

PRAISE FOR *THE LAST CHANCE HOTEL*

‘This mystery is a worthy prize-winner . . .
a jolly, atmospheric mystery.’

THE TIMES

‘[*The Last Chance Hotel* is] an inventive murder mystery for
ages nine to 12, with a twist: it will appeal to fantasy lovers, too
. . . Thornton, like [Agatha] Christie, can turn murder into a
thoroughly comforting bedtime read.’

THE TELEGRAPH

‘[A] hoot of a genre mash-up . . . Talking cats, mysterious
notebooks full of ancient wickedness; what’s not to love?’

THE OBSERVER

‘Nicki Thornton’s debut novel is wonderfully atmospheric
with a cast of eccentric characters.’

DAILY EXPRESS

‘A magical blend of murder and mystery for super-sleuthing
fans everywhere.’

SUNDAY EXPRESS

‘[A] mash-up of murder mystery and fantasy that celebrates
food and cooking, and is full of great characters, plot twists
and intriguing detail.’

METRO

‘Murder mystery meets magical fantasy in this highly
entertaining debut, rich in inventive world-building
and eccentric characters.’

THE BOOKSELLER

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

Nicki Thornton is officially the Queen of Magical Crime! Here she's back with detecto-cat Nightshade to uncover a new mystery in a weird and wonderful village. There's a beginner witch, annoying new boys and some very strange goings-on. Will they be a match for the Howling Hag? Watch out for the twists and turns – and a few extra screams along the way!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham'.

B A R R Y C U N N I N G H A M

Publisher

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THE
HOWLING
HAG
MYSTERY
NICKI THORNTON



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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?

2. THE HOWLING HAG

‘You say you want to meet a witch like saying you’d like pickle in your cheese sandwich, Mortimer Scratch.’ Raven attempted her best Deny Everything scoff. ‘How is that even possible, seeing as witches don’t exist?’

Raven told herself to stay calm, to not give away that her stomach felt like rabbits were running around in there. She had been taught from an early age how to respond to Questions. But she could not meet the boy’s curious stare, and instead she focused



on a slinky black cat that was basking on top of the inn's sunny wall. It looked half asleep, although its ears were pricked up.

'Can you call me Mort?'

'Why?'

'It's my new name.'

'I don't think I can do that.'

'I don't see why not. Mortimer makes me sound like a nerd.'

'Well, possibly, but I don't want to call you Mort because that just makes you sound dead. Because, you know, it means dead in French? If you ask me, sounding dead is worse than sounding like a nerd.'

'Of course I knew that,' the boy said quickly, though his eyes, which were the colour of autumn conkers, gave him away by opening wider in surprise. 'But not many people are going to know that, are they? You are the smartest person in the class. How about Morti? I'm going to give that a go and see if I like it.'

The cat's green eyes blinked open and then closed again as if to say: *Who is this idiot?* Despite her nerves, it made Raven unexpectedly want to giggle.

'So, how do I find this witch?'

'Why are you asking me?' said Raven stoutly. 'I wouldn't have the faintest idea how to find a witch.'

I'm going to see my Grandpa Knox.' She kept her fingers crossed behind her back.

'I didn't mean your grandfather is a witch, that would be stupid,' said Morti.

The cat moved itself into a long stretch and gave another very slow blink, as if saying, *He definitely is an idiot.*

'Is that your cat?' Raven asked.

Morti turned. The black cat had returned to being motionless, except for the tiniest, rhythmic twitch of its tail on the sun-dappled wall. It stared back at Morti, as if this was a staring competition.

'Nah. It hangs around. Guess it must be a stray. Oh no . . . or . . . d'you think it could be the witch's cat spying on us?'

Raven spluttered. 'Which witch are you *on* about?'

A small hiss came and black fur rose along the cat's back.

'The one they chant about, of course. *She's going to trick you. She's going to get you. She's going to eat you.* Never dare go into Beechy Wood. You're telling me Sam Carruthers would have missed that catch in cricket if he hadn't been cursed by bad luck and burnt his hand? Ella's new shoes vanishing and then reappearing dangling from that spelling trophy?

Thought she'd never stop crying. Don't you want to stop this witch pestering people and being gruesome?'

Raven blinked thoughtfully. So did the black cat. Because, yes, in the last few weeks the school had suffered more than its fair share of unpleasant incidents. Yes, she had heard the playground chanting. She just hadn't paid it much attention.

Morti turned to look along Twinhills' ancient high street, to where the school waited silently until the next day. 'I have never been to a school before that's haunted by some malevolent spirit. And I've moved around a *lot*.'

But there couldn't be a witch. Not one Raven didn't know about. A new witch? One that was trying to curse the school?

Morti pushed open the gate and moved a clanky old bicycle on to the pavement. 'Someone is trying to stop that old witch. Mrs Maudlin found a bottle tied to the front railing. Not just any old bottle – I heard it was full of salt and nails, stuff what witches can't stand. It's called a witch chaser.'

'Witch chaser!' scoffed Raven, getting better at her scoffs now. 'Why would witches not like salt and iron and an old bottle? That's just silly superstition.' But this would not do at all.

‘This witch is ruining all the fun. I want to stop her and you can help me. We can be like knights.’ He straightened the orange basket perched at the front of his bike. ‘I’m ready to ride out on my trusty steed.’

On the wind, a low and sarcastic voice seemed to growl: *Trusty steed? Rusty steed more like.*

Raven swung around to look at the cat, because it was almost as if it had spoken out loud.

Raven knew rather more than most people of the rules and power of magic and knew perfectly well that the likelihood of a cat actually being able to talk was very small indeed. She also knew it was incredibly unlikely there were *two* families of witches in Twinhills. The idea was very troubling.

‘I’m ready to fight and kill any witches that might be lurking, cackling and doing their fiendish deeds,’ said Morti. ‘Let’s start with your grandfather.’

‘Why do you want to start with Grandpa Knox?’ spluttered Raven.

‘Grandfathers know all the old stories, don’t they?’ explained Morti. ‘We should make like detectives and investigate.’

‘I thought we were going to be knights on our rusty steeds— I mean trusty steeds.’ She shot another suspicious glance at the cat, who was blinking intelligently as if taking in every word they were saying.

‘We’ll be witch-hunting detecto-knights.’ Morti’s face broke into a wide grin that reached his ears.

It was true that Grandpa Knox would know all the old stories about witches. But Raven couldn’t take Morti to meet him. There were just too many things he shouldn’t see at Dandelion Cottage; Grandpa Knox was terrible at taking secrecy seriously.

Grandma Antirrhinum (luckily everyone only ever called her Snapdragon) had been the cautious one. She had fixed an alert specolens to the kitchen wall, made from a pair of her fanciest sunglasses. You could peer at the lenses and they would show you any unexpected visitors approaching. Snapdragon had been the one to insist that her profession could be dangerous. Yet, sadly, she had been the one to suffer a terrible magical tragedy – one that no one liked to talk about.

Morti and his dreadful bicycle with its dented orange basket were waiting. He pointed up at the awful cackling witch sign hanging outside the inn. ‘That’s her. The Howling Hag.’

Raven had looked at that sign plenty of times. It showed what people probably thought witches should look like. As if any self-respecting witch would ever go around wearing a pointy hat and

riding on a broomstick. That would hardly be secretive, would it? It might just possibly get you noticed. All magic had to be cloaked in absolute secrecy – well, if everyone believed in sorcery, wouldn't everyone want their problems solved by magic?

'The Howling Hag?' Raven winced as she looked at the sign. 'That's who you think is cursing the school?'

She was just about to allow herself a sigh of relief, because *that* witch was not real. But then . . . was there a reason the village inn was called the Howling Hag Inn? There had been strange happenings at school. If she was real, why did Raven not know this?

And what possible reason could she have for cursing the school?



3. IGNORING A PIECE OF SALMON

Had that boy really called me a *stray*? Stray! Mortimer Scratch needed to be taught a thing or two about cats.

It is true that humans can be trained. But all that rubbing around the legs, giving them the big old eyes and the purring (they all like the purring) . . . it all takes so much effort. And to be honest, I was here in Twinhills mostly for a holiday. Not to help rude humans like Morti Scratch.

All humans have their faults. Even in very



pleasant houses that are good for a nice piece of salmon and that smell of coffee and freshly swept floors, like the Maudlin family's at the top of Twinhills High Street.

Even there, as I was tidily eating my salmon, they snuck a collar around my neck. I could scarcely believe it. The indignity. It wasn't so much the bell I minded (getting rid of that was the work of a moment). But there was this small circular metal disc with one word on it: *Snoozy*.

That is one of the worst things about humans. The terrible names they give you.

How much easier if you could just come out with it: *It's Nightshade, thank you very much*.

Stray? I would not forget that insult in a hurry.

The troublesome boy, Morti, was awkwardly holding out a packet of prawn cocktail crisps as he tried to manoeuvre his awful bike on to the street. Raven, a bright and considerate child, reached out to help him and looked thoughtful as she accepted the crisps.

'I can tell that you are annoying mostly because it's the way to be noticed and you want to make new friends,' she said. 'But that you are really very kind, you always mean well and are warm and generous.' Higher praise than he deserved.

I could see Raven Charming was dithering over the seriously bad idea of taking him to Knox's. Did she really need me to leap in and point out the dangers? Not a danger that Morti might find himself zapped and suddenly sprout white fur and whiskers (the Charmings were skilful enough for that not to happen). But there are things the eyes of a nosy boy like Morti Scratch are not supposed to see.

'I knew you were smart, that is totally how it is!' nodded Morti. 'Is that witchcraft? Bet you know I stole these crisps too. But no one'll miss them.' He shook out some more into her hand. 'These prawn cocktails are dead unpopular.'

They chatted, I listened: Raven stoutly denying anything to do with witchcraft was real, Morti pointing out some of the unsettling things that had started happening at the school. Like that chanting. And he might be right.

I'd heard it. It went around like a scared whisper after anything strange happened. *She's going to trick you. She's going to get you. She's going to eat you.* Not something you want to hear in any school. And I'd started to watch Rookery Charming, standing to one side of the crowd, watching the latest incident unfold with her creepily intense light-brown, sometimes yellow eyes.

There can be trouble when you are young and not fully trained in the magical arts. Sometimes you do magic without even meaning to. Can lead to uncomfortable questions if someone notices. It was certainly going to be pretty awkward for Rookery Charming if there really were two witches in Twinhills and one of them was up to no good.

I shrugged myself up and padded along the warm wall, dappled with nice end-of-afternoon sunlight, and reminded myself I was on holiday. All I wanted to care about was that it was almost time for a nice plump fillet of salmon to be dropped into a nice clean china bowl at the Maudlins’.

‘Even cycling up that hill is better than staying here,’ said Morti, glancing at a house which stood to attention between the school and the inn. It was called Tidy House and, true to its name, it had a garden so neat that weeds would not dare drop their seeds on it. ‘Don’t want to risk being here and having to watch Mr Odorless spray weedkiller all over again.’

That was indeed one of the most unfortunate things about the very pleasant village of Twinhills – the head teacher lived right next door to the school. And Mr Odorless himself was unfortunate. He had a pale, very flat face, although this could turn a nasty

shade of violet when he was cross. Which, as far as I could tell, was most of the time.

I was actually waiting for him to arrive as it brought me a fun moment in my day: Titus would be let into the garden. An objectionable, small, yappy, snappy excuse for a pooch. Utterly hideous. When I lay full stretch along the top of this wall, my tail can't help being the perfect length – it dangles slightly higher than Titus is able to jump. Annoys him into a snapping, wheezing frenzy. Quite irresistible joy.

So much better than a hot walk trying to prevent a couple of kids from plunging headlong into some very nasty trouble, or worse – some seriously sinister magic.

I heard the sound of the front door of the school being locked, followed by the familiar tread of Mr Odorless's scuttling footsteps as his short figure approached. I think that sound made Raven decide. Because she and Morti began the tough cycle up the very tediously long hill to Knox's, presumably with a plan to tackle bad magic and possibly upset a vengeful witch, as if that would be no trickier than sharpening your claws on a tree.

The end of my tail twitched in readiness at a delightful few moments tormenting Titus, followed

by a superb piece of plump fresh salmon. Then a comfy cushion right where the afternoon sun would have moved to. My definition of a perfect afternoon.

But I was getting that feeling. The one I get when a mouse I've been watching silently, intently, and without moving for a very long time, thinks I've gone. That feeling that nothing good was going to happen.

Was I really going to give up my holiday and help that insulting boy?

Stray!

Surely there was no choice. I leapt off the sunny wall and trotted along after them.