

WOODWITCH

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‘Three are the Watchers within the wood
The trees have ears so you’d better be good.
One is wicked and one is wild
And one has big teeth to eat the slowest child!’

Hedgely schoolyard game

Chapter One

Fledgling Witch

Cassandra Morgan was brewing potions in the potting shed. Bent over a softly simmering cauldron, she measured out an ounce of powdered peppermint, a drachm of dried rosemary and thirteen drops of tincture of ginger. She'd been there for hours – so long, in fact, that Montague had given up chasing woodlice and was taking a nap amidst the cabbage seedlings. Now and then, the cat opened one golden eye to check on her progress and make helpful comments like, 'You've miscounted, that's fourteen peppercorns,' or, 'I'd grate the lemon peel finer, if I were you.'

Cassie was working in the potting shed because she had been forbidden by Mrs Briggs, the housekeeper, from using her camping cauldron indoors after accidentally setting fire to the moss-green rug in her bedroom. It was only slightly singed, but, as Mrs Briggs explained, there was a lot of wood in Hartwood Hall and a lot of antique furniture. Cassie had complained that she couldn't possibly work out of doors because she was trying to brew an enlivening elixir which required very steady temperature control – and it had been blowing a gale all week.

Brogan, the gardener, had taken pity on her and let her use his shed. So, there she was, amidst towers of terracotta pots and salmon-coloured geraniums, carefully feeding tinder grass to the fire beneath her small copper cauldron.

'It's supposed to be turning a shade of warm apricot,' said Cassie, checking her *Witch's Handbook* once more.

'It would, if only you would give it sufficient time and *keep stirring*,' said the grey cat. Montague was Cassie's familiar; he could do a little magic of his own, but mostly he was there to provide annoyingly practical advice at every opportunity.

'I haven't *got* time,' said Cassie, glancing at the clock on the potting shed wall. 'I need to get to coven after this.'

Cassie was determined to arrive with a bottle of perfectly brewed elixir and complete the tasks required to earn her white Potioneer badge.

‘You have ample time. You’re only thirteen and the witch’s craft takes years of hard work to master. Humans aren’t like cats,’ said Montague, grooming his whiskers. ‘We are born with agility and grace whereas you must develop your skills through constant and persistent practice. There will be plenty more badges to earn and tests to pass after this one.’

But that was just the problem. As a matter of fact, Cassie had three problems.

The first was that she had started behind compared to the rest of the young witches in her coven. They had all grown up in the village of Hedgely, or in witching families elsewhere in the country, and had known about the world of Faerie and its dangers since they could walk. Cassie, on the other hand, had spent half her life in a boarding school in London. Her teachers had told her there was *no such thing as faeries* – but her teachers had been wrong, and when it came to the dangerous and deceptive faery folk she had a lot of catching up to do.

Cassie’s second problem was that her mother, Rose Morgan, was still missing. It had been seven and a

half years since Cassie had last seen her, but now she at least knew *where* her mother had gone. Cassie had seen a letter in which Rose explained that she planned to travel to Faerie, to find something precious she had lost, and that a friend had offered to help her do so. Cassie didn't know what her mother had been searching for, or who had helped her cross the border, but she was sure Rose had intended to return home.

Cassie's final, and most insurmountable problem, was her aunt. Miranda Morgan was Cassie's guardian, the Coven Mistress and the Hedgewitch; the warden who guarded the Hedge, the great tract of forest that formed the border between England and Faerie. She was the only person who could help Cassie follow her mother to Faerie, but Miranda had forbidden her from going – that is, until Cassie had earned her licence and was a fully qualified witch.

And so, Cassie needed to earn this badge, and all the others that stood between her and that final test. She had to prove that she had all the skills necessary to travel across the border, to survive Faerie and return safely home again.

'*Cassandra...*' said Montague softly.

She had to learn and learn fast if she wanted to prove herself to her aunt. There was no time for mucking about on broomsticks with the other girls or playing silly games like Blinkers. She had read the *Witch's Handbook* cover to cover, and she was determined that she would master every rune, every spell, every potion in it.

‘CASSANDRA!’ Montague hissed.

‘What is it?’ asked Cassie, drawn from her thoughts back to the potting shed and the geraniums and the orange flames that were licking up the sides of her cauldron.

‘Oh no... no, no, NO!’ she cried, blowing on the fire, but this only made the flames rise higher. The purplish-brown liquid inside was bubbling to a rolling boil, rising over the rim of the cauldron and pouring out, hissing as it reached the flames and letting off clouds of rosemary-scented steam.

‘The watering can. Quickly!’ said the cat.

Cassie grabbed the watering can and emptied its contents over the potting shed table, dousing the flames and flooding the workbench. The geraniums had been splashed with the diluted elixir and, one by one, they lifted their pink petals and began to sing. A wordless

tune filled the potting shed as the plants formed a chorus, nodding their blooms to the strange melody.

Cassie sank down on her stool and sighed. In one careless moment she'd lost hours of meticulous work and the potion wasn't the only thing she'd ruined – her *Witch's Handbook* was soaked through, its pages dyed with clouds of aubergine.

'You'd better tidy this up before Brogan sees it,' said Montague, batting a paw at one of the singing geraniums which was rather off-key, 'or you'll be brewing potions outdoors all through the winter.'



By the time Cassie had mopped up the potting shed, raced upstairs to change into her pointed hat and witch's cloak and back down to the kitchen to hang her sopping handbook by the fire to dry, she was already running late.

'Here now, hold your kelpies!' called Mrs Briggs, turning from the bread she was kneading to pull a tray from the oven. 'I've baked hazelnut rolls; you can take them along to the coven hall for afternoon tea. Oh my, whatever happened to this?' She peeled away the cover of Cassie's handbook to inspect its sodden contents.

'I had a little accident in the potting shed.'

‘Another?’ said Mrs Briggs. ‘Well, it will dry, but you can’t go along without a handbook. Wait here a moment.’

‘But I’m going to be late!’ called Cassie, as the housekeeper disappeared through the scullery and up the back stairs.

Mrs Briggs returned a moment later with a small black book and passed it to Cassie. It was a *Witch’s Handbook*, just like her own, with the swirling silver triskele on the front cover, only it was older, its pages dog-eared and yellowing.

‘It was your mother’s copy – found it last time I was in the attic and put it aside, just in case. All right, straighten that hat and don’t forget the rolls!’



Cassie’s broomstick, which was named Tantivy, thoroughly enjoyed the break-neck flight down the hill from Hartwood, over the river Nix, through the village of Hedgely and up to the coven hall. Buffeted by the wind, Cassie could barely control Tantivy’s eagerness, but just now she was grateful for its speed as she and Montague skidded to a halt outside the hall. Normally, she would come to coven straight from school on a Friday afternoon, but today was the last day

of the summer holidays and their first coven meeting since July.

The coven hall was a low, round building of yellow stone, situated on the outskirts of the village between the last row of houses and the looming shadow of the Hedge. It had a pointed slate roof, like a witch's hat, and was surrounded by a garden of flowering herbs. Just now there were poppies, pennyroyal and purple loosestrife, but Cassie did not have time to stop and admire them. She could already hear singing coming from inside the hall.

*'The sky is clear as we fly on,
Beneath the dazzling stars.
We know their names and stories,
Their wisdom, it is ours.'*

A dozen voices were raised together in the coven song; the meeting had already begun. Leaving her broom outside in the September sunshine, Cassie crept up the stone steps and slowly pushed the door ajar.