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Opening extract from  
**The Witch's Tears**

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For our mum, who was beautiful both inside and out.

E.C.

In memory of Geoff, for his love and enthusiasm.

K.C.

# PROLOGUE

*J*ack was sprawled on the grass, gazing up at the blue sky. Merry was lying next to him, leaning on one elbow. She had a paperback open in front of her, but she wasn't reading. Instead, she was studying Jack's face: the line of his jaw, the shape of his eyes, the curve of his lips as he thought of something and grinned.

*'What's funny?'* she asked.

*'Nothing, really. I'm just enjoying the sunshine. Enjoying the fact that you are here, and Gwydion is not.'*

*'Gwydion?'* Merry searched her memory. *'He was a wizard, wasn't he?'* She glanced back at her book. The paperback had gone, replaced by pages of parchment, bound together with a

*leather cord. That was weird. But she didn't really want to read, anyway – she wanted to feel Jack's lips against hers. Tossing the manuscript aside, she shifted so she was lying right next to him.*

*Jack smiled, pulled her into his arms and kissed her.*

*Eventually Merry drew away and rested her head on his shoulder.*

*'I've missed that so much.'* She shivered a little; the warmth of the day was fading and there were dark clouds gathering in the north. *'You know, I think it's about to rain. Let's go.'* She sat up and reached for her bag.

*But Jack didn't move.*

*'Jack?'* She nudged him. *'Aren't you coming?'*

*He shook his head, not looking at her.*

*'You know I can't come with you.'*

*'Why not?'*

*'Because I'm dead, Merry. You killed me, remember? True love's kiss?'*

*He pulled the front of his shirt open and Merry saw a gaping wound across the centre of his chest, dark with dried blood.*

*'Oh God...'* She pressed her hand to her mouth.

*'There wasn't a happy ever after, Merry. Not for us.'*

*And now she could see that Jack's lips were pale and waxy, and his eyes were cloudy, unfocused...*

★ ★ ★

Merry gasped and sat up.

It was a dream. Just a dream. Or at least –

She brushed her fingers against her lips. It had felt real. He had felt real.

Grief swelled painfully in her chest. She pulled the duvet back up and curled in a ball on her side, hugging her knees, waiting for the hurt to fade. It was nearly two weeks since she'd last dreamt about Jack, or had a nightmare about Gwydion. More than three months since she and Leo had escaped from the Black Lake. Sometimes – on days when she was busy, or surrounded by people – it seemed like longer. But then a fragment of memory would stab at her, make her catch her breath, and the whole thing could have happened yesterday.

There was a photo of Merry and her brother on her bedside table. In the photo, Leo was smiling. She tried – failed – to recall the last time she'd seen him look that happy. Today was the first morning of the summer holidays. But the brighter the sunshine, the more they both seemed to be lost in the shadow.

She wiped a tear away from her cheek. The day began.

# ONE

**M**ERRY WAS SITTING against the trunk of the oak tree in Gran's back garden, eyes half closed against the mid-afternoon glare, the bare skin on her arms and legs prickling from the grass and the heat. Her fingernails still ached from the surge of magic she'd just unleashed, and the back of one hand stung. When the potion had exploded, it had sprayed across the kitchen, a few drops escaping Gran's hastily conjured protective screen. Gran had been testing her, watching her make yet another healing salve. Twenty-plus herbs that all had to be correctly prepared and added in precisely the right order,

supposedly. Merry had merely tried to... speed things up. It hadn't exactly gone to plan.

*But it might have worked. If Gran had just let me finish what I was trying to do.*

And if Gran hadn't suggested – for the second time in the last fortnight – that Merry needed to go back to the Black Lake. Right at the moment when she'd been trying to concentrate.

She ripped a tuft of grass out of the dry soil. Being a witch meant becoming familiar with hundreds of years' worth of spells and techniques and history. Merry understood the necessity, sort of. She had to be able to cast spells with the other witches so that she could become a full member of the coven. Witchcraft was a team sport. Or at least it was supposed to be.

But the endless, picky details were driving her crazy: a spell must be cast, and the results recorded, and each member of the coven involved in exactly this way, and this way only. Merry had done stuff by herself in the spring that none of the other witches in the coven were capable of. Not even Gran. Yet even spells that she could do almost without thinking had to be relearnt 'the proper way', which usually meant – at the very least – some sort of chant in a language that Merry didn't



speak. Because that was how everyone else did it, and that was how it had always been done. No shortcuts allowed.

*Even if you're powerful enough to use them...*

Her fingernails were tingling again. She took a few deep, slow breaths, letting the frustration ebb away.

A tuft of dandelion seeds floated past, and Merry reached up to catch it. 'Wishes' – that's what Leo and she had called them when they were kids. They used to chase them around the garden. She examined the cluster of delicate filaments, remembering the sorts of things she used to wish for – more pocket money, blonde hair: all the really important things in life – trying to decide what she would wish for now. Right this second.

Being allowed to concentrate on the types of witchcraft she was actually interested in – that would be her first wish. Healing was obviously important. Selfless, and all that. But that wasn't the kind of magic that she wanted to spend her life doing. Flying, or becoming invisible: *those* were the kinds of spells that made her heart beat faster. Or the Cinderella potion, one drop of which would transform the user into an utterly gorgeous version of herself. Gran kept promising they'd get on to the exciting stuff, but it never seemed to happen.

Her phone buzzed: a calendar alert. Probably reminding her about a coven meeting, or a practice session...

Merry grimaced. Being left alone for a bit – that would be her second wish. Because almost as soon as she'd recovered from the ordeal of fighting Gwydion – physically recovered, at any rate – her proper witch training had started. And the testing. Gran wanted to know why Merry's power was still unpredictable. That's why she kept trying to get her back to the lake: to see how Merry's magic reacted near the place where she'd first learnt to harness it. And the whole coven seemed obsessed with figuring out exactly how powerful she was, and whether the power would start to wane as she got further from the events of the spring.

Further from Jack.

She closed her eyes, shivering, remembering Jack as she'd seen him this morning: dead and cold at the edge of the water.

Merry never wanted to go back to that place.

*But... But if I could go back to that time...*

If she had a second chance, she might be able to do things differently. Find a way to keep him alive.

*That's my third wish then.*

Perhaps there was a spell for time travel. Or perhaps

she could invent one. Though Gran would be less than impressed. Time travel was almost definitely not on the approved syllabus. Maybe it would be better just to wish for Jack to come back from the dead—

A wave of emotions – not hers, but somebody else’s, someone nearby – crashed across her thoughts. Ever since her ancestor, Meredith, had left her that night beneath the lake, this kept happening. It was like... like there was some vacant space inside her head, just waiting to be filled up by other people’s feelings. It was bizarre. Annoying, sometimes. But it was also intriguing. Merry opened her eyes and sat up straighter. The woman who lived next door to Gran was playing with her toddler in the garden. Merry concentrated, allowing her mind to float, to expand into the space around her. The emotions stopped being a random buzz of background noise and smoothed out into distinct strands of boredom and guilt. Or rather, guilt about being bored.

Merry drew back, trying to close off her mind. Before she could, another swarm of emotions surrounded her, as sharply delineated as ice crystals. Gran’s emotions. Exasperation, a touch of disappointment and... nervousness? Gran hadn’t exactly made a huge effort to hide her frustration at Merry’s progress, or lack of it. But why should she be nervous?

Just as well Merry hadn't said anything about her new talent. Using magic to see inside other people's heads probably broke ALL the rules. Besides, if by some miracle mind-reading was allowed, the coven would definitely decide to test the extent of this power too. Or tell her to go away and learn how to do it using the official, ancestor-approved method.

It was too hot. She grabbed her phone and texted Ruby.

You around? Need to go out. Anywhere with air con.

She'd had enough witchcraft for one day.

By the time Merry left the cinema that evening the heat had faded, but the air was still sticky, clinging to her skin like damp washing. Ruby – because she was six months older, and because she had the type of gran who bought her grandchildren cars, rather than setting them magical homework – had dropped her home. Now Merry was sitting by the window in her bedroom, leftover popcorn bobbing in the air above her head like a flotilla of really tiny spaceships.

The film had been all right. She'd let Ruby choose, so they'd gone to see a romantic comedy, definitely not what Merry would have picked. Fictional happy endings held

zero appeal right now. But it wasn't just the film: the cinema had been full of couples being... couple-y. At least her mental barriers had held. Merry closed her eyes and tried to replay the evening in her head, imagining that she'd been there with Jack instead of Ruby. Jack, the screen-light flickering across his face, sharing her bucket of popcorn and holding her hand in the dark...

Merry swallowed and shook herself out of the daydream. Sitting here, imagining what might have been –

Jack probably wouldn't have understood the film in any case.

Sighing, she reached across to her desk, grabbed a chunky A5 notebook and flipped it open to where she'd jammed a pen between the pages. This was her first spell book – or rather the first that she was constructing herself. Gran had given her copies of what she called 'the beginner's standard works'. Four printed spell collections (technically known as 'knowledge books'). Six books of instruction, stories and traditions ('wisdom books'). But apparently it was customary (read: obligatory) for every witch to keep her own set of notes on the spells she tried, the effects she observed, and any other magical occurrences. The official name for this was a 'journey book'. Merry had seen Gran's journey books: thirty volumes or more of

closely written text, plus sketches and bits cut out from other books. There were even little watercolours. Merry flicked back over the last few pages of her journey book. In contrast to Gran's neatly presented pages, her efforts so far were a bit... slapdash. There was a lot more underlining, crossing-out and arrows to show where something had been missed. The only colour so far came from fluorescent highlighters.

She pinched a piece of popcorn out of the air and popped it in her mouth.

*So, where was I? Oh yeah –*

*She picked up the pen and added: and apparently I should have stuck to the exact order and just been more patient. But there must be a way to speed the whole thing up. I mean, who has the time to spend THREE HOURS making ONE potion? She chewed on the end of the pen for a moment. In any case, why do these long recipes have to be learnt by heart? Why don't witches just save all this stuff to the cloud? Then I could look spells up on my phone.*

Merry sighed, snagged another piece of popcorn and threw the journey book back on her desk.

Being a full member of the coven should be kind of cool. All the sisterhood, and that. But surely there were alternatives to everything that came with it? Better

alternatives, perhaps. Maybe she could be a sort of... freelance witch? A witch with choices. Possibilities.

*Instead of being trapped between a past I can't forget, and a future I'm not sure I want...*

Jack would have understood. He would have had something useful to say, if only she could talk to him. He would have taken her mind off the future, at least. Her throat tightened with sadness, and the remaining popcorn dropped out of the air.

Merry swore, sang the beginning of a cleaning spell and sent the scattered popcorn zooming into the bin. Her biggest regret was that she'd never taken a photo of Jack. Right now she could still remember his face clearly, but would that still be true after a year had gone by? A decade? Merry knew she couldn't have prevented Jack's death, and she'd come to accept that. Most of the time. But it still hurt. And she still missed him.

Then again, a photo might just have made things worse.

She got up and stretched. Maybe she could talk to Leo instead – if she had any idea where he was. He'd told her that morning that he was going to the cinema, but Merry hadn't seen his car in the car park. And he wasn't replying to any of her texts. Still, for a witch, there was always another way.

Merry jumped up, grabbed the drawstring bag that was hanging from the front of her wardrobe, went into the bathroom and started filling the basin with water. Ever since what had happened at the Black Lake, she'd found spells using water – hydromancy – particularly easy. Theoretically, what she was about to do was supposed to be used for talking to another witch when no ordinary method of communication was available. She was just going to tweak it a little. If Leo ever found out, he'd be furious. But...

*It's his own fault for acting so weird, making me worried about him.*

Merry had promised, after what they'd been through together at the lake, that she would always be completely honest with Leo. But now she couldn't shake the feeling that he was keeping stuff from her. Sure, she hadn't exactly told him how much she was missing Jack. But he hadn't exactly asked her. And she didn't want him worrying about her when he seemed to be going through so much pain. Leo still couldn't bring himself to even mention Dan by name. She'd begged him over and over to let her help him. But he just brushed her off. Every time.

The basin was full. Merry opened the bag; a small selection of stones – some cut and polished, some rounded



like sea-washed pebbles – spilt out on to the bath mat. At least she'd remembered to cleanse and recharge the stones after she used them last. Merry selected a chunk of amethyst and a piece of tumbled aquamarine – both good for scrying – and placed them in the bottom of the basin together with her silver bracelet. She spread her hands wide above the water and sang part of the incantation Gran had taught her.

‘The Moon I invoke, a light in the darkness; the Pole Star, eternally present; enable my vision, show what I seek, but shield the seer from all who would harm her...’

The surface of the water became mirror-like, reflecting her own features, before fading to black. Merry closed her eyes and pictured Leo's face.

*Show me my brother...*

And there was Leo, sitting in his car, hands on the steering wheel. But he clearly wasn't driving. Behind him, through the car window, she could just make out what looked like trees.

*Oh no. He's at the lake. Again.*

Merry stretched out her fingers, almost touching the surface of the water.

*Poor Leo...*

★ ★ ★

Leo gripped the steering wheel tighter and stared at the dark trees ahead of him. He knew he ought to leave. He knew he shouldn't be here. Perhaps it would have been better if he had gone travelling with Sam and the others, but then he was convinced that Sam had been... reluctant, when he'd invited him. Whatever. He didn't need friends like that. The result was that he'd stayed in Tillingham, and over the last few weeks he'd been coming to the Black Lake more and more frequently. It was like a scab that he couldn't leave alone. To be sitting in his car in the car park, rather than down at the edge of the lake, was better than he'd managed before. But still, he knew that none of this was healthy. And it wasn't going to bring Dan back.

The funeral had been difficult. He hadn't dared show too much emotion, hadn't dared risk revealing his true feelings in front of so many of his other friends. He'd gone home, tried to put it behind him, to carry on as if nothing had changed.

When in fact everything was different. *He* was different.

The future Leo had been planning in his head for so long now belonged to somebody else. He wasn't sure that he even wanted any of it.

Leo turned the key in the ignition and reversed the car

out on to the road. Maybe university would still be the best thing for him. It would get him away from Tillingham, away from what had happened here. And it wasn't like Merry needed him any more.

He changed gear and accelerated, wondering whether Merry would ever learn a spell to see into the future, wondering what it would show. Him as a doctor, an overworked GP in some suburban practice? Merry still in Tillingham, running the coven? And would either of them be happy?

Leo pulled up in front of the house. The lights were on in Merry's bedroom, which meant she was still awake, probably waiting up for him. Thankfully, Mum was on a yoga retreat with a work friend until Friday, so at least there wouldn't be any awkward questions there. But lately, Merry had been watching him closely, badgering him to 'open up' to her. Which wasn't going to happen. A tiny part of him had somehow become convinced that, eventually, Dan would have loved him back. But there was no way he could admit that. Not even to his sister. So instead he'd made even more of an effort to try to act normal. But tonight...

Tonight, he'd messed up. Even if he'd stayed out for a couple of drinks after the cinema, he should have been home ages ago.

The moon emerged briefly from behind the clouds, and silver light flooded the landscape. Leo got out of the car, locked it and stood for a moment, gazing through the branches of the willow that grew next to the garage, out across the lawn.

Somebody was there. Someone was standing right at the edge of the garden, just beyond the overgrown rockery, looking up at the house.