

# THE WILD MAGIC TRILOGY

## *The Promise Witch*

CELINE KIERNAN

THE WILD  
MAGIC  
TRILOGY  
BOOK 3

*The Promise*  
*Witch*

CELINE KIERNAN



WALKER  
BOOKS

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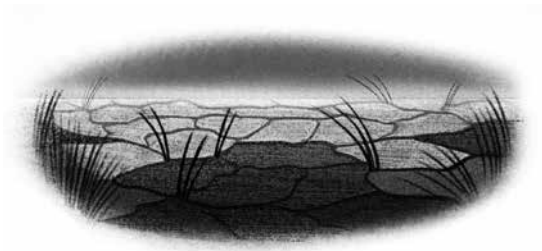
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## *The Parched World*

Still in her pyjamas, Mup climbed out of her bedroom window and into the shimmering heat. It was early morning, the palace peaceful with sleep, but already the air felt too hot to breathe.

It's only May, Mup thought. *What will it be like when summer really starts?*

The sky was a heartless scald of blue overhead, the narrow granite windowsill roasting beneath her feet. Mup curled her toes around the edge and looked down. The walls of the castle plummeted sharply away beneath her. Far below, the courtyard wavered in a mirage-dance of heat.

*I'm like a small bird, she thought, standing on the edge of a cliff.*

Mup took a breath, closed her eyes and let herself topple. She fell down and down. The air sped past, ruffling her colourful pyjamas and streaming her twists

of hair back like dark snakes. *Lovely*, she thought, spreading her arms. *Lovely and cool*.

She opened her eyes. The ground was rushing towards her. Every flagstone, every war-cracked seam in the cobbles zoomed close. Mup arched her back, turned her face to the sky, and swooped a swallow-graceful arc up, away from the looming ground, through the oven-heat of the enclosing walls and into clear morning air above the castle.

A hot breeze blew up there, so horribly dry that Mup felt it suck the moisture from her skin.

On the battlements to her right, sentries ran forward. Men and women alike, they shaded their eyes against the sunshine, and gazed anxiously up to where Mup floated high in the buffeting air.

They were worried for her safety.

Mup gave them a little wave: *I'm OK*.

She pointed that they go back into the shade. Instead, they launched themselves into their raven forms and rose upwards in a cawing flock. For a moment the beating of many dark wings disturbed the air around Mup. Then the ravens were above her, climbing the hot air draughts on outspread wings, wheeling far overhead, patrolling the skies for threat.

Sighing, Mup turned her attention to the castle and

surrounding forest below. She took it all in – the square, stone severity of the buildings, the brittle fragility of the trees – and she felt at once hopeful and sad. It was all so beautiful. It was all balanced so delicately on the edge of ruin.

*Like an egg on a tightrope, as Dad would say.*

Slowly, watching all around her, Mup floated out across the top of the river wall and down to the heat-cracked riverbed. The woods surrounding the castle should have been fresh and green at this time of year, but the heat had crisped them to a parched brown. Leaves fell in unseasonable drifts to the shimmering earth.

Mup's feet sent up a puff of dust as she landed in the centre of what had been the castle river. Once, little fish had peeped and played where she now stood. Once, crayfish and snails had led their slow, creeping lives. It had been cool and safe for them. A green world of waving river weed. Now there was nothing but dust and the sad whisper of dead leaves falling from the dying forest.

*Everything had been going so well till now.*

By working hard and pulling together, the people of Witches Borough had survived the terrible curse-winter that Mup's grandmother had sent to break them. Village had helped clan, clan had helped river-folk, and

the castle had become the place where everyone met to plan and coordinate. A real, proper sense of community had grown as people joined together to help each other survive the interminable snow.

Then the snow had disappeared. As quickly as it had arrived, it simply melted away. Spring opened its bright green leaves to the sky, and everyone thought they'd won.

"The old queen has admitted defeat," they cheered. "She will leave us alone!"

Witches Borough could finally get on with building a new life.

About one month later, the castle inhabitants awoke to find the river gone.

Mup remembered the morning well. They had rushed down to find fishes flopping and gasping in the slippery weed, frogs and newts stunned, the riverbanks already drying.

The next day the heat came, the clouds disappeared, and the thirsty time began.

That had been a month ago. It had not rained in Witches Borough since.

*First, Grandma tried to freeze us out, thought Mup, kneeling down into the dust of the parched riverbed. Now she's trying to thirst us.*

She lay on her stomach, and pressed her ear to the hot ground.

*Hello, she thought. Can you hear me?*

Far, far beneath her, there answered a tiny, thready, muffled voice. The sound of the river, sucked below and desperate; trapped underground by the terrible, invincible, bitter power of Mup's grandmother. Mup spread her hands, pressed her palms to the earth. She was the pathfinder, after all. She was the stitcher of worlds. Surely she could find a path to the water? Surely she could lead the water home?

She closed her eyes and concentrated.

*We're looking for you, she thought. You're not alone down there. We'll find you.*

There came no reply. Mup could still sense the river down there, shifting and lost, as if wandering some subterranean labyrinth just out of her reach. Above and around it, the earth ached; so sad and thirsty that even touching it made Mup want to cry.

A shadow fell across the parched ground. Mup looked up to see her mother floating down from the top of the boat steps. Her dark hair and dark silk dressing gown fluttered in the hot air. Her pale face was grim as she surveyed their surroundings.

*"You shouldn't keep coming out here alone, Mup."*



“The land is getting sicker, Mam.”

Mam landed lightly by her side, crouched, and pressed her fingers to the earth next to Mup’s splayed hand. She grimaced in sympathetic pain. She glared out at the hot wind, the angry sun, the blank and gleeful sky. She whispered to the bitter old woman who was controlling them all. “I’m telling you now, Mother. You will not win.”

Mup nodded in fierce agreement. *We’ll stop her.*

But how?

There came a flash of shadows as the sentries swooped low, cawing a warning. Mam and Mup shot to their feet. Lightning flashed at their fingertips as they stared towards the bend in the river where the guards’ attention was focused. For a moment there was nothing, then a sound became audible there – the sound of people singing.

Mam relaxed. “Choral magic,” she whispered.

“Clann’n Cheoil!” cried Mup. “The kids are here!”

A smile softened Mam’s expression. “The very first class for our new school.”

A little band of children came into view around the bend. There were about twenty of them. Made minuscule by the castle looming to their right and the steep riverbank to their left, they ranged in age from five

to maybe twelve. Mup swelled with pride to see them. No matter how closely they huddled together, or how scared they seemed, she was proud of how brave they were for coming here. And she was proud of their parents, who so believed in Mam that they would risk sending their children to her, despite the threat still posed to them by the old queen.

There were no castle children in this group. Unlike Clann'n Cheoil – who had brought their children home as soon as they could – the Speirling and castle staff and other aristocrats of the borough had yet to call their children back from the distant boarding schools where many of them lived.

*Maybe castle people don't believe in Mam as much as ordinary people do,* Mup thought.

Maybe they still thought Mam was going to lose.

The children advanced through the heat haze, their eyes fixed on the ravens patrolling the skies above. Despite the brutal sunshine, they walked in cool shade, thanks to a hazy parasol of summer cloud that drifted just above their heads. This cloud was being created by the beautiful voices of the men and women who accompanied the children – members of Clann'n Cheoil who had vowed to protect any students on their daily journeys to and from the school. A soft, subtle, silver-and-white confection, the cloud

evaporated as quickly as the *clann* could conjure it. It took all their magical energies to keep singing it into being, and they sang in turns, voices lifting into and dropping from the melody as some of them took up the thread and others paused for a moment to rest.

These adults were familiar to Mup. The *Clann'n Cheoil* had fought with her mother against the old queen, and had stayed with her through all the perilous months afterwards. They were loyal and independent. None more so than the tall silver-haired woman who led the children through the swirling dust of the river floor: Fírinne, leader of the *clann*, Mam's loudest supporter and sometimes terrifyingly fierce best friend. Mup waved to her. Fírinne winked.

Mam stepped forward. The children faltered at the sight of her. Mup knew why. Mam was so like a raggedy witch: all pale skin, all black eyes, all dark and flowing hair. Even her dark dressing gown – such a difference to Mam's usual jeans and T-shirts – drifted around her in a manner uncomfortably reminiscent of a raggedy witch's cloak.

It's OK, thought Mup, smiling at the children's hesitant faces. *You'll get used to her.*

“Mam, I'm going to get Crow, so we can welcome the kids when they come inside.”

Mam nodded, and Mup launched herself upwards. The children stepped out from under their cloud, gasping and shouting as Mup shot away from them in a swirl of dust and dead leaves.

*I suppose you'll have to get used to me too,* she thought as she zoomed like a cloud-shadow up the side of the castle, heading for the chimney smoke which drifted from her best friend's home, high on the battlements above.

In the first few months after he and Dad had fixed up the vardo, Crow had moved around quite a bit, "looking for a decent campsite". Finally he had settled on this spot, high on a patch of flat roof, facing the forest where Clann'n Cheoil camped, and looking down onto the wide cool expanse of the castle river.

*Back when there was a river,* thought Mup.

She rose to the level of Crow's campsite, and his beautiful little home came into view. The vardo nestled in a small garden of potted plants, which Crow kept carefully watered from the castle's last remaining well. *Who'd have thought Crow would turn out to be a farmer?* thought Mup, smiling at the lush herbs, the bee-visited early flowers, the potted apple trees and vegetables. The rooftop garden was quiet; the vardo's painted shutters firmly closed, the door shut tight.

Hovering at the edge of the roof, Mup cawed the special polite call that Crow had taught her – the one which meant, “I’m here. Is it OK if I come closer?”

Crow had explained that this was like knocking on someone’s door before walking into their room, or ringing the doorbell before entering someone’s house. “Just because you can walk into my camp, doesn’t mean you *should*,” he’d told her, as he and Dad put the finishing touches to his caravan. “The whole camp will be my house, not just the vardo.”

Mup had never forgotten that. She’d made mistakes before with Crow, and hurt him by not listening to him. She was determined never to do that again.

She floated patiently, waiting for Crow’s answering call.

None came.

Maybe her friend wasn’t home?

But the smoke rising from the vardo chimney told her otherwise. Crow would never leave a fire burning if he wasn’t home. Maybe the breeze had carried her voice away?

Mup tentatively drifted closer, cleared her throat to call again, then paused.

What was that sound?

Somewhere within the closed-up vardo someone

was singing. Faint, dark, very sweet, the song was beautiful in a way that Mup found disturbing. Through the heat and the over-bright sunshine, it seemed to spread a dark web around the brightly coloured wagon. It seemed to hint of shadows, of depths beyond the daylight, of a black river running below the surface of all things. Hypnotic, it drew Mup in, pulling her forward, her discomfort growing even as she bobbed closer.

Before Mup knew it, she found herself right up against the wall of the vardo. How had she got here without noticing? The magic was painfully thick here. The song too loud. Shadows seemed to swarm unseen. The sunlight felt fragile. Yelling in terror, Mup slapped herself away from the painted wood, sending herself spinning back the way she'd come.

The song within the vardo stopped. The dark power fell away.

Crow's voice called uncertainly from within. "Is ... is someone there?"

Mup slammed to a halt against a little raised parapet. Sunshine fell down around her in a shower of heat and light. She clung, gasping, to the stone – not at all certain what had just happened. Behind her, a latch clicked quietly and the door of the vardo creaked open. Crow's

tousled head peered around the door frame. His huge dark eyes were wary.

“Mup?” he said. “Have you...?” He looked behind him. He came outside and closed the door. “Have you been there long?” he asked.

“Was that you singing, Crow?”

Crow didn’t answer.

“What was that song?” asked Mup.

Crow didn’t seem to know what to say for a moment, then he lifted his chin as if in defiance.

“It was just one of Crow’s dreaming songs.

I make them up as I go along.”

“I’m ... I’m not sure I liked it, Crow.”

His eyes widened in offence.

“Why ever not? It’s Crow’s own song.

If it comes from Crow, can it be wrong?”

Mup didn’t know what to say to that.

Crow softened at her obvious discomfort. Obviously in a rhyming mood today, he said:

“Don’t worry, girl who is my friend,

I’ll fix the music in the end.

I’ve not yet got the notes quite right,

If I sing them wrong they can cause ... they can cause...”

Mup waited patiently as Crow searched for the best word.

He beamed when he found it: “They can cause fright!”

The two of them grinned at each other across the heat-shimmered air.

“Good rhyme,” said Mup. “All your practice is paying off.”

Crow puffed his chest.

“Never again, in life to come,  
Will rhyming steal Crow’s words or tongue.  
Rhyming is MINE now,  
where and when I choose,  
to make good songs with  
and tell my truths.”

He seemed to be back to his usual brash self, but Mup couldn’t help thinking her friend looked a little feverish, his eyes dark-ringed and at the same time over-bright.

“Maybe ... maybe you could talk to Fírinne about that particular song, though, Crow? Get her to teach you how to sing it properly? It feels like very strong magic.”

Crow blinked at her.

“Maybe,” he said.

Mup nodded awkwardly. It was obvious Crow wasn’t keen to pursue this conversation.

She gestured behind her. “The kids are here for the first day at school.”

“Already?” Crow shook himself into his raven form.



“Let’s go!”

He flapped away over the rooftops.

Mup paused before following him. She looked around at the sun-filled rooftop. Everything seemed fine. Crow’s carefully tended pots of herbs and vegetables, the beautifully painted vardo, all were silent, all peaceful, slumbering in the sun. Still, she couldn’t help staring at the shadows pooled beneath the wagon; were they a little too thick there? Was the silence a little too . . . too listening?

Mup shivered. *You’re being silly*, she thought. *Crow’s magic is rough around the edges. That’s all. He’s learning, just like the rest of us.*

Still, she kept her eyes on the shadows as she backed away, only turning at the last minute before launching herself after her friend.

She caught up quickly. They flew together between sun-blasted towers, skimmed heat-shimmered ridge tiles, dodged chimneys, until finally they breasted the edged of a parapet, swooped down into an internal courtyard, and landed at the back door of the new school.

Crow looked Mup up and down as he rose into his boy form. For the first time Mup noticed how unusually neat he was, even his tangle of hair seemed somewhat tamed. He made a point of straightening his colourful jacket.

*“The question I ask myself, girl-sometimes-hare,*

*Is shall you be changing from your sleeping-wear?*

*It seems a tad rude, if not to say crass,*

*To appear so dishevelled on the first day of class."*

Mup looked down at herself. She was still dressed in her pyjamas and her feet were bare.

Every inch of her was covered in dust.

"Oh dear," she sighed. "I got a little distracted this morning."

Crow raised an eyebrow as the sound of voices rose up from within the building.

*"Well, it's too late now to make an impression,*

*You're stuck wearing jammies to this morning's lesson."*

And he let himself into the classroom, leaving Mup to dust herself down as best she could.



## *A Rebel School for Rebel Children*

Mup smiled as she stepped into the classroom. She had helped Mam choose this room. Desks and chairs waited patiently for new occupants. Bookcases were ripe with untold adventure. A row of glasses twinkled next to jugs of water, in case the children were thirsty after their long walk to school. Bright, airy windows and a stained-glass door opened onto the courtyard garden from which Mup and Crow had just entered. The children would be able to run around this garden, if they liked, or fly among the trees, or nestle in the mud at the bottom of the tiny pond which, before the drought, had brightened the centre of the lawn.

“Whatever the students need to learn, let them learn it,” Mam had told the teachers. “Whatever they need to become, let them become it.”

Mup wiggled her toes in one of the bright splashes of

colour which the stained-glass threw across the floor. It's perfect, she thought. *They're going to love it.*

On the opposite side of the room a door led to an interior corridor, which led to a flight of steps, which led to the old guardroom, which opened onto the riverside courtyard.

Tipper's voice echoed happily from the shadows there. "This way, childrens! Follow me!"

With a skitter of claws and a merry bark, Mup's little brother bounded into the room. All fat paws, all waving tail, all jolly golden face, he lolloped merrily around the desks, barked "Hello, Crow! Hello, Mup! Hello, hello!" and bounced right back out again.

Grinning, Mup ran after him to wait in the doorway. The new students were edging down the steps and into the corridor. They were a row of owlish faces in the gloom. The light of the riverside courtyard seeped in from the cloakroom behind them. Fírinne was a tall shape within the door there, standing guard. Mup waved up to her. Fírinne raised a hand in reply.

Dad's distinctive, broad-shouldered silhouette joined the tall, slim clann leader. Fírinne leaned on one side of the door frame, her arms crossed, Dad leaned on the other, and the two of them began talking in low voices. Mup knew they were discussing the safety of

these children, the possibility of Mup's grandmother engineering some kind of vengeance against their parents.

Crow came to Mup's side, and the approaching children eyed the two of them cautiously.

Mup beamed at them and flung her arms wide. "Welcome to Magic School!"

Unsmiling, the silent children crept past and into the classroom.

"It'll be OK," Mup said gently. "It'll be OK. I promise."

Tipper bounded about, excitedly barking. He snuffled pockets and licked tentatively reaching hands. The children began to smile. They began to look around the sunny room. *Whatever they'd expected, Mup thought, it can't have been this bright, happy, noisy place.*

"Fírinne!" barked Tipper, running to the schoolroom door. "Fírinne, where is Badger? You said you'd help him down the stairs!"

Fírinne's voice rose up in the guardroom and all the children laughed as Mup's dear old grey-faced labrador, Badger, floated down the corridor, into the room, and was deposited gently by the door. Delighted with himself, Badger strolled from child to enchanted child, stiffly wagging his tail and introducing himself with polite licks on their outstretched hands.

Crow began solemnly handing out copybooks and pens, a name badge for each pupil.

Tipper noticed a tiny girl lurking at the door. “Come in! Come in!” he barked.

The little girl just stared.

Mup went to her. “No need to be scared,” she whispered. “No one will hurt you.”

The little girl seemed to doubt this. “Not even teacher?” she asked.

At the word “teacher” the other children went silent. They seemed to withdraw.

“Will ... will teacher be here soon?’ asked one of the boys.

“Teacher’s *already* here,” grunted Crow, with his usual lack of tact.

The children gasped. Their eyes darted to the big desk at the front of the room.

The sunlight streaming in the windows there had made it easy to miss the ghost. To a passing glance she could be mistaken for just a shadow. But once you knew she was there, there was no missing her, and once you’d seen her, there was no mistaking the tall, dark-clad spectre for anything other than what she was – a raggedy witch.

With a quiet hiss of fear, the children stepped backwards.

The little girl hid her face in the bright legs of Mup's pyjamas

"It's OK," said Mup. "It's just Naomi. Didn't your parents tell you she'd be here?"

The same Naomi chose that unfortunate moment to drift into shadow. Her severe features leapt into focus, and the children moaned.

Mup made a frustrated gesture at the lurking spirit. Try not to look so terrifying. Perhaps it wasn't possible for the ghost to actually change from her terrible uniform, but surely a smile wasn't beyond the realms of her spectral capabilities?

The children began edging for the door.

"Come on, now," urged Mup, desperately trying to prise the little girl from around her waist. "Let's ... let's everyone choose a seat."

"Not a chance," growled one of the older boys. He grabbed his little brother, and ran.

"Wait!" called Crow.

*"Wait there, friends.*

*This witch is here to make amends.*

*She'll teach us all we wish to know.*

*In magic skills she'll help us grow!"*

His words had no effect.

"Naomi is nice!" cried Mup. "I promise!" But the

children were hurrying away, the older ones dragging smaller ones with them as they went.

A friendly voice, from nowhere and everywhere at once, brought everyone to a halt.

“Hello,” it echoed. “Hello! Am I late?”

It was such a warm voice, so full of infectious enthusiasm, that the children crept back to see to whom it belonged. They giggled when the ghost of Doctor Emberly popped his head through the wall at the far end of the room. His head and his ruffled lace collar were all that could be seen. He looked like a great luminous daisy pinned to the bookshelves.

“Oh, I am late!” he cried, taking in the semi-deserted room.

Bustling his way through the blackboard, he managed to shower Naomi in chalk.

“Gracious!” he cried. “I have besmirched your vestments! A thousand apologies!”

He dusted Naomi down as best he could, then bowed his lowest, most repentant bow.

The witch nodded her thanks. Then, as if to acquaint her friend with the predicament, she cast a bleak glance to the knot of children, half in, half out of the door.

Doctor Emberly seemed to immediately comprehend the situation.



“Dear pupils!” he cried. “Brave adventurers on the path of knowledge. Did you think class was cancelled? I can hardly blame you. It’s all my own fault for being late. It shall not happen again.”

He swept down the room, cooing and tutting and gently ushering bewildered children to their chairs. They were entranced by him, his beaming smile, his irresistible good nature. Even the shy little girl – still firmly gripping Mup’s pyjama leg – allowed herself to be guided to a chair.

“Would you like me to sit with you a while?” whispered Mup.

The little girl nodded, her eyes huge over the thumb she’d jammed into her mouth. On the other side of the room Crow was in a similar situation, with two small, grubby boys desperately clutching his coat tails. He smiled triumphantly at Mup as he knelt between the boys’ chairs. This is it. *The start of something good.*

All around them children began taking their seats.

At the head of the class Doctor Emberly clapped his ghostly hands, and said:

“Magic is for everyone.”

With a gasp, the children looked to Naomi. They obviously expected her to smite the poor doctor. She simply continued to float against the bookshelves, her

attention reverently fixed on Emberly's gentle face.

"Magic," said Emberly, "is free."

The children turned wondering eyes back to him.

"We are all born magic," he said. "But we all need to learn how to use that magic. Miss Naomi and I are here to help you do just that – starting with animal transformation."

"Men is ravens," intoned the children. "Women is cats."

"Not any more," said Naomi softly. "Not unless they want to be."

Emberly smiled at her. She smiled back. "Here," said Emberly, "we become whatever we wish to become. Now..." he sparkled a grin at the children, "shall you start by drawing the animal you'd most like to turn into today?"

At Mup's side the little girl's eyes grew wide with excitement. Her thumb popped from her mouth. She released Mup's pyjamas and reached for her pen.