

For mum,
who cheers loud and hugs hard.



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PINCH PERKINS

AND
THE MIDSUMMER CURSE



CATHY FITZGERALD





The Sleeping Beauty Curse

It was a hot sunny day on Tricky Dragon Lane and someone had been cursing magical Londoners. Pinch Perkins was working the case.

‘Where were you on the morning of the third of June?’

Her suspect raised an eyebrow. ‘Am I to understand, young Pinch, that you are enquiring as to my whereabouts with a view to clearing me from your investigation?’

Pinch gave a curt nod. She was a detective now – she needed to play it cool.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Wreake, putting a silvery hand to her silvery chin and affecting a thoughtful look. ‘I’d say I was probably in the same place I’ve been for the past twelve years of our acquaintance, which is namely –’ she gestured at the Marvellous Magical Mirrors shop – ‘here. Can’t go leaving the premises, can I, dearie? I’m a ghost.’ She waggled her fingers at Pinch in a spooky fashion.

‘And can anyone . . . um . . .’ Pinch checked her list of questions, ‘confirm that?’

'I'm sure the twins could,' said Mrs Wreake, 'but what with me being dead and all, I'm unlikely to cause anyone bodily harm, am I?' She smiled and took on a pearly sheen as a beam of sunlight hit her. 'I must say, you're doing a lovely job of detecting.'

'I am?' said Pinch, trying not to look pleased. This was her first interview and she wanted to do well.

'Oh yes, dear, if I had anything to confess, I'd have coughed to it by now.' The ghost zoomed forward, her wispy white eyebrows crinkled. 'Even so, why don't you leave all this nasty business to the grown-ups? Put it out of your mind and get yourself an ice lolly, or read one of your storybooks? Dwelling's not going to help, is it?' She smiled maternally and floated away through the wall into the back room.

Pinch blinked after her. Eat an ice lolly at a time like this? She wondered what went on in grown-ups' heads sometimes. 'Right,' she called. 'Thanks for that. Bye!'

She slumped against the door. All around the shop, in the looking glasses that gleamed and sparkled on every wall, her reflections followed suit. Pinch-in-the-mirror was a messy sight: curly brown hair, a tangle as usual; peeling pink skin on a sunburnt, freckled nose; old shorts and a faded blue T-shirt stained with tomato sauce. She raised her eyebrows.

Could do better, she told her reflection. Her reflection said, *Bog off.*



With a shrug, Pinch pulled open the creaky old shop door and stepped out on to Tricky Dragon Lane. The muggy air swept over her in a wave. It had been hot for weeks, and as she leaned against the alley wall to ponder her next move, she felt the warmth of the bricks on her back.

The first victim had been discovered a month ago. An elderly wizard found unconscious on the floor of his conservatory, cheeks wet with the concerned slobberings of his pet gargoyle, Tubs. *Somnus incantatus* was the med-mages' diagnosis, or an enchanted coma; everyone else called it the Sleeping Beauty curse.

Since then, a new Sleeper had been found every few days. Six, so far, including a hard-working young witch in a beauty salon (*Hair Presto!*) slumped over her cutting chair, and a peckish sorcerer, sprawled across his kitchen floor in a pool of fridge light. All had magic and all lived in the Sancts – the safe, secret places that were neither here nor there, where London's magical folk hid in plain sight. Boarded-up tower blocks, overgrown car parks, dingy dead ends: the Sancts whispered 'Nothing to see here' and 'Ooh, I wouldn't go in there' to the city's human inhabitants – the Humdrums – who spent their days oblivious to their unusual neighbours. But behind the boundary spells and defensive enchantments, lively communities thrived.

Pinch lived in one of the oldest Sancts, the Crooked Mile, on a narrow, twisting alley called Tricky Dragon Lane. All manner of magical creatures called the Crooked Mile home: hedge-witches and fortune-tellers; magicians and conjurors; demons and djinn. For it had been a place of refuge for centuries, ever since Pinch's many-greats-grandmother, Butterwort Bailey, had laid down powerful spells to protect its inhabitants from the witch-hunts. Indeed, Pinch was so used to the safety of home – so brain-squeezingly, fist-clenchingly, teeth-grindingly *bored* with its safety – that she never thought to be afraid . . . until the curse had come to Tricky Dragon Lane.

Pinch shivered despite the heat. *Work the case*, she thought, looking down at her notes. Better to do something – anything – than nothing. But the words swam as her eyes pricked with tears.

A jangling sound further down the Lane made her dart back into the shadow of Marvellous Magical Mirrors. Ekundayo Ade had stepped out of his junk shop, The Rootle. He had dark brown skin, short black hair in twists, and was armed, as ever, with his camera. He looked along the alley and then strode off in the opposite direction.

Pinch's fingers tightened around her notebook. Ekundayo was on her list of suspects. She followed him, ducking in and

out of doorways to stay hidden. He snapped a shop window, a flower basket and once his own shadow, where it lay dark against the paving stones. Grown-ups were so *weird*, she thought again. But was this typical grown-up weird, she wondered, or was it serial-cursor weird? She made a note and kept following, until he stopped, at last, at the little crossroads where Tricky Dragon Lane met Pickleherring Alley – and where the last victim had been found.

‘Perkins.’

She startled as a boy appeared behind her – then gave an irritated growl. Henry de Sallowe was her neighbour – and nemesis. He had a long white face with a sharp chin, straight black hair cut around unabashed ears, and the kind of smarmy smile naive parents fell for every time. Particularly *her* parents, who were always encouraging him to visit for tea, or a movie on weekends. *Be nice*, her dad would mouth as he handed round the popcorn. Henry annoyed Pinch at the best of times – which *this* was not.

‘What do you want?’ she hissed. ‘I’m busy.’

‘Yes, I can see,’ he said. ‘Doing a survey of Tricky Dragon doorways? This is the third in five minutes.’

Pinch turned her head fully now. Henry was immaculate as usual, wearing a white shirt, somehow crisp despite the heat, with a tie, smart trousers and shiny shoes. He looked

less like a child than an adult who’d had a run-in with a shrink ray. ‘You’ve been *following* me?’

‘Been following you, following him,’ he said, nodding at Ekundayo. ‘So *you* can’t talk. Why are you, anyway? Following him.’

‘Mind your own beeswax,’ snapped Pinch, quirking her shoulder higher so he couldn’t see her yellow notebook.

‘*Two forty-three . . . Ekundayo leaves shop*,’ said Henry, standing on tiptoe to read it all the same. ‘You’ve done some troll-brained things in your time, but this is the best. Why are you investigating –’

He broke off and Pinch felt herself flush.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Sorry.’ There was a sympathetic hitch to the corner of his mouth. ‘This is about –’

‘Seriously,’ Pinch said. ‘I’m busy – leave me alone.’

‘Hmm,’ said Henry. They watched as Ekundayo rummaged in his pocket, unearthed a mint and inspected it for fluff. ‘He’s not the most obvious supervillain, is he?’

Pinch chewed the inside of her cheek. Ekundayo was funny, enthusiastic and kind, but he’d been spotted deep in conversation with the last victim just before she collapsed. Pinch needed to know what they’d been talking about.

‘He’s got a new camera,’ said Henry conversationally. ‘Saw him out with it yesterday. He took a photo of me.’

He nodded at Ekundayo, who was now lying flat on the cobbles, pointing his lens skyward. 'I think he's trying to get a good shot of the dragon.'

The Tricky Dragon sign gave the alley its name. Centuries old, it hung above number 11 and showed a golden dragon holding a hand of cards, winking a hooded eye. Sometimes it was his left eye, sometimes his right, but Pinch had never managed to catch him swapping between the two.

Pinch felt a sudden tug on her shoulder strap and whirled around to see Henry pull something from the side pocket of her bag. It was a glass phial filled with a pewter-grey gas that swirled in the sunlight like a miniature storm cloud.

'Give that back!'

Henry stepped away from her, holding the tube out of reach. 'What is it?'

Pinch gritted her teeth. 'It's a banshee's wail. Now give it back.' Of all the kids in the world, why did she have to live next door to this one? She was sick of him.

Henry looked puzzled. 'Why do you need a banshee's wail –' he began, and then his mouth fell open in understanding. 'To wake up your mum?'

Pinch nodded and plucked the phial back with trembling fingers. 'Loudest thing I could think of.'

'I'm – I'm not sure it works like that,' said Henry, but she pushed past him and headed towards home. A moment later, he fell in step beside her.

Pinch was dimly aware he was still talking, but her head was too full to listen. The banshee's wail had to wake up Mum. It *had* to. She'd been in an enchanted sleep for weeks now, ever since the morning she'd been found on the cobbles beneath the Tricky Dragon sign. Med-mages had run tests and diagnostics; traumancers had nodded sagely and said 'give it time'; dreamwalkers had hunted for her on the 'psychic plane'. Dad had even let a chiropo-witch poke at her toes. Mum hadn't stirred.

And all this time, Pinch had done . . . nothing.

Her stomach boiled with frustration. She'd spent most of the last few weeks staring at the posters in her bedroom. The grown-ups shut her out of their worried conversations and talked in voices too low to overhear. *Go and play, Pinch*, her dad said, his kind eyes distant. But she wanted to help. She knew the Crooked Mile better than anyone. She'd had plenty of time to explore . . . cooped up inside its boundaries. She'd shimmied up every drainpipe, peeked in every window, danced on top of every wall. There wasn't a neighbour she hadn't chattered to, a squirrel she hadn't befriended. And if she could travel? She whispered

the idea to herself – it sounded so magical. What if she could go to the other Sancts and investigate all the curse victims? She could figure out what was going on, she was sure of it. She chewed the inside of her cheek. Sure-ish.

Pinch kicked a pebble, just missing old Jenny Greenteeth, who was sunbathing with a blue cotton handkerchief over her face and her knobby feet in an inflatable paddling pool. They were in the heart of Tricky Dragon Lane now, a square courtyard with a pretty garden at its centre.

Henry was still talking. ‘So I reckon a harpy’s holler might actually be louder than a banshee, if you could bottle it before the harpy bit your head – oooof!’ He stumbled into Pinch, who’d stopped abruptly.

‘How do you do it?’ she demanded.

Henry looked thoughtful. ‘Well, I guess you might write them a nice note, or take them some flowers or –’

‘Not the harpy,’ said Pinch. She folded her arms and gave him her hardest stare, the one that could crack a grown-up at five paces. ‘How do you go outside?’

Henry blinked and took a step backwards.

‘Don’t tell me you don’t,’ said Pinch quickly. ‘Because I’ve seen you.’

His long white face fell into perfect stillness. Then, ‘You’re imagining it.’

‘I’m not. I saw you in the Crawl the other day. Dad sent me down to get a box of his old potion books. You were messing around with the gate and –’ she clicked her fingers – ‘poof! You disappeared.’

The Crawl was a narrow tunnel that ran beneath Tricky Dragon Lane. It was full of rusty bikes and chests of drawers and carpets, magic and otherwise, that the inhabitants no longer needed. Pinch had often wondered how far it stretched; if it could take her to the Humdrum human world and the other Sancts beyond. But a wooden door blocked the way and, like all the exits to the Crooked Mile, it was heavily spelled. You needed magic to get through – but young witches had none. Power usually emerged around the age of twelve, and so far, to Pinch’s frustration, she’d shown no sign. Her only comfort was the fact that Henry hadn’t either.

‘You’re losing it,’ he said now. ‘How could I get round the boundary charms?’

‘Dunno,’ she said. ‘But you do.’ She watched as he straightened his already straight tie. *That* was the Henry she knew: the boy who always had the right answer and had never – to her knowledge – climbed a tree. He wasn’t a sneaker or a rule-breaker or a wall-scaler, or any of the interesting things.

Henry flushed. A muscle twitched in his cheek, and he looked away.

'I knew it!' said Pinch. 'Show me how.'

He snorted and shook his head. 'No way. You'll spoil it – you'll tell someone.'

'I won't – I promise. Please, Henry – I've got to do *something*. I want to see where the other Sleepers were found. Figure out what's going on.'

Henry was quiet for a moment, then shook his head again. 'Forget it. You'd get eaten faster than you could say "What big teeth you have, Grandma". Wait till you're older – till you've got your magic.'

Pinch gaped. Henry was patronising *her*. That wasn't how it worked. 'We're the same age!'

He looked uncomfortable. 'But we're not, are we? Not really. Your parents treat you like you're a little child.'

Pinch clenched her fist until she felt the sharp stab of nails in her palm. Some angry, animal part of her snarled and suddenly she wanted Henry to feel as bad as she did.

'Fine. Don't help!' she shouted. 'But leave me and my family alone. You're always at my place, sucking up to Mum and Dad. Just because you're bored and you've got no one to talk to except mouldy old *Smellidew*.'

Henry rocked back on his heels as if she'd struck him. His mother – Lady de Sallowe – spent most of her time travelling. She left Henry in the bony clutches of his governess

Beady Meledew, a thin-lipped disciplinarian whose sole enjoyments in life were setting Henry chores and alphabetising her extensive collection of antique rulers. The only colourful thing *Smellidew* had ever done, to Pinch's knowledge, was appear on the *Bedazzled* TV channel, winning *Mastermancer* six times in a row with her specialist subject: disinfectant. Everyone apart from Lady de Sallowe knew that she and Henry had loathed each other from first sight.

'You . . . you . . .' Henry was flustered. 'You're such a –'

'Go on – I'm such a *what*?'

'A baby!' he roared. 'All this detective stuff – you're just playing at being a grown-up.'

Pinch swallowed. Henry was irritating, but he wasn't normally mean. She'd pushed him too far, but the roaring creature inside her wouldn't back down. 'If I'm such a baby,' she said, bringing her face close to his, 'race me. Right now. Up and down the Lane. And if I win – you show me how you get past the boundary charms.'

'You won't win. I'm faster.'

'So, you don't need to worry about losing, do you?'

Henry glared. 'OK. What's in it for me?' Then his eyes narrowed. 'If I win, I get your roller skates.'

Pinch reddened. He knew how much she loved her wheels. They were precious: midnight blue with a shimmering

shooting star on each heel and spelled to grow with her feet. That was pricey magic – it was hard to enchant objects and her parents had saved for months. Her stomach twisted at the thought of giving them up.

‘You’ve got a bedroomful at home,’ she snapped. ‘Why d’you want mine?’ Henry’s family were rich: he changed his skates more often than Pinch changed her shorts.

‘I don’t,’ he said with an angry shrug. ‘I’ll dump them in a cupboard. Maybe I can use them for spare parts.’

Pinch growled. Then she looked away, thinking hard. Henry was fast, but he played it safe on the corners. She could beat him.

‘Fine,’ she said, her heart racing. ‘Let’s start at St Lidwina’s.’

He nodded and they retraced their steps to where the little church marked the western end of the Lane.

Pinch looked down at her shoes. They had no wheels and could almost have passed for ordinary trainers – except for the shimmer of something that made you look again. It didn’t matter that *she* didn’t have magic yet; they had plenty of their own. ‘*Transform your sole,*’ she muttered. ‘*Add a little roll.*’ There was a pop and the shoes sprouted wheels.

‘Go at the first bell,’ she said.

Henry gave a nod of agreement and turned his own shoes

into skates. The two of them crouched side by side, muscles tense, waiting. *Any moment*, thought Pinch, straining forward. A scruffy grey pigeon landed, looked and fluttered noisily back into the sky. In the distance, a low hum of music carried from Spoonbenders cafe. And then, suddenly, came the peal of church bells.

Pinch threw an elbow into Henry’s stomach and took off along the passage. She was ahead. Past Ekundayo’s junk shop they tore, and Marvellous Magical Mirrors. Out of the dark alley, into the courtyard at the heart of the Lane.

‘Oi!’ yelled Jenny Greenteeth as they whipped past her paddling pool. But Henry had just edged into the lead and Pinch didn’t have a thought in her head that wasn’t *faster*. She spurred herself on, bouncing as her wheels stuttered over a bump.

They sped under the archway on the eastern side of the courtyard, twisting and turning through the alley’s narrow bends. Now Pinch was in front, but only just; she could feel Henry jostling behind her. Past the Lick & Spittle pub, where the bartender, Jasper Fludd, was watering baskets of limp pink petunias. Then a sprint to the old-fashioned lamppost that marked the end of the Lane. Pinch rounded it first, keeping the lead, but suddenly Jasper loomed ahead. They flowed to either side, ducking beneath his pasty arms. Pinch heard Henry’s wild hoot behind her and laughed herself.



Under the arch, and back into light. *BAM!* The sun angled straight into Pinch's eyes. Blinded, she felt her wheels lock and stutter. She braked, lost her balance and began to fall, head over heels, slewing across the pavement, smashing, at last, into the side of Jenny Greenteeth's deckchair. It wobbled. Jenny cried out – and landed in the paddling pool.

For a moment there was silence. Then a shriek filled the air that was so loud all Pinch could do was cover her ears.

'Look!' yelled Henry, who'd skidded to a halt by the pool. He was pointing at the glass phial containing the banshee's wail. It had flown out of her pocket and smashed. Shriller and shriller the cry grew, bouncing off the brick walls all along Tricky Dragon Lane.

Pinch rolled on to her back and stared up at the sky. In window after window around the courtyard, the neighbours peered down at her – and then a new voice rang out, louder even than the banshee.

'PINCH PERKINS!

GET

UP

HERE!'



An Investigation Shared

Pinch hobbled up the stairs of number 59, her grazed knees sharp with pain. Dad was waiting for her at the door. His wiry hair was standing on end – never a good sign. Culpeper Perkins was a man who experienced the world through his lively grey curls.

'Kitchen,' he said, jerking his head to the far side of the room. The atmosphere in the attic was as oppressive as it had been that morning when Pinch had escaped, except now it was hot and humid too. The plants – crammed on to every surface and hung from every rafter – loved it; they stretched out tendrils like little children poking out tongues to catch snow. But Pinch felt herself wilt.

She sat down at the old oak table while Dad filled a white china bowl with warm water. He crouched in front of her and for a time there was silence as he cleaned away blood and dirt from her knees.

'Henry was being annoying,' said Pinch.

Dad raised an eyebrow and gave her a long look.