



CHAPTER 6



Downstairs, Aunt Connie looks like she's about to lecture me, but instead begins to cough and cough. I wait for it to subside and then, when it doesn't, go to the tap and fill a glass of water for her. The water runs smoothly at first then sputters out. Something clunks inside the sink but I ignore it and take the water to Aunt Connie.

‘Young hag! Is! This! My sister?’ Aunt Connie asks, pointing at Temmie who is now pecking at a piece of cake.

‘Did you – um – hear that big bang?’ I ask.

‘Eh?’ Aunt Prudie asks, at the same time Aunt Connie says, ‘What big bang?’

The bathroom. I have to tell them that I exploded their bathroom.

They look more like a pair than they’ve ever done before.

After everything that I did – and then had to confess to and explain – in November, I’m getting better at being frank. But Aunt Connie is still the hardest person to tell how I think and feel. We haven’t had much practice. But I owe her honesty.

‘Yes, that’s Temmie,’ I admit. ‘It wasn’t – it was a mistake. Another mistake. But I . . . I didn’t mean . . . I seem to have some stars this month.’ I try to sound as breezy as possible.

But it is not possible to be breezy about the stars inside me, especially when I have them and no one else does. And ‘some stars’ is a massive understatement. I’ve got a whole galaxy of stars inside me.

I’ve got more energy than I would usually have.

Celestial energy, I guess, but I'm vibrating.

No one else can know about this, I said to Mirabelle. And now I'm standing in front of Aunt Connie who was the one I really didn't want to confess to.

Aunt Connie looks from Temmie the robin to me and back again.

'Magic?' she whispers, and her voice is post-cough rough.

Aunt Connie looks manic as she makes a grab for my wrists. Her tight hold feels like running the hot tap straight over my hands.

'Aunt Connie! Let go! It hurts!'

Aunt Prudie's eyes dart from one of us to the other.

'Magic! And we don't know how long it will last! Come, young hag!' says Aunt Connie.

'No,' I say, as defiantly as I know how. 'No' is a good punchy word.

'You don't understand, Clemency! There has never – never! – been December magic! And it is not wild, it is not loose, it is *inside* you! And that means we can use it!'

There is nothing quite as infuriating as being told you don't understand.

'There's too much though, Auntie!' I protest. 'Way too much magic.'

'No such thing as too much magic! This could make us

like the magic equivalent of . . . billionaires!’ Aunt Connie says, wagging my wrists up and down for emphasis. ‘No Morgan has ever had magic like this before!’

Is it stars or is it anger in my eyes, my hands, my chest? Aunt Connie has always annoyed me – bossing and arranging and time-keeping us all. But the mention of the Morgans is the worst. The one-up-witchship, the rivalry between the two covens has wasted so much of all our time and energy.

‘I don’t know how much power I have! Or how to use it, or what will happen if I do!’ I try to explain as her hands tighten so close around my wrists, I can feel her nails dig in. ‘There’s too much magic. It’s making me sick, Aunt Connie.’

‘This is a gift!’ Aunt Connie insists, eyes wide in sincerity. Temmie is flitting again, flapping between me and my aunt, incapable of resolving our fight since I turned her into such a tiny bird.

‘And we don’t look this gift horse in the mouth,’ she adds and it takes me a moment to realise what she means: I shouldn’t ask questions, I should just take the magic and run with it.

‘We can push the envelope now! Experiment! Go magic wild,’ Aunt Connie preaches. ‘There’s so much

fun to be had in magic – fun and frolics. Maybe even a whole month of merriment! You just have to be merry enough for all of us! Lucky, lucky young hag.’ Her tone is almost pleading now. ‘But if you do go magic wild you should stay in the house. We like our magic inside, away from prying eyes. Hidden and no harm, Clemency, you know that.’

‘I’m afraid to even think, Aunt Con,’ I say.

I don’t want to be afraid of the inside of my own head. I should be able to say anything in there, even if I can’t out here. And I still can’t believe magic is inside me. Disbelief isn’t helpful right now. I can disbelieve until the stars fall down from the sky but . . . it’s still happening.

My mum, my mediator, isn’t here. She’s at work, like always in non-magical months. If she were here, maybe Aunt Connie wouldn’t be dragging on my wrists.

‘We demand you join the star,’ Aunt Connie says. ‘You’ll need to spend some time with each of us to learn our ways. With Temmie, in the sky. With Flissie, in the weather. With Prudie, in the soil.’

‘Me?’ a rough voice asks.

Aunt Flissie’s eyebrows are down in a deep frown and we must look a very strange sight to her: a coven elder

clinging on to a young hag, the beginning of what could be a real, physical fight. Aunt Connie finally drops my wrists. I massage one, then the other as she lifts up her own hand, finger pointing at me.

‘I get the “for the good of the coven” thing but you’re not hooking me up to anything, experimenting on me, messing with the stars inside me in any way, OK? I do not give my permission to be messed with,’ I say. ‘We should have learnt that already.’

‘What’s going on?’ Aunt Flissie asks from the doorway.

‘Clem has magic,’ Mirabelle whispers from behind her.

‘The stars know,’ my aunts all say in chorus immediately, sounding like they’re in a cult rather than a coven as they all troop into the kitchen.

Maybe it’s claustrophobia, this dizziness I’m feeling.

‘Where? When did the stars descend on you?’ Aunt Flissie asks.

But they didn’t descend on me. The magic mobbed me.

‘So . . . what’s your plan? You young hags? What are you thinking?’ Aunt Flissie isn’t asking the question maliciously. There’s no judgement in her clear brown eyes. She must be anticipating an actual plan.

‘I *have* to get rid of it,’ I tell her.

‘We forbid that!’ Aunt Connie snaps, fists to the table.

'You, young hag, are grounded for defiance of your coven elders!'

And I don't know whether to cry or laugh. Where did she hear the word 'grounded'? I always thought my aunts didn't engage with pop culture at all, but she's picked that one up from somewhere.

'Yes,' Aunt Connie repeats, folding her arms primly. 'You are not allowed to leave this house. For the good of the coven.'

Aunt Connie has barely recovered from her last coughing fit. But she stands, wheezes and tries to clear her throat again to speak across all of us.

Senara, from the doorway, frowns. 'I'll see if I can get hold of a stethoscope, I could have a listen to your chest, Constance? What do you think? Could be . . . asthma?'

'I'm fine,' Aunt Connie says, but of course she's not. She takes a deep, ragged breath before beginning a lecture.

'With this December gift, we've got the opportunity to create a new world! A witches' world!'

It takes me a moment to work out why this is an echo. The stitch witch, from the tapestry, that's what she said she wanted. A witches' world. And she named it too: *Avalon*. And I think a witches' world could be

a good thing . . . maybe. But I don't want to be a tool either. That's what I'm trying not to do.

'All you want to do is use me!' I blurt out. 'And this magic *hurts!* I need air,' I say, trying to squeeze round my aunts and the table.

'You can't go out there,' Flissie says. 'It's not safe, for anyone.'

So, Aunt Flissie is on their side too. I'm massively outnumbered, even if Mirabelle is with me. But it'll be safer for them if I get out.

'Young hag, I forbid you to go outside!' Aunt Connie says and slams the kitchen door, almost catching Senara with it.

Rage is building inside me. I'm so angry, I could scream. If I could catch my breath.

'You can't keep me here against my will. For lots of reasons! One!' I hold up a finger which sparks and all my aunts flinch. 'It's just a wrong thing to do. And you should know that. It's rude! And bad behaviour! The Morgans pretty much enslaved you in October so you really should know that no witch can be forced to share or transfer power. Two!' I hold up my second finger and all the electrics in the house fizz. The bulb next to me explodes with a satisfying pop – glass shattering.

The shards fall harmlessly on to the carpet, but it doesn't feel harmless. 'I am, at the moment, and for whatever reason, The One True Witch,' I say. 'I am the only one with any power to wield so you do not want to make me angry!'

But, of course, it's too late for that as my third finger flicks up and the house is submerged in darkness.

I see my own family duck backwards, away from me. It is a fear I have never known before: that I am the scary thing. They are all afraid of me. I can't even say the third reason.

The fluttering panic in my heart has turned jagged, the wings breaking themselves against the inside of my chest.

Aunt Connie opens her mouth, perhaps to shout something at me, but all that comes out is a cough. She collapses back into her chair.

I slide out of the kitchen and in the hall start pulling on my boots.

Senara takes my place at the table and bends over Aunt Connie.

'I can't hear anything,' Senara says, aggressively tapping the end of her stethoscope. 'It's not working.' She squats down to put her ear to Aunt Connie's chest.

'I think you have a temperature, too,' Senara says, fiddling about with her thermometer. 'But none of this kit is working any more. I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on with it.'

'It's me,' I shout my third point from the hallway. 'I have to get out of here. Hidden and no harm – nothing human-made will work when I'm near.'

'Perhaps it would be best to get a human doctor to come. Some human medicine. Magic isn't always the answer,' Senara says, voice even and rational.

'No!' Aunt Prudie shouts. 'No hospital. None of that human stuff.'

Temmie the robin flaps tight circles round and round Aunt Connie who tries to swat her away but her arm is feeble. Wings flapping, twig legs kicking in every direction, Temmie disappears, flying tighter and faster than I could have imagined possible.

Aunt Connie's hand flutters over her chest, her eyes half-shut, and she abruptly slumps sideways out of her chair.

'If you leave, we can call 999,' Mirabelle says.