



WHILE YOU WERE OUT

An attempt was made to deliver a parcel to your address.

Your parcel must be signed for and we will make a redelivery attempt as soon as possible.





CHAPTER 1

It is beginning. Or it will do as soon as I can persuade Mirabelle to get up.

She's face-planted into her bed so I'm talking to the back of her head, which is wedged deep in her pillow.

'They sent me to come and get you, you know that, right? Aunt Connie is counting every second.'

'Twenty-nine minutes!' Aunt Connie shouts up the stairs, as if to prove my point.

I glance out the window between our two beds. The moon is high and it's well past my bedtime.

'And the aunts are excited – they think it could be my year.'

My cousin, Mirabelle, groans into her pillow. 'You're too young, Clem. It's not your year,' she says in a muffled voice.

In twenty-nine minutes – at midnight – September will end, October will begin, and, if Aunt Connie's right, magic will descend on me for the first time. She's convinced this is the year.

I've seen twelve Octobers now and never fully been a part of it. So now, even though I don't live for October like my family do, a small nervous tingly thrill is hovering at the base of my spine.

I sit at the edge of my bed and kick my feet. Mirabelle and I have shared a room for as long as I can remember. And while we've both grown, the room has not. There's just about enough space for our two beds, and that's it. So, my side of our bedroom is covered in art and bits taped up on the wall, but Mirabelle's wall is blank. My clothes are half on the floor, half in a mound at the end of my bed, and Mirabelle's are neatly folded away underneath hers.

'Twenty-eight minutes!' Aunt Connie hollers up the stairs. 'Chop, chop, young hags!'

'Cannot be late! Stars don't wait!' another voice adds. That's Aunt Prudie. Our family is a lot sometimes.

Finally, Mirabelle rolls over in her bed. She's already frowning, but when she catches sight of me, it turns into a full-on glower.

I reach up and pat my hair self-consciously. I've spent most of the evening fiddling with hair ties and pins to get my hair up into two buns on either side of my head, like Mirabelle, but I couldn't manage to colour it.

Mirabelle has purple streaks, which she always wraps into double top-knots.

Mirabelle is almost fourteen now, so she thinks she's loads older than me, even though it's not actually quite a year's difference. Her First October was last year and, since then, she doesn't listen to anyone, especially me. She doesn't seem to have time for me anymore.

I tell myself that things might, just might, be different if I get my magic this year.

'Urgh,' Mirabelle says, and sits up to pull out her own buns, shaking her big curls loose. She'd almost rather choke on her own hair than share the same style with me. Mirabelle tosses her curls forward so that they cover as much of her face as possible, then her frown moves from my hair to my clothes.

'You're not going in those, are you?' she says, disgusted.

I look down at my pyjamas. They have a pattern of dancing penguins on them. 'Why not?'

Mirabelle pauses for a moment, clearly keeping everything she might say on a leash. Then she sighs and says, 'You'll get cold. Come on then, let's get this over with.'

I'm leading us down the stairs when there's a knock at the door. I hop the bottom step and look down the

corridor where my family are all lined up, ready to go; Aunt Connie at the front, clutching her egg-timer.

‘Twenty-five minutes!’ she announces.

I glance back at the door. ‘But Aunt Connie, who is that?’

‘None of humankind!’ Aunt Prudie howls, already waving a long, bony finger about.

In October, we witches are hidden deep under layers of magic that muffle us to ordinary humans.

‘Maybe we shouldn’t answer it, love—’ my mum says but it’s too late, I’ve already swung the door open.

‘Delivery for you,’ the postman says, with a grin.

‘Pssst!’ Aunt Prudie hisses at the postman, swatting the air as if he was a stray cat roaming around.

‘Aunt Prudie!’ I exclaim, then whisper over my shoulder, ‘You can’t hiss at him! It’s just the post.’ Nevertheless, I frown at the postman. I don’t know why anything is being delivered this late.

‘We’re late!’ Aunt Connie says, peeking around me, her white hair puffy with outrage. ‘We’re meant to be there in . . . twenty-two minutes!’

Aunt Flissie, right at the back, doesn’t say anything, she just adjusts the straps on her huge backpack.

‘Um, sorry, it can’t be for us,’ I tell the postman.

We don't really get much delivered, as four out of the six people in the house never use the internet and the other two of us don't have our own bank cards.

'Sorry about that,' the postman says. 'Must be for next door. Can you sign for it anyway?'

'Yeah,' I say, though I can't see the neighbours getting their parcel 'til at least November.

The postman, who has been delivering our mail for as long as I can remember, peers around me down the corridor, where my whole family is fidgeting, impatient to leave.

'Family . . . party?' he asks.

Aunt Prudie glowers from behind Aunt Connie. Aunt Prudie is, as always, in her green gardening overalls and Aunt Connie is in her favourite apron, *still* clutching the egg timer.

'Yeah, something like that,' I say. 'Where do I sign?'

'Right there, ta.' The postman holds out a small digital tablet for me to scrawl my initials on to.

I scrawl a quick "CM" with my index finger and pull away instantly. No tingles, no sparks – yet.

'Thank you! Enjoy your . . . party!' He hands me the parcel: a long rectangle.

'Get rid of him!' Aunt Connie hisses down the

corridor behind me but, luckily, the postman has already turned to go. At the garden gate, he lifts his hand as if to wave, but then drops it instead and shakes his head.

I hurriedly prop the parcel in the corner by the door with all the other junk and clutter my family accumulate and follow them out of the house.

If Aunt Connie could, she would round us all up like ducklings and have us march in a line. She tries to do a head count but Mirabelle has slunk right to the back and Aunt Flissie has marched on ahead.

Mirabelle clicks the door shut, lingering by the house for just one more moment, then joins us in the street.

Our quick procession into the night is quiet, both by my family and the city's standards. We silently make our way past row after row of terraced houses. Even Aunt Connie doesn't say anything, she's so tense with focusing on what is about to happen. As always, the preparations for October started months ago, so my aunts are, by now, extremely highly strung and manic with nervous energy. Even my mum stares into the darkness intensely, squeezing my hand.

As the tightly packed houses of the city streets start to open up and the low buzz of traffic fades, Mum

sniffs, taking in the air. Then Prudie and Connie sniff. My aunt Flissie and cousin Mirabelle do not sniff.

I can't smell it yet, but magic must be in the air.

'Soon! The autumn gift! The lawless month! Freedom!' Aunt Prudie shouts, hobbling forward more quickly. Even in her usual half-sentences, she can be a bit of a poet when the mood takes her.

As we pass through the gates into the deeper dark of the park, I join in with the sniffing. The night air is damp, earthy, like fallen leaves.

The park is silent and gloomy, but in its quiet stillness and under the faint moonlight, I spy a cluster of figures moving.

'Mum, the Morgans are already here!' I whisper.

'The Morgans are already here,' she passes back.

I hear Aunt Connie take up the message. 'Prudie, Flissie, the Morgans are here!'

'Typical!' Aunt Prudie shouts, but she doesn't mean it. For tonight at least, the feud between our two families is on pause.

Our family tree is one of those old, knobbly ones with two main branches that grow in completely different directions and only a few fresh, green shoots. The branches are the Morgans and the Merlyns – us.

My aunts, Prudence and Constance, are our elders. They are definitely not always prudent or constant, though. And they're not sure who's actually oldest. If it's the one with the whitest hair, then it's Constance, and if it's the one with the most wrinkles, it's Prudence. They're both selectively deaf and shout most of the time.

Then there's Aunt Felicity, my cousin Mirabelle's mum, who always takes the October opportunity to go as far away from us all as she can. There's something bothering my Aunt Flissie which we don't talk about, but in October she can't get far enough away from the rest of us. Every year, my aunts try to keep her at home, but they never can.

And then there's my mum: Patience. She lives up to her name most days. We all live together in our definitely too-small, nondescript terraced house and for eleven months of every year, my aunts are miserable; and for one month, they are mad. I don't know how my mum puts up with it, but I do know that witch sisters are no ordinary sisters. My aunts call her Pattie, and I call her Mum.

Aunt Temmie – Temperance Merlyn – is the one I'm kind of named after. She would have made up the fifth and final point of the Merlyn witches' star. But Temmie died one October and we don't talk about that either.

There is nothing *spooky* or *ooky* about my aunts but if you wanted to use the word *kooky*, you probably could.

The Morgans are the other branch of the family. At best, they're plain rude. At worst, super creepy. There are more of them than us – thirteen, to be precise, which Aunt Connie is secretly very jealous of. I don't know much about the Morgans, but my aunts decidedly dislike them. Mum of course manages to be polite to them; Aunt Prudie, not so much.

We set off across the grass towards the Morgans, Aunt Prudie stomping determinedly forward in her big gardening boots.

'Merlyns. The stars don't wait!' A great voice booms across the dark lawns of the park to us.

'I know, I know, three minutes!' mutters Aunt Connie then she raises her voice to reply. 'Morgans, welcome.' Our two families never say hello to each other like normal people.

The Morgans all share matching expressions of distaste as we approach. They don't want to be here, and they definitely don't want to be here with us. I get the shiver I always get when I see the Morgans. They're waiting, stone-still, but somehow obviously impatient.

‘Hm,’ the owner of the voice says, out of the dark. ‘Your little park will suffice. Though of course we keep and protect the place where greater power resides.’

The October magic only comes when we’re all together, so the Morgan family and the Merlyn family have to tolerate each other for just one night. The two covens must meet on neutral ground. Centuries ago, they used to meet on clifftops, or out on the moors or at midnight under bridges and that kind of thing. Now we meet in this ‘little park’ because we Merlyns are not welcome at theirs.

‘You hope for a First October?’ the voice remarks. It means me.

Mum had her First October when she was eleven. Aunt Prudie had hers when she was nine. It comes to every witch at the time which is right for them, apparently. Aunt Connie has wanted me to join the circle for the last couple of years, but it’s like the magic has been staying away on purpose, just to frustrate her.

I attend this midnight gathering every year but the Morgans have never even noticed me before, just another young hag, lurking behind her coven elders. Aunt Connie pushes me forward a bit. I now see all thirteen Morgans. They are all a lot taller than us.

The shortest of them, still a head taller than me, is a girl about my age who has her mouth open as if she is about to speak to the witch who is obviously their leader. I look up at the witch with the booming voice.

‘Hello,’ I say. ‘Um, Ms . . . Morgan?’

The witch is silent for a moment, inspecting me from her great height with a slight sneer and cold eyes. She looks like someone who’d accept ‘Your Majesty’ as a title. She has an impossibly straight back, and is standing like a headmistress. Like most of her coven, she has thin, twitchy lips and a high forehead with floating, unimpressed eyebrows. She is still staring into my eyes with laser focus. Under her scrutiny, I am suddenly nervous.

‘You may call me Aunt Morgan,’ she says eventually. Her face is dark with disdain.

Aunt Connie elbows me and I dutifully reply, ‘I hope it will be my great honour to join the coven officially.’

Aunt Connie checks her egg-timer, squints up at the stars and nods. It is time for the two branches of our family to come together.

As if following an invisible order, the Morgans begin to approach us.

The group of witches shifts, and all of us – Merlyns

and Morgans – stick in an arm as if we’re going to stack our hands like a team about to enter a competitive sport. In front of me, Mirabelle puts in her arm with a loud sigh which makes Aunt Morgan raise her disdainful eyebrows even higher. Behind me, Mum nudges me so that my hand, with hers, meets all the others.

‘Sorry,’ I murmur as I stub someone else’s fingers with my own. Someone swats my hand away. I glance around the circle, looking for whoever has tried to push me out of it.

The Morgan girl who was going to interrupt earlier, taller but no older than me, raises her eyebrows then smugly lays her hand right on top of everyone else’s. She has two stubby braids with a little halo of flyaway hairs and an extremely condescending nose. I’m still staring at her as she smirks at me then tilts her chin upwards and starts to watch the sky, earnestly.

The circle tightens. There’s a moment of silence, then, as one, all our hands are hoisted into the air.

I look up. Above us, the trees are already a bit skeletal, their fingery branches black against the dark sky. At this time of year, when the leaves come down, something else does too . . . magic.

‘The stars know,’ Aunt Morgan says.

‘The stars know,’ everyone echoes back to her and for the first time, I sense it too. Then I see it.

‘They’re coming!’ I say, and Mum shushes me. ‘Oh my . . . stars!’ I breathe.

There are actual stars, seemingly coming straight from the dark sky, shrinking smaller and smaller as they descend in a funnel of light towards where our outstretched hands meet.

The magic comes as streaming light. I feel a prickle I’ve never felt before. Tiny beads of light are beginning to descend down our arms and cluster around us. It’s like being walked on by hundreds of gentle, wispy feet. I shift as if to brush them off but, behind me, Mum puts a gentle hand on my shoulder.

The magic settles like confetti across the heads and shoulders of the gathered witches. It sparkles strange, glittery dandruff onto each of us. Across the circle from me, partly visible behind the pyramid of arms, Aunt Morgan is glowing all over. The lights are the iron filings and she is the magnet. The magic is finding its home in her; it appears to cluster most densely in her head and her heart. The lights look like they’re winking out but really, they’re sinking into her, slowly.

Then I look down at myself. My chest is lit up, tiny stars sparking and then flaring and vanishing . . . inside me.

I don't know how long we stand there, absorbing the magic as it flows down into us. But when the circle sighs collectively and our arms drop, my hand is thick with tingles and my shoulder is sore.

'Ah, old friend, we missed you,' Aunt Connie says, standing straight with a crickety-crack of each knobble of her spine for the first time in a full year.

Around the circle, the witches are taking a moment in their own way, each shivering or stretching into her power as it suits her.

'Are we done here?' Mirabelle asks, shaking her head so that her purple-streaked hair falls forward, hiding her.

'Always a bit rusty to start with,' trills Aunt Connie, swiping left and right and up and down with her finger, though nothing happens.

'After eleven months off . . . we should start slowly and carefully, right?' I whisper to Mirabelle.

'You would if you wanted to live,' she says, darkly, to me.

As my family all crick and crack their hands, a pale wave falls across the Morgan witches. There's a long white cloak unfurling around each of their shoulders, reaching

all the way down to their ankles, making them look grander and taller. I look for the smirking Morgan girl my age but when I find her, the smirk has disappeared.

Aunt Morgan, even more menacing in her cloak, crooks a finger at her, the youngest of her coven, and the now smirkless girl steps forward. She takes the girl's chin in her hands and tilts her head this way and that. With a tutting noise, Aunt Morgan looks away. Something flickers in her eyes.

In fact, all the Morgans have something glinting in their eyes.

The young witch bows her head as she's released, as if with shame, and I realise: the magic didn't descend on her this year.

Summoned by Aunt Morgan, another young hag with elegant long braids rushes forward. 'We don't need her, Mother, your plan can still proceed,' she says eagerly.

I'm instantly curious: about their plan and the two girls, the one who has failed to gain magic this year and the one who fails to care about her.

'Come away, Morgans – we are not witches who *hide* in such a human place,' Aunt Morgan announces to her entire coven and her face is somehow wrong. The way she says 'human' with a twist of disgust is . . . disgusting.

Their youngest young hag looks like she wants to stay, stick her hand back into the middle, demand we all try again.

But the rest of the Morgans move in haste; they must be in a rush to begin their 'plan'. The feeling of dread that I have doesn't seem to bother any of the rest of my coven and my mum lifts one glowing hand in a farewell wave.

"Til All Hallows'," Mum says, but the Morgans aren't the waving kind.

None of their coven reply. Instead, all eyes turn to Aunt Morgan, who raises her chin high and, as she closes her eyes, they all disappear.