

# WYCHETTS



AND THE  
FARM OF FEAR

The third book in the *Wychetts* series

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## **Previously...**

*Wychetts (pronounced “Witch-etts”) is an ancient timber framed cottage, which contains an amazing magic power that was awoken accidentally by Bryony and her stepbrother Edwin on the first night in their new home.*

*The children wanted to use the magic of the Wise Ones to rid themselves of each other and return to their old lives; but when the evil Shadow Clan took over Wychetts and seized its power, Bryony and Edwin were forced to work together to save the cottage, and the whole of civilisation, from destruction (not to mention a worldwide shortage of ice-cream).*

*Following their traumatic battle with the Shadow Clan, the children had mixed feelings about a planned summer holiday. Bryony couldn't wait to spend a relaxing week in the sun, but Edwin preferred to stay home and learn more about magic from Inglenook, the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. As it happened, neither got their wish; the children were plunged into a harrowing adventure on the Isle of Lost Souls, where they became embroiled in a bitter feud between two criminal animal gangs in a quest to recover the lost Wychetts Key and control its power. After a deadly fight against the Terrible Fang, Bryony and Edwin learned to share the power of the Wise Ones, but on her return home Bryony made a discovery that would change her mind about magic...*

Bryony dumped her suitcase in the corner of her bedroom. She might have enjoyed packing for a holiday, but unpacking had never been her forte. Of course, she could use magic to help her, but somehow it didn't seem right anymore. Besides, after her ordeal Bryony felt she'd had more than enough magic for a while.

Bryony flopped onto the bed and sighed, savouring the familiar comfort of her own mattress. It was dusk now, and through the window she could see stars twinkling through the veil of darkening sky. For some reason, stars always reminded her of Mum. When she was very small, Mum had a bedtime routine of holding Bryony up to the window and showing her the night sky. And there was a song she would sing, but Bryony couldn't remember how it went. It was something to do with the moon...

At the thought of her mother, Bryony's hand slipped unconsciously beneath her pillow, and there her fingers touched something soft and slightly furry. Hoping against hope, Bryony drew her hand from under the pillow, and with it came...

"Mr Cuddles!" Bryony exhaled a grateful sob, and clasped Mr Cuddles to her chest. "Thank you, Inglenook!"

Although Bryony hadn't let on to Edwin, she had still been a bit upset at the thought of never seeing her favourite soft toy again. But now Mr Cuddles was back with her, and everything was all right. It didn't matter that he'd been pecked quite a bit, and was leaking stuffing from a hole in his stomach.

Bryony lovingly prodded the stuffing back into place. Then she saw something poking out of Mr Cuddles that wasn't stuffing: at first

she thought it was a bit of dried pasta, but on closer inspection discovered it was a rolled up piece of paper.

Curious, Bryony pulled the paper from Mr Cuddles' stomach and unrolled it. There was writing on it. Her mother's writing.

Bryony read the words, her dark eyebrows furrowing as she struggled to make sense of their meaning. But that was impossible. The words had no meaning. They just didn't make sense.

Bryony looked up and gazed through the window. She was surprised at how dark it had become, how quickly the hungry night had fallen. The stars were shining brighter now, but she scarcely noticed their brilliance as her black eyes focussed on that large silver crescent which seemed to dwarf everything else into insignificance.

And as Bryony sat staring at the night sky, the words on the paper repeated in her mind...

“Beware the Moon of Magister.”

## Prologue

*A farm in the West Country, two hundred years ago.*

The ancient barn rang with the sounds of celebration, as shouts of joy and raucous singing mingled with the scratchy strains of an aged fiddle.

The boy watched with growing envy as the revelries gathered pace. Mother had forbidden him so much as a sip of ale, and given stern warnings against dancing with strange girls. So far he hadn't seen any strange girls, but there were plenty of pretty ones. He watched them dancing gleefully in the middle of the barn, their long hair and petticoats swirling to the music. The boy cursed his youth and his mother's strictness, but contented himself with the thought that next year he'd be old enough to join in the merriments.

Then someone banged loudly on a table. The dancing stopped, and the barn fell silent.

"Ladies and gentlefolk," bellowed a tall man with a bushy black beard. "I crave your attention, if you please. You will now be addressed by the Lord of the Harvest!"

Cheers echoed as a small man stepped forward. Of course, everyone knew he wasn't a real Lord; the title was only a jest, a temporary honour for the harvest festivities.

"We must give thanks," said the Lord of the Harvest, adjusting his crown of twisted corn stalks. "Thanks for the most bounteous

yield in living memory. This year, for the first time in many, none will go short of bread this winter. This year, we shall all share in the fruits of our labours.” More cheers erupted, mixed with sounds of ale being hastily guzzled.

“We must also give thanks for our deliverance,” continued the Lord of the Harvest. “For none of this would be possible if our Master was here.”

The cheers faded, replaced by angry snarls and murmurs.

The Lord of the Harvest raised a hand for silence.

“But that wicked monster, who denied us our share and treated us no better than cattle, has finally gone. At last we are free from his tyranny. But he will never be free from us. He must stand atop the hill and watch as we plough his land and reap his crops, year after year until the end of days!”

The cheers returned, louder than before. The Lord of the Harvest hoisted his tankard.

“I propose a toast. A toast to the plentiful harvest. And to our dearly departed Master. May his soul burn in hell fire for all eternity!”

Cheers sounded again, and the ancient barn seemed to shake. The din made the boy wince; he didn’t think it right to be cheering the death of a man. But the Master’s cruelty was well known, and even a God fearing lady like Mother said the old landlord got no more than he deserved.

The cheering subsided, and the throng raised their tankards. Then someone started shouting.

“My cup is empty,” bellowed the tall, bushy bearded man.

“So is mine,” cried another.

Similar shouts were heard. The boy sighed, as he knew what that meant.

“We need more ale.” The Lord of the Harvest pointed at the boy. “Lad, fetch a barrel from the shed.”

“And quickly,” added the bearded man. “For we must toast our Master’s health.”

People laughed, but the boy didn’t share their humour as he slouched from the barn.

Next year he’d be old enough to drink. Next year he’d be dancing with the prettiest girls, not acting as skivvy to a bunch of drunken louts.

Compared to the barn, the yard was eerily silent. Night was falling with an unsettling eagerness, and the chalky moon hung stark against the darkening heavens. The heat of the day had faded, and a chill breeze sent stray wisps of straw scuttling spider-like across the cobbles.

The boy wasn’t afraid of the dark, but regretted not having a lantern as he made his way towards the store shed. This corner of the yard was plunged in shadow, and he had to fumble for the bolt on the shed door. When his fingers finally located the rusted metal pin, he was surprised to find the door had been left ajar.

The boy opened the door further, and peered into the shed. It was dark as pitch inside, but he could discern the barrels stacked against the end wall. And was that a moving shadow?

The boy’s pulse quickened. There was someone in the shed.



He called out, trying hard to disguise his growing unease. “Who be there?”

There was no answer.

“Where’s that useless lad? We need our ale!”

An angry shout came thundering from the barn. The boy debated whether the risk of entering the shed was worse than facing the wrath of an ale starved farm labourer.

Then he took a deep breath, and crept slowly into the shed.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw there was no one lurking to ambush him. He didn’t have long to savour the relief; another angry bellow from the barn reminded the boy that he had a job to do.

The boy spat on his palms and rubbed his hands together, then seized the rim of the nearest barrel. He dragged it into the middle of the shed, and then carefully lowered it onto one side. It was hefty work, and he decided to take one last breather before rolling the barrel out of the shed.

He was about to start rolling when he heard a noise behind him.

Thud.

The boy wheeled round, and saw something rolling across the floor towards him. It was round in shape, with a tapered end and a sprig of leaves on the top.

The boy knew a turnip when he saw one, and chuckled as he picked up the errant vegetable. He saw there was a basket of the things in the corner of the shed, and was going to put the turnip back in the basket when something made him stop.

They hadn't grown turnips on the farm this year.

The boy inspected the turnip in his hand. There was something about it that didn't seem right. And the boy should know, having spent most of his childhood digging up the things. It wasn't just the weight, or the odd bumpy texture, there was something else...

He could feel vibrations coming from the turnip. As though it was alive...

He stared at the turnip, and the turnip stared at him.

It had eyes: beady, wicked looking eyes!

Horrified, the boy dropped the turnip. Then he saw more beady eyes staring at him from the basket.

The boy turned to run, but knocked into the barrel on the floor. The impact sent him sprawling, and the barrel went rolling across the shed.

The boy fell flat on his face. The barrel came to a rest against the shed door, barring his escape route.

He heard more thuds, and looked round to see the turnips dropping from the basket. They came bouncing towards him, their eyes ablaze with evil intent.

But what harm could turnips do? Even bewitched, living turnips? They had no limbs, no claws to cut him with.

The boy started laughing. They were turnips, mere vegetables. Nothing to be afraid of.

But the boy's laughter twisted into a scream of terror when the turnips opened their mouths...

# 1

## Face It, We're Lost

The ground was dry as bone, the soil baked to concrete by the merciless summer sun. In the middle of the field stood a lopsided scarecrow, its arms spread wide in a forlorn pleading gesture. Perhaps it wanted to escape this place, as though it knew its presence wasn't needed; for nothing grew here, only jagged flints sprouted from the cracked, hardened earth. It was a barren scene, which did little to lift Bryony's spirits after two hours of walking.

"Can you see the footpath?" Bill came clambering over the stile to join Bryony in the deserted field.

"There's no footpath, Dad." Bryony stared glumly at the horizon. "Face it, we're lost."

"Impossible." Bill shook his head. "I never get lost."

Bryony knew that wasn't true. "You once got lost getting out of the bath."

"There was soap in my eyes," explained Bill. "And no harm was done, after I apologised to our next door neighbour and her twenty party guests. Mind you, it would have been quite embarrassing if it wasn't for that flannel."

Bryony's stepmother Jane was next over the stile. "I don't see a footpath," she announced, surveying the landscape. "You said it continues through the field, darling."

“It does,” insisted Bill. “Or rather it should, according to my map.”

“Which you left at home,” pointed out Bryony.

“I did not leave the map at home,” contested Bill. “I put it in my back pocket before we left the house. It must have fallen out somehow.”

“Along with your brains,” muttered Bryony, who wasn’t in the mood for her father’s feeble excuses.

Jane’s son Edwin was the last to climb the stile, and needed his mother’s help to negotiate the rickety wooden structure. Normally Bryony would have mocked him for being a weak little cissy, but she was too tired and miserable to start on her stepbrother. In any case, there was someone far more deserving right now.

“We’re lost,” she fumed, directing her furious gaze on Bill. “And it’s all your fault.”

“We’re not lost.” Bill raised his hands in a calming gesture. “You are only lost if you don’t know where you are. And we know where we are. We just don’t know how we got here, or how we’re going to get home again.”

“That’s very much like being lost,” reflected Jane, her usual cheery smile replaced by a weary grimace.

“To the untrained layman,” conceded Bill. “But I have a keen sense of direction, and don’t need maps to guide me. I can plot my position from the sun, even from the direction of the wind.”

“And most of that’s coming from you,” grumbled Bryony.

“I was in the Boy Scouts,” Bill reminded his daughter. “It may have been a few years ago, but I’ve brought all those hard earned skills into my adult life.”

“Along with the uniform.” Bryony was trying not to look at her father’s grotesque baggy shorts.

“I’ll guide us home,” promised Bill. “I just need a few seconds to get my bearings.”

Bill licked his finger and held it in the air. Then he pointed at the sun. Then he turned and pointed in the opposite direction. Then he turned back and pointed at the sun again.

Bryony watched despairingly as her father performed a series of strange bodily movements. She knew he didn’t have a clue where they were, and that it would probably be hours before they made it home.

If ever.

Bryony sat down on the stile, and slipped off her shoes to massage her weary feet. If she’d known they were going to be out this long she would have worn comfortable trainers. And a hat to keep the sun off her face, just like the one that scarecrow was wearing. Perhaps she could borrow it for a while?

Bryony examined the lopsided figure in the middle of the field. As well as the large floppy hat, the scarecrow wore a dark dinner jacket and a loud stripy waistcoat. It was quite well turned out for a scarecrow. Someone had obviously gone to a lot of bother; although Bryony couldn’t see why, as nothing was growing in the field.

It was, she decided, a depressing place. It wasn't just the barren soil, there was something else about the field that made her feel uneasy, but she couldn't put her finger on it. The sooner they were on their way home, the better. But from the way her father was still prancing about, Bryony guessed that wouldn't be any time soon.

Bryony continued to rub her feet, wondering why she had let herself be talked into this 'pleasant afternoon stroll'.

Edwin, on the other hand, was enjoying every minute of it. It was a beautiful late summer's day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Unlike Bryony, he was wearing sturdy walking boots and a wide brimmed hat. Bryony had laughed at him when they'd left the house, but he took great delight in noticing that she wasn't laughing now.

So far so good.

There was movement in Edwin's shirt pocket, and he looked down to see a mouse's head poking out.

"Aren't we heading back yet?" asked Stubby, twitching his whiskers impatiently. "We've been walking for hours."

"What do you mean we?" Edwin scowled at his rodent friend. "I've been doing all the walking. You've been resting in my pocket all the way."

"I wasn't resting," said Stubby. "I was dealing with some outstanding paperwork."

"You mean chewing up bits of kitchen roll." Edwin noticed flecks of white on the mouse's whiskers.

Stubby shook his head. “One day in the distant future, when you grow up, you’ll understand how important it is to keep on top of admin.”

Edwin wondered what sort of ‘admin’ a mouse had to do, but decided against asking. There were more important matters to see to.

“Anyhow,” he replied, lowering his voice to a whisper, “we’re not heading home just yet. Not until I’ve spoken to Bryony.”

“Ah yes, your little scheme.” There was a wary edge to Stubby’s shrill voice. “Are you sure you want to go through with it?”

“Of course,” said Edwin, vehemently. “And anyway, we don’t really have a choice now.”

“Be careful,” warned Stubby. “No good ever comes of you mucking around with magic.”

“It’s all in a good cause,” insisted Edwin. “And don’t worry, I’ll be careful. Careful is my middle name.”

“True,” agreed Stubby. “Along with ‘Anything’ and ‘But’.”

Edwin looked up again. Bill was still meandering around the field, right forefinger in the air. Jane was sheltering beneath a straggly hedgerow, fanning herself with her hand. Bryony sat slouched on the stile, staring solemnly at the ground.

“Keep your head down,” Edwin warned Stubby. “It’s time.”

Stubby retreated into Edwin’s pocket, muttering misgivings about his involvement in proceedings. Edwin strolled towards Bryony, trying his best to look nonchalant.

“Seems like we’re lost,” he observed, adjusting his hat to shield the sun from his eyes. “Probably be hours before we get home.”

“I thought you and your mum enjoyed hiking,” replied Bryony, without lifting her head.

“We do,” agreed Edwin. “When you and your dad aren’t around to mess things up.”

Bryony glanced up, her dark eyes narrowing as she met Edwin’s gaze. “It’s not all Dad’s fault. You two were slowing us down.”

“Sure.” Edwin chuckled. “Bet you would have got lost a lot quicker without us.”

“I wish you’d get lost,” hissed Bryony. “Like, forever.”

Edwin bit his lip. He didn’t want to get into an argument with Bryony. She was obviously in a bad mood, even more than usual, and he would have to choose his words very carefully in case he made things worse.

He adjusted his hat again, cleared his throat, and then smiled at his stepsister. “Can’t wait to get back home. Mum says it’s sardines for tea.”

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “I hate sardines, they make me feel sick.”

Edwin winced, feeling he should have known better. Bryony hated everything he liked, and vice versa. But he knew what might help sway the argument. “And Mum says there’s chocolate éclairs for dessert. You like chocolate éclairs, right?”

Bryony’s face creased with displeasure. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

“Of course not.” Edwin was finding this even harder than he’d feared. “I’m just saying I can’t wait to get home.” He peered down the



field to where Bill was still pacing around. “And sooner rather than later.”

“Dad will get us home,” said Bryony, as much to convince herself as Edwin.

“Yeah, but when?” Edwin moved closer to his stepsister. “It’ll be getting dark in a couple of hours, and I wouldn’t want to sleep out here in the open countryside. When the sun goes down the temperature will plummet. And there’ll be loads of creepy crawlies.”

Bryony shrugged. “But nothing creepier than you.”

“I’m serious,” said Edwin, casually slipping a hand under his hat. “There’s a very real chance we won’t get home before nightfall. So it looks like we might need help.”

Bryony’s eyes widened as they beheld the object Edwin produced from under his hat. It was a large metal key, with three irregular shaped teeth at one end. The other end was circular, embossed with a weird half-human, half-animal face. The face belonged to Inglenook, Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. And the key was the Wychetts Key, the source of the Guardian’s power when away from the magic cottage.

“What are you doing with that?” gasped Bryony, scowling at her stepbrother.

“I asked Inglenook if I could borrow it for the day.” Edwin did his utmost to seem matter-of-fact. “After all, you never know when it might come in handy.”

“Put it away.” Bryony turned away from Edwin. “That thing is nothing but trouble.”

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