘And Nightshade.’

‘I know you’re watching for Hetty! But I can’t believe you left me to do everything!’ Octavia moaned, hurling a stone, receiving an anxious look from a reproachful duck preening its feathers.

Veena *should* be helping. They’d agreed a plan: get everything looking wonderful in the hope that Lorna would remember she loved the return of summer, the buzz of visitors and the bustle of her cafe. If things on the island stood any chance of springing back into life, they needed to work together.

‘You’ve done everything?’ Veena said. ‘Got out all the cafe tables and chairs, scraped off all the winter grime . . . all without getting your clothes even a little bit dirty?!’

‘Haven’t even started!’ admitted Octavia with a grin. She followed Veena’s gaze up the still-empty river.

‘Think Hetty can do a little magic?’ Octavia asked in a voice clouded with doubt. ‘We really need it, don’t we?’

‘Of course Hetty can help.’ Veena was pleased Octavia hadn’t said Hetty wasn’t really a witch because magic wasn’t real. Not yet.

‘Hetty’s magical affinity is being able to look inside people and know what they might need,’ said Veena. ‘She’ll work out why Lorna doesn’t want to talk to us or even bring people to the island any more.’

Thinking about the *Floating Witch* was the only thing that made the pressure on Veena’s chest lessen.

She would do anything to save her island home. She was not giving up anything without a fight. Mum might want to pin her hopes on the random luck of miracles, but Veena was putting all her hope firmly into Hetty Dimple and Nightshade – her travelling cat with a big secret – and magic.