



THE
SPRITE
SISTERS

THE MAGIC UNFOLDS



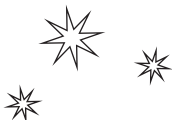
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CHAPTER TWO



GLENDA'S

PLAN



SUPPER AT Sprite Towers was a lively affair on Monday evening. Everyone was delighted about Drysdale's win and there was much to talk about. The Sprite Sisters were in high spirits at the thought of their trip to London and playing at the Royal Albert Hall. Mum beamed, proud of her girls, of their talent and the effort they put into their music.

'Will we stay with the Fords?' asked Ash. 'And will they come to the concert?'

'Yes, on both counts,' replied Dad.

'Cool,' said Ash.

'I like the Fords,' said Flame.

‘Yes, they’re a lovely family and good friends,’ agreed Mum. ‘Your father and I have known Tom and Hannah since we were all at university together.’

‘I’m going to wear my new shift dress,’ said Marina, dreamily. Of all the Sprite Sisters she was the one who most enjoyed clothes and fashion.

‘I wonder how it will feel standing on the stage of the Royal Albert Hall,’ said Ariel. ‘It’s a *huge* building!’

And so they went on.

Dad’s announcement that he was going to look at the state of the roof after supper dampened their spirits, however.

‘Is this because Oswald wants to buy Sprite Towers?’ asked Ash.

‘Partly – but it needs attention, anyway,’ replied Dad, aware that his family was watching him anxiously. ‘I don’t think we can leave it any longer.’

When they had cleared the table, Dad walked out over the wide, rolling lawn, a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck, pencil and notebook in hand. Mum and Grandma followed a few minutes later. The Sprite Sisters raced around on their bicycles, as Mum, Dad and Grandma stared up at the huge expanse of the roof.

The warm evening light shone on Sprite Towers, as they walked around the house. Dad looked through the binoculars and made detailed notes. Mum and Grandma pointed out tiles that had slipped and chimneys that needed attention.

‘Okay,’ Dad said, finally. ‘Let’s go up to the attics now, and see what’s happening inside.’

The Sprite Sisters put down their bicycles and followed their parents and grandmother to the top of the house.

At the top of the mahogany staircase, Dad turned left. ‘Let’s start at the east side.’

He marched along the corridor and opened the door of the end room. ‘It’s a while since I’ve looked at this part of the house. ‘Oh Lord – look at that.’

He walked towards the wall and raised his fingers to touch a line of water trickling down the plaster.

‘Yuk,’ said Ariel, touching some slimy orange fungus that was growing in the corner.

‘I had no idea things were so bad up here,’ said Dad. ‘I knew it wasn’t going to look great, but I didn’t expect it to be in this state. Things seem to have deteriorated.’

The Sprite family made their way around the attics. They went through the Train Room, with its huge table covered in trains and tracks, and into the Dressing Up Room, with its colourful assortment of clothes, hats and shoes.

As they progressed, Dad looked increasingly worried.

‘It’s worse than I had realised,’ he said, staring glumly at a large, yellow patch on the ceiling. ‘There’s quite a bit of water coming through.’

‘There were some tiles that had slipped above here – remember, we saw it from outside?’ said Mum, pointing to the corner.

The Sprite family stared at another wet piece of wall.

Dad sighed heavily. ‘Right, I’ve seen enough now. I’ll get the builder round to get up on the roof and have a proper look. It’s going to be a big job.’

‘Let’s go down, love,’ said Mum, touching his arm. ‘I could do with a cup of coffee.’

‘Can we stay a bit longer?’ asked Ariel.

‘OK, girls, you can stay up here for another ten minutes – bedtime in twenty minutes.’

As Mum, Dad and Grandma made their way to the kitchen, Flame looked at the line of water trickling down the wall.

‘I wonder how we could use our magic powers to mend the house,’ she said, thoughtfully.

‘I could remove the water from the walls,’ suggested Marina. ‘Why don’t we start with that?’

She stood in front of the wall and held up her hands, palms outstretched, over the trickle of water. As she closed her eyes, opened them and focused on her magic power, a bolt of bright blue light whooshed out of her hands. Bit by bit, she worked her way up and down the wall – and the plaster began to change colour, from yucky damp yellow to white.

‘Well done,’ said Flame, touching the newly-dry wall. ‘But how do we stop the water coming through this bit of the roof, when we can’t get up there or see the tiles from below?’

The Sprite Sisters stared at the ceiling. All they could see from inside the room were the wooden rafters and the

cream-painted plaster that was packed in between.

‘I think I could sense where the tiles are,’ said Ariel.

‘Do you think you can use your Air power to lift them?’ asked Flame.

‘They’re heavy things,’ added Marina, doubtfully.

‘I’ll have a go,’ said Ariel.

‘If you get the tiles back to the correct position, Ariel, I’ll bind them,’ said Ash.

Ariel lifted her hands and shut her eyes. Silently, frowning with concentration, she moved her hands in the air and used her magic power to sense the location of the tiles above her.

After a few seconds, she said, ‘There’s a hole here – three tiles have slipped.’

Flame, Marina and Ash watched the blue light of Ariel’s magic power radiating from her fingers, as she lifted the tiles into position.

Ariel was so absorbed in the feeling of her magic, and her sisters so absorbed in watching her, that nobody heard Dad walk back up the attic stairs and along the corridor towards them. Ariel’s face was tilted up towards the ceiling, her eyes were closed, her arms stretched up high above her head and her palms open flat. Her legs were braced one in front of the other and bent slightly, as if she was holding up a big weight above her head, and her bottom was sticking out, ever so slightly, when Dad entered the room.

‘Ariel, what are you doing?’ he said from the doorway.

The Sprite Sisters spun round in surprise.

‘Oh!’ said Ariel, dropping her arms instantly. Above her, there was a sudden crash on the roof, as something heavy dropped on to it.

The Sprite Sisters held their breath

‘Good heavens, what’s that?’ exclaimed Dad, looking up.

‘Pigeons,’ said Ash.

‘Pigeons? Don’t be silly! No, it sounded like something heavy falling on the roof.’ Dad stared up at the ceiling.

The Sprite Sisters waited, silent. After what felt like a very long time, Dad said, ‘Oh well, we can’t see it from down here.’

Then he looked round and said, ‘What *were* you doing, Ariel?’

‘She was giving us her impression of a praying mantis,’ said Marina, quickly.

‘Ri-ght,’ said Dad, slowly. ‘Jolly good. Very convincing – particularly the sticking-out bottom.’

Ariel giggled and her sisters smiled. It was not the first time that Dad had taken his daughters by surprise when they were using their magic powers. Had he seen the blue light radiating from Ariel’s hands, they wondered. It seemed not, for Dad was looking around the room.

‘What did I come up here for? Ah, yes – notebook and pencil. There they are.’ He picked them up. ‘Well, don’t let me stop you, girls. It’s very useful to know you can mimic a praying mantis at any given moment. You might be able to use it to speed up the queue in a supermarket or stop traffic.’

Dad left the room, chuckling. The Sprite Sisters burst out laughing.

‘Oh fiddle!’ said Ariel. ‘I nearly had the last tile back in its place!’

‘Quick, finish it now – I’ll stand guard,’ said Flame, moving to the doorway.

Ariel resumed her praying mantis stance, shut her eyes and focused her mind. The heavy clay tile hovered in the air, then dropped gently into its correct position with a gentle clunk. The hole was sealed.

Immediately, Ash stepped forward, lifted her hands and used her power to bind the repair and seal that part of the roof. As she completed this task, they heard Mum call up the stairs, ‘Come down now, girls – bedtime!’

‘That’s good,’ said Flame. ‘If we keep coming up here and using our magic powers to mend the roof, we might be able to solve Dad’s problem.’

And they raced down the stairs to bed.

A mile away at The Oaks, supper had been a cool, quiet affair. Glenda asked few questions and Verena had become tired of starting conversations in which her grandmother seemed to have no interest.

After supper, Glenda made coffee and carried the tray through to the sitting room. She sat down on the cream silk sofa and said, ‘Verena, come and sit down beside me, dear.’

Something in the tone of her voice made Verena start – or

was it, she wondered, the fact that her grandmother had called her ‘dear’? She rarely calls me that, she thought, and then only when she wants something.

Verena sat down and looked at her grandmother. Glenda smiled, but her pale blue eyes looked like ice.

She’s a cold woman, thought Verena, but she’s still beautiful. You can see she was once a ballet dancer: she sits so straight and bends and stretches in ways other grandmothers do not – except Marilyn Sprite. She was a ballet dancer, too, and she’s very graceful.

On the coffee table in front of them was a large inlaid wooden box, ornately decorated with mother-of-pearl. Verena had never seen it before.

‘Impressive, isn’t it?’ said Glenda, as she opened the lid and lifted out a tray.

Verena’s eyes opened wide at the beautiful jewels laid out on the velvet tray.

‘Yes,’ she replied, staring at huge diamond rings; a pair of emerald earrings; a sapphire necklace; a gold torque with a ruby inlaid – and many, many more pieces.

‘One day these will be yours,’ said Glenda, quite casually.

Verena stared at her grandmother in disbelief. She was too surprised to say anything.

‘Why don’t you try on something?’ said Glenda, picking up a strand of pearls. ‘Turn around, dear, and I’ll fasten this for you.’

Verena turned around, mesmerised, and lifted her hair.

Glenda placed the necklace around her neck and fastened the gold clasp.

‘Go and look in the mirror,’ said Glenda.

Verena stood up, walked through the hallway of The Oaks and stared in the huge gilt-framed mirror. Then she pulled back her long blond hair – and smiled at her reflection.

‘To my mind, a strand of natural pearls is the most elegant jewellery of all,’ said Glenda, behind her. ‘See how it frames your face?’

Verena nodded, fingering the pearls. She liked the way they were different shapes and felt warm and smooth. ‘They’re beautiful, Grandmother,’ she said.

‘You will be a beauty, my dear – you already are,’ said Glenda. ‘And that necklace is very valuable.’ Then she turned and moved back to the sofa. ‘Come, Verena, let’s sit down. There’s something I want to tell you.’

Verena took a fleeting look at her reflection in the mirror and turned to follow. She felt elated, dreamy. She remembered how she used to put on her mother’s jewellery as she was getting ready to go to a party. Her mother had always asked her to help her choose what to wear. They had laughed and played and Verena had felt happy. But now her mother was gone. She had left The Oaks and Verena, and moved to Buenos Aires to live with another man.

Verena had thought her parents were happy together and it was a blow when they parted. It all seemed to happen very suddenly. Her mother had wanted to take

her to Buenos Aires, but her father had refused. They had had a big argument about it. Finally, it was agreed that Verena would stay at The Oaks and continue to attend Drysdale's, and her grandmother would look after her whilst her father was in London. Verena would fly out to Argentina in the school holidays.

She had looked up Buenos Aires on the world map. It was a long way away.

I miss Mummy so much, she thought. In two weeks' time, I shall see her again. Daddy is here so little. I wish he didn't have to work so hard in London and that he could spend more time at home.

'Did you hear a word I said?' Glenda's voice was sharp. Verena blinked, as if brought back to the real world. She knew better than to lie to her grandmother. She was like a hawk: she missed nothing.

'I was congratulating you for winning the music competition,' said Glenda.

Verena smiled. 'Thank you. I hope you'll come to hear me sing in London on Saturday.'

Glenda snapped shut the lid of the jewellery box, then turned to Verena. 'How important is it to you to win this competition?' she asked.

Verena was surprised. 'I'd love it for Drysdale's to win!'

'Absolutely,' agreed Glenda.

'Why?'

For a second there was silence. Then Verena said, in a

voice flat with disappointment, ‘You’re not coming to hear me sing. I knew you wouldn’t.’

Glenda looked at her granddaughter. ‘I haven’t been feeling well since the school concert the other Saturday night.’

‘I thought you were feeling better – you’ve been out and about this week,’ said Verena. She looked down at her hands and remembered how her grandmother had been carried out of the concert hall by her uncle and Batty Blenkinsop nine days ago. She thought of the wiggly line her grandmother’s shoes had made, as they scraped along the floor. The doctor had visited and told her to rest.

Verena had no idea of the truth of the matter: that Glenda’s pain was the result of misusing her power. Verena knew nothing of her grandmother’s magic, nor anybody else’s.

‘Your father will be there,’ said Glenda.

‘But I’m singing at the *Royal Albert Hall!*’ said Verena. ‘Don’t *you* want to hear me?’

Glenda picked off a piece of fluff from her cashmere cardigan.

‘The Sprites are all going,’ continued Verena.

‘That’s good – they can give you a lift to your father’s house,’ said Glenda, crisply.

Verena stared across the room, feeling hurt and sad.

Glenda leaned back on the sofa and looked keenly at her granddaughter. ‘Verena, would you like to live at Sprite Towers?’

Verena looked round at her grandmother. ‘You asked me

that last Saturday, after the rounders match. I said that the Sprites lived at Sprite Towers.’

‘And we talked about the fact that you are a Sprite, too.’

Verena nodded. She remembered Marina Sprite telling her this on Saturday. She did not believe her at the time. The idea that she, too, was a Sprite was surprising.

‘As you know, Oswald has told the Sprites he would like to buy Sprite Towers,’ said Glenda. ‘The house is badly in need of repair and Colin Sprite does not have enough money to pay for it. Your uncle thinks this is a good time to press him – and I agree.’

Verena looked at her grandmother and waited.

‘Oswald wants to turn the house into a hotel and build new houses in the grounds,’ said Glenda.

Verena said nothing.

‘I’m a director of Oswald’s property company.’ Glenda paused, as if thinking about this, then said, ‘Oswald does not know it yet, but I intend to get Sprite Towers for us. We will be the Sprites living at Sprite Towers. I have enough money to buy the place and maintain it.’

Verena sighed and twisted her hair round in her hand. ‘I’d rather live here at The Oaks with Mummy,’ she said, staring at the carpet. I would like to live with Daddy too, she thought, but not in London, as he is never at home. Sometimes I wonder why he’s always working.

Glenda stretched out her right hand and studied her long, manicured nails. ‘There’s something I want you to

do,’ she said. ‘Something that may help us get hold of Sprite Towers more quickly. I have no doubt that I will own it, but I’d like it to be sooner, rather than later.’

‘How can you be sure you’ll own it?’ asked Verena.

‘Because if I want something, I always get it,’ said Glenda.

This was not strictly true. Glenda had got almost everything that she wanted in her life. She’d had four husbands from whom she had gained vast sums of money. She had led a fabulous, luxurious life and been a well-known ballet dancer. She had a son, Stephen, Verena’s father, of whom she was fond. Most important, she had magic power. That she loved more than anything.

There were two things Glenda had coveted, but failed to obtain in her life. The first was to be the prima ballerina in her *corps de ballet*, forty-five years ago. That honour, however, was bestowed upon her distant Sprite cousin, Marilyn. The second thing was to gain the love and property of Sheldon Sprite, another distant cousin and the owner of Sprite Towers – but he fell in love with, and married, her rival.

That she had failed to obtain these two things irked Glenda. They irked her so much that she hated Marilyn Sprite – still hated her to this day.

Marilyn Sprite stood in my way, thought Glenda. Now I will stand in hers. I will take the Sprite family’s beloved home and throw them all out.

She laughed, quietly. Verena watched her, fascinated and afraid. There was something strangely hypnotic about her

grandmother. It was the sense that she would stop at nothing to get what she wanted.

‘The other day you asked me to spy on the Sprites,’ said Verena.

‘Yes – and that’s what I want you to do,’ said Glenda, smoothing her hair. ‘I want you to make friends with the Sprite Sisters – get into the house and tell me everything you find out about them.’

‘But that’s not honest!’ said Verena.

Glenda gave a short, cynical laugh. ‘Probably not,’ she agreed. ‘But since when did honesty get anyone anywhere?’

Verena stared at her grandmother, horrified by her remark.

‘I want you to tell me about the house, about the things the girls do when they are together,’ continued Glenda. ‘I want you to tell me if you see or hear anything unusual.’

‘Like what?’

‘Watch and listen, Verena,’ said Glenda. ‘There *is* something unusual about the Sprite Sisters.’

‘What sort of “unusual”?’

‘You will know what I mean when you see or hear it, believe me.’

‘I don’t know how you expect me to be friends with them,’ said Verena, her voice rising. ‘Flame hates me – and I hate her. She was furious when I turned up at the rounders match on Saturday. We’ll never be friends and she’ll never let me be friends with her sisters. It’s a silly idea!’

Glenda’s silence was complete and ominous.

Verena held her breath. She touched the pearls, as if for reassurance.

Finally, Glenda said, ‘I don’t care *how* you do it, Verena, but find a way into Sprite Towers – and make sure you can keep going back.’

‘And what if I don’t?’

‘Then I shall move away and you’ll have to leave Drysdale’s and go to live in London with your father,’ said Glenda. ‘And I shall be very angry, Verena – very angry indeed.’

Verena stared silently into space. Then she shrugged and said, ‘Okay, I’ll try.’

‘Good, that’s the spirit,’ said Glenda. ‘You can keep the necklace if you want.’

‘Oh,’ said Verena, quietly. ‘Thank you.’

A few minutes later, Verena climbed the stairs to her bedroom and got ready for bed.

I don’t want to annoy Grandmother, she thought. I’ll have to do what she asks, or she will go – and I don’t want to leave Drysdale’s . . .

She looked around the big, empty bedroom. I like Mrs Sprite and I know that she likes me, she thought. I wouldn’t want to hurt her . . .

As she brushed her teeth, she thought about Marina and Ash, and how they had taken her down the garden to see their animals after the rounders match. She had been touched by the girls’ friendliness.

Maybe I should make friends with Marina, she thought. I'll never make friends with Flame, and I don't want to. Marina's in the year below, but she's fun and it would annoy Flame like crazy if I became friends with her sister.

Verena smiled. It would be fun to annoy Flame, she thought, and I don't suppose I'll find out anything about the Sprites that will hurt them. Maybe Mr Sprite will find the money to mend the roof and Grandmother will give up her idea of living there.

Verena rolled over in her bed, still wearing the necklace.

Marina and Ash told me we were distant cousins, she thought, closing her eyes. I have other family nearby. Maybe I am not as alone as I feel.

And with that, she fell asleep.

Downstairs, in the gathering dark, Glenda stared out at the garden of The Oaks. In her mind, however, she saw Colin Sprite looking up at the roof of Sprite Towers, his face taut and worried.

That's it, she thought. The roof – that's the way to cripple the Sprites. They won't be able to afford to live there if the roof falls in.

She flexed her long hands and focused her mind. Then, using her dark magic, she created images of water dripping down the walls of Sprite Towers. She felt her power seep through the tiles on the roof, in between the timbers and into the very fabric of the huge, old house.