

Halloween Magic & Mayhem

by
Stella Wilkinson

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Chapter One

How on earth did I end up here? I was supposed to be at a party kissing the boy of my dreams, instead I'm dancing naked on the town common, on Halloween, with a Coven of strange women who might be witches, a bunch of zombies that I have to return to their graves, a talking crow, and my pet ghost thrown in for good measure. Just yesterday I was an ordinary teenager...

One day earlier...

I left school on Friday, thrilled to be free for the weekend. My best friends, Bryony and Kate, were discussing what costumes to wear to Tamsin Warner's Halloween party tomorrow night, and I was super excited too.

Tamsin seemed to have invited everyone in our year, as well as a few kids from the other school in town, one of whom was Sean Carrey.

Sean Carrey is the boy I like.

I had been in the local shopping centre a few weeks ago with my mates, when a bunch of boys started showing off in front of us on their skateboards. One, in particular, had caught my attention. He had brown hair with a floppy fringe that he kept flicking off his face, big brown eyes, and a dazzling smile. He knew he was cute. What had amazed me most about him was that he seemed to think I was cute too. Despite my being surrounded by some quite pretty female friends, he kept smiling at me. *Me*, plain, boring Emily Rand.

The only interesting thing about me is maybe my hair. It's long and dark. But my eyes are dishwater grey, I think my lips are too thin and my nose is too big. My dad keeps telling me I'm going to be "a great beauty some day", just like my mother was, but I think that day is quite a long way off right now. Plus, my dad is biased.

Anyway, this boy kept looking over, and my friends all noticed and started nudging me. I was embarrassed but secretly delighted.

Despite being nearly sixteen I haven't had much attention from boys, and this one was perfect for my first serious crush. He didn't go to our school, which was a major plus point. I've known all the boys in my school since we were five and clearly remember the phase where they all thought it was hilariously funny to wipe snot on my back; not to mention that time I spent the night at Kate's house and my spare knickers fell out of my bag onto the classroom floor and all the boys threw them back and forth whilst I howled in the toilets and refused to come out for three hours.

This boy had not been part of any of that; he was a mystery, without any childish past, and did I mention he was cute?

After about twenty minutes of showing off in front of us, his friends got chatting to my friends, and so naturally we talked a bit.

His name was Sean Carrey, he went to Fairgreen School on the other side of town, he was sixteen, and he liked pizza and he loved the Alien movies. That was about all I learned. Then his mates wanted to push off and he didn't ask for my number or anything, he just said, "See you around, Emily."

But I never did see him around.

I kept hoping to run into him again, despite being really nervous about doing so. I made my friends go back to the shopping centre every Saturday after, but we never found them.

Then last Monday Tamsin invited us to her party, and she mentioned that some of her friends were coming from Fairgreen. I didn't want to ask her about Sean, but I didn't have to; it turned out he had already asked Tamsin about me.

She was almost green with envy as she told me that Sean had specifically asked her if I was going to be there.

I blushed a lot, but it was a happy blush. He had remembered my name, *and* he told Tamsin to tell me that he was looking forward to seeing me at the party.

I was terrified that he might not really actually like me, and just as terrified that he might. I had no idea how to talk to a boy I liked. Was I supposed to flirt with him and pretend to be confident? It was far more likely I would sit in a corner and hope he'd come and talk to me. I just prayed I wouldn't completely humiliate myself by being totally unable to say anything remotely intelligent.

But it didn't matter, the important thing was that at long last there was a boy who liked me, and I was going to see him at the party.

I did a private happy dance when I got home, and then rushed to ask my dad if we could forget about my big birthday dinner.

Halloween is also my birthday, and this year is my Sweet Sixteen. Dad was going to lay on a "family dinner", which was nice of him but I don't actually like my so-called family.

By that I mean my dad's girlfriend and her son.

My mum died when I was five. I don't remember her that much, but it meant my dad and I were pretty close as I was growing up. So you can imagine how much I resented it when he starting to date again two years ago. Not only did his new girlfriend move into our house, but she brought her son with her: an immature pain in the bum called Duncan, who is only six months younger than me and is now in my class at school.

Dad's forever telling me I have to make sure Duncan's included in stuff I do out of school, but I hate having him follow me around, and I was relieved when he found his own group of idiots to hang with. Unfortunately it seemed they were also invited to the party.

Dad was disappointed about the family dinner but understood that I would rather go to a party.

"Maybe we can all get together beforehand and then you kids could go out after?" he suggested.

Personally I had intended to spend most of the early evening getting ready for the party, so I came up with an alternative.

"How about we have the family dinner on Sunday night instead? That way I can celebrate my sixteenth two nights running." I gave him an enthusiastic smile and he agreed, actually believing I wanted the family dinner. So we were all happy.

"By the way," he'd added, "your aunt called and said to remind you to go see her after school on Friday. She's invited you to stay for dinner. She said to tell you not to forget."

So school was finally over for the week, we had a party to look forward to tomorrow night, Sean Carrey was going to be there, and I was hoping for some decent money from my relatives for my sixteenth. Everything seemed good with the world.

I separated from Bryony and Kate at the corner of Milton Place and went to see my Aunt Iris.

Everyone in town knows Iris is a witch. Not the kind that rides around on a broomstick in a black hat, but the kind that burns incense and wears a lot of pagan

jewellery. She doesn't make any secret of being a witch. In fact, she says it's good for business. She runs one of those shops that sells a lot of witchy paraphernalia. Books, coloured candles, silver pentagrams and crystal balls, all that sort of stuff.

Iris is my mother's sister, the only family I have left on that side, so we're pretty close. I'd secretly always hoped that she and my dad would fall in love, but they don't really get on. Mainly because of the witch thing, I think.

The bell tinkled over the door as I entered her shop and her cat, Lyra, jumped down off the windowsill to greet me. Lyra is generally quite unfriendly to most people, but she loves me, and twined around my legs purring hello.

I bent to stroke her, enjoying the dim light of the shop and its wonderful smells.

Iris came round from behind the counter and gave me a warm hug.

"Thank the goddess you're here at last," she said.

"I only finished school twenty minutes ago."

"I know, I'm just eager to see you." She walked over to the door and flipped the sign from Open to Closed, then locked the door.

"Aren't you supposed to be open until five?" I asked, confused.

She nodded. "Yes, but it's a quiet day, and you and I really need to talk undisturbed."

"That sounds ominous," I said in surprise.

She gave a strained laugh. "It's not 'ominous', no, but it is important."

We went upstairs to the flat she lived in over the shop.

Considering how important whatever it was she wanted to talk about apparently was, she took a very long time to get to the point. First we sat out on her roof terrace and drank nettle tea, while she asked me a bunch of questions about school. Then, when it got too cold, we went inside and carved pumpkins together while she told me lots of spooky Halloween stories. It wasn't until she'd made dinner and we sat down at her old oak table that she cleared her throat and said she had something to tell me.

I twirled spaghetti around my fork and tried to look interested, even though I was actually focusing on not getting tomato sauce on my clothes.

"You're sixteen tonight," she said, a bit overdramatically.

"No," I corrected her, "my birthday is tomorrow. You know that."

She shook her head, "You officially turn sixteen tonight at midnight. There are things you should know before it happens."

"If this is about sex, then Dad already gave me *the talk*; it was embarrassing enough the first time, please don't make me sit through it again!" I begged her.

She laughed, "It's not about sex."

"Well, that's a relief anyway. What else should I know?"

"You should know about your powers. I think they're going to be quite strong, and so you mustn't do anything stupid."

I looked at her in disbelief. "Powers?"

She nodded impatiently, "Yes, your magic powers. You do realise you are a witch?"

Chapter Two

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right, and monkeys might fly out of my butt."

"Don't be sarcastic, Emily, it encourages negative energy."

"OK, Iris, but seriously, I know you are into all...this," I waved my hand towards her fireplace, which doubled up as an altar, "but it's not my bag. I mean I like wearing black, it's better than this cat sick yellow they make us wear in school – sorry, Lyra, no offence," I apologised briefly to the cat, who licked her nose in response.

"But the black outfits aside, I don't really dig the image, and I don't want to be considered a freak at school, which I would be if I went around saying I was a witch!"

"Do you consider me a freak?" Iris asked as if it had genuinely never occurred to her.

I could hardly say yes, even though I wanted to. "Oh, ah, um," was the best I could come up with.

Mercifully she just laughed. "Thanks, Emily. Listen carefully: you are going to become a witch at midnight whether you want it or not. You don't have to tell anyone and you really don't have to wear black. But you do need to know what you're doing. Please, just humour me in this?"

"Humph, fine, I'm a witch." I said. "So, do I have some magical destiny to fulfil?"

She furrowed her brow, "No, why would you?"

"Well, I don't know," I spread my hands, "Isn't that normally how it works?"

"Not so far as I know. You just get your powers. It's up to you what you do with them. But you have to be careful; there are rules, of course, against openly using them."

"Right, yes, rules. Will the vampires rip my head off? Or the Ministry snap my wand or something?" I said, letting the sarcasm creep back in.

Iris sighed slightly but all she said was, "Your wand. Mustn't forget that." She went over to the Welsh dresser against the wall, and reaching right up to the highest shelf, she reverentially took down a small grey book and a stick.

Placing them on the table in front of me she wiped a tear from her eye.

"This is your sixteenth-birthday present from your mother. Her wand and her Grimoire."

"These were my mother's? She thought she was a witch as well?" I said it sort of jokingly, to cover my emotions. My mother left these for me? I choked back a tear of my own; I would think about that later. I ran my finger down the dusty cover of the grey book.

Iris put her hands on her hips. "She didn't just think it, Emily, she was an amazing kitchen witch."

"Kitchen witch?" I was lost now.

"Yes, she was particularly skilled at brewing. And your Grannie Mara is a fantastic hedge witch, so you have it from both sides."

This time I choked on a laugh of disbelief. "Oh, come on! You can't tell me that my father's mother is a witch too? My dad would bust a gut."

"Your father chooses to ignore the obvious all too often," she said sadly. "Are you not aware of your grandmother's unusual herb garden?"

I looked at her in amazement. It was true my grandmother did grow all sorts of unusual plants, and on the rare occasions we visited her she would show her garden to me and try to teach me the names of the things.

I struggled to get my head around it all. Again I retreated into taking the mickey to move past something I wasn't ready to comprehend. I picked up the wand.

"It's a stick," I said flippantly.

"Yes," Iris said calmly, "in essence it is a stick. The wand has no actual power of its own, but it will give your magic some direction. The crystal in the end will enhance your magic too, making it stronger."

I looked at the end, and buried in the wood was indeed a small crystal. I waved the wand around.

"Expelli... something!" I intoned, then looked around expectantly.

Iris huffed; I think I was starting to annoy her. "This isn't Harry Potter, Emily. And secondly, you don't actually have any magic, yet."

I put the stick down and picked up the book. "What's a Grimoire when it's at home?"

"It's basically an instruction manual. How to cast a circle, how to create magical objects like talismans and amulets, how to perform magical spells, charms and divination, and also how to summon or invoke supernatural entities."

I flipped through the pages, a little overcome as I saw it was filled with my mother's neat handwriting.

I wished she were here.

"OK, Aunt Iris. Thank you for these presents. Is there anything else I should know?" I wanted to go home now and look at my mother's book.

Iris stroked Lyra as she jumped onto her lap. "Oh, Em. There's so much you need to learn, but perhaps you've had enough for one night?"

I nodded.

She stood up. "The fact you inherited the craft from both sides is going to make you very powerful, do you understand? But until tomorrow we don't know exactly what your powers will be, so just be careful not to do anything stupid – and promise you'll call me if you have any questions?"

She then took off one of her necklaces and put it around my neck. "From Lyra and me, for protection. Happy Birthday, sweetie." She planted a kiss on my forehead and I gave her a hug, before collecting up my new belongings, stuffing them in my school bag and heading home.

That night I sat up late reading my mother's Grimoire. It was an amazing book and my mother had clearly taken all this witch stuff very seriously. How could I never have known? Why hadn't my father told me? I knew he liked to bury his head in the sand, but was I really a witch?

Inside the front cover of the book was a poem of sorts, entitled "The Witches Rede". It said:

*Bide the witch's law ye must
In perfect love and perfect trust
Eight words the Witches Rede fulfil:
An ye harm none, do what ye will.
What ye send forth comes back to thee
So ever mind the law of three
Follow this with mind and heart
Merry ye meet, and merry ye part*

I couldn't help but think it sounded more like something from "Pirates of the Caribbean" than a Witches Rede. But I took its meaning on board. Kind of a "do as you would be done by, or else" message.

I heard the church clock strike midnight and tensed, wondering if anything magical was going to happen. Would I be surrounded in a blaze of white light or float to the ceiling as I got my powers? I sat cross-legged on my bed and looked round; nothing was different.

I let out the breath I had been holding and rolled my eyes. *Of course* nothing was different; how silly to have let myself be sucked in to thinking it might be.

That's when I saw the ghost materialise in my chair.

Chapter Three

I screamed, loudly.

Sitting on top of the clean laundry on my bedroom chair was an honest-to-goodness ghost. A boy of about my own age, but in a transparent grey. I kept screaming.

My door banged open and Duncan stood there in a t-shirt and boxer shorts. "What the bloody hell are you screaming about?" he demanded, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "I thought you were being murdered!"

"Ghost!" I whispered pointing at the chair.

The boy in the chair sat up, startled. "You can see me?"

"Yes, I can see you!" I didn't take my eyes off the ghost as I scrambled off the bed towards the reassuringly solid frame of Duncan. "Go away!"

Duncan looked at me like I was mad. "I guess you were having a nightmare? Don't worry, I'm going!"

"Not you." I clung to Duncan.

He looked extremely surprised. Normally I avoid being anywhere near him.

"Can't you see him?" I asked Duncan, digging my nails into his arm.

"It was a bad dream," Duncan said in a soothing voice, as though dealing with a child. "Go back to bed." He shook off my hand and slid out of the door before I could display any more unusual behaviour, shutting it behind him.

I made a move to open it and run after him, but the ghost held up his hands as if surrendering. "Please wait! I promise I won't hurt you."

I looked at him suspiciously.

"Please," he said again, "I've been here for years and no one has ever been able to see me."

"Here?" I was horrified. "In my bedroom?"

"Well, I can go anywhere in the house, but I like it in here best."

"You've been watching me all the time?" I was getting mad. "Like some kind of Peeping Tom?"

He had the audacity to smile. "Nothing else to do. I like watching you."

I put my hands on my hips. "As in, when I'm getting changed?" I shuddered to think of all the things he might have seen. Somewhere in my anger at being spied on I had lost my fear of him.

"Yes," he confirmed cheerfully. Then, seeing my expression, he added, "I don't follow you into the bathroom though. I think you should have some privacy, and some things are best left unseen, don't you agree?"

"Oh, well, that's alright then!" I said furiously. "I suppose I should be grateful you have some limits, you bloody pervert!"

"Now, now, Emily. I'm only human. Well, sort of, anyway. You didn't know I was here; there was no harm in it. Spying on your parents is pretty dull, though sometimes I hang out with Duncan and watch him play computer games, but it's boring when you don't get a turn."

I sat back down on my bed. "How long have you been here? What happened to you? What's your name?"

"I'm Peter." He held out one hand as though to shake mine but I leaned back away from him.

"Ah, yes, right, can't shake anyway," he said, not in the least offended.

“How long have I been here?” He sat back down on my pile of clothes and tapped his lip thoughtfully. “Quite a while I think. For a long time before you came, anyway.”

“What happened to you? You don’t look very old to be, um, dead.”

He couldn’t have been more than sixteen himself, and actually he would be kind of handsome if he wasn’t all grey and ghostly.

He smiled. “It’s a great story. My whole family were butchered to death right here in this room. It was a bloodbath. We never found out how the killer got in, and they never caught him, he could still be around now. My four brothers are still here too, roaming around the house, spying on any naked girls they can find.”

I put my hands over my mouth in horror, looking round the room for some signs of blood on the carpet or walls. “I feel sick.” I genuinely thought I might throw up.

“I was just joking!” he said, seeing my white face.

“What? You sleaze rat! You scared the spit out of me. What really happened?”

“Well, it was early in the eighteen hundreds, and I was working as a chimney sweep. I was getting a bit big for the job and I got stuck in that chimney there.” He nodded at the chimneybreast that ran from the living room up through the house. “My boss got me from a workhouse and was a cruel man. No one cared that I didn’t come back out, in fact my bones are still just behind that wall.”

I looked at the chimneybreast with concern but I didn’t react quite as badly this time. “Are you serious? It sounds like something from a bad movie.”

“Hmm, you got me, I think it is from a bad movie actually.”

“Peter!” If he’d been solid I would have whacked him.

“OK, OK, well, there was this great white shark...”

I folded my arms and glared at him.

He smiled ruefully. “Sorry, so much time on my own, I think I’ve gone a bit peculiar. The truth is that I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything much about my life at all. I know I’ve here since before television was invented. It totally brightened up my dull existence when I saw my first TV show. I love TV!”

He looked longingly at the small television in my room. “You couldn’t put your ‘Friends’ DVD on for me, could you? The one where Phoebe teaches Joey to speak French? I love that episode, it’s hysterical.”

I groaned, but got up, flicked through the box set and inserted the requested DVD. I put the sound on low and climbed into bed. I was just plumping up the pillows behind my head to watch it better when Peter sidled onto the bed next to me.

I gave him a look, but moved over slightly so he could lie next to me comfortably, though why I cared about the comfort of a ghost was beyond me; surely he could just sort of float?

One of my arms drifted downwards and went through his stomach. It felt cold, but nothing more. I pulled my arm back.

“Emily?”

“Yes, Peter?”

“How come you can see me now? You never could before.”

My eyes snapped open wide. “Because it’s gone midnight,” I said, slowly letting it sink in. “And I’m now a witch.”

“Oh, right.” He seemed to accept that without question. Then he looked excited. “You could help me cross over! I seem to remember that only a priest or a witch can help a stuck spirit to the other side, is that right?”

“I don’t know, sorry. I’m kind of new to all this. I’ll ask my aunt tomorrow.” I yawned and tried to focus on the show as my eyelids drifted closed.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My eyes snapped open. It was daylight and I was in bed alone. I wondered if it had all been a dream after all, and then the tapping noise started again.

I glanced at the clock, feeling disorientated; it was already half past ten in the morning. I guess my father let me sleep in because it was Saturday.

I looked around for the source of the noise. A huge crow was standing on the sill right outside my window.

“Come on, witch, open up!” Surely the bird didn’t just say that?

I approached the window tentatively. “Hello?” I said, feeling stupid.

The bird tipped his head to one side. “Hello,” he answered quite distinctly, “any chance of opening the window – its bleeding freezing acorns out here.”

I must be going mad, I thought. I considered shouting for my father. Aren’t crows supposed to be evil? But this one could talk. Maybe it was some kind of rare parrot?

“Look, lady,” the crow said, “I ain’t got all day whilst you dither, I’m here on a matter of business.”

I opened the window an inch. “What kind of business?” I said suspiciously.

“I’m ’ere as your new Familiar.” He ducked his head to me, in what I guessed was a respectful gesture.

“My Familiar?” The word itself sounded, well, familiar. “Is this a witch thing?”

“Yes, ma’am. You’ve just come into your powers; I figure you don’t have a Familiar yet?”

“Well, no.” I cracked the window open a little more, still suspicious. “Who sent you?”

“No one sent me. I heard the gossip, of course. There’s lots of gossip when a new witch gets her powers, and you’re radiating power; all the animals can sense it.” His beady eyes were fixed on mine.

“So let me get this straight,” I tried to get my sleep-addled brain working; “you heard I needed a Familiar, and so you flew over here to offer your services?”

He bobbed his head. “The early bird catches the worm, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

“I see,” I said thoughtfully, but I wasn’t sure about it at all.

“You’ll get a lot of cats applying for the position,” he went on, “but I can be much more useful, take messages for you, spy without being noticed. I know owls are popular right now, but honest, gov, owls are useless, they sleep all day and keep you up all night asking for dead mice. I fend for myself and I’m house-trained too, I don’t poop indoors.”

“Um, good,” I said, wondering if perhaps I was still dreaming. “So what’s in it for you? Why would you want to be a Familiar? Wouldn’t you rather just do what you like?”

“It’s worth it, especially for a bird.” He answered. “Gets me higher up the ‘pecking order’ if you’ll excuse another pun. I’d be under a witch’s protection. No one messes with a Familiar; I could even taunt the foxes.”

If a bird could smile then I’d swear he was smiling at that idea.

I shook my head, trying to clear my brain. “How come I can hear you talking?” I narrowed my eyes on him.

“Because you’re a witch now.” He gave me a look that said “Duh!”

I mulled that over for a minute. “Why do I need a Familiar?”

“All witches have a Familiar!” He seemed shocked by the question, so I didn’t pursue it. I figured I had a lot more reading to do if I wasn’t going to look as thick as two short planks in this new world.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Bob.”

“*Bob?*”

“What’s wrong with Bob?” He looked offended.

I felt bad for insulting him. “I guess I was expecting something more otherworldly,” I said lamely.

“What, like Rumpelstiltskin?” If a bird’s eyes could roll, this one’s did. He grumbled quietly for a bit, then clarified, “It’s short for Blackbobhead. But I prefer Bob.”

“Yes, I can see why. Bob, thanks for stopping by and all that...”

“Listen, lady...”

That was the second time he’d referred to me as *lady*. “Don’t call me that, it makes me sound old – I’m only fifteen. No, hang on, it’s my birthday today, I’m sixteen!” I felt all giddy and happy to finally be sixteen.

“If you take me on then I would call you Mistress,” Bob said.

“Really?” I sort of liked the sound of that.

He cocked his head, “Wanna give it a trial run? Just call when you need me. I’ve memorised the timbre of your voice now and we birds have an amazing sense of hearing.”

“OK, Bob, you’re on. Come in. Come and meet Casper, I mean Peter, he’s my ghost.” I had totally lost my grip on reality now.

“Peter?” I called, unable to see him anywhere.

His head appeared through the wall. “Oh, good, you’re up. I got bored when the DVD finished, and I can’t put on a new one. Could you put the next series in for me?” His body followed his head into the room.

“This isn’t the time for watching TV,” I said. “It’s my birthday and it looks like I’m definitely a witch.”

“A very powerful witch,” Bob said proudly, “and born on Halloween too? A very powerful witch indeed.”

“Yeah, but all that Halloween stuff is just nonsense, isn’t it?” I said, suddenly not sure if it was or not.

Both Bob and Peter gasped at my ignorance. “It’s All Hallows Eve!” Bob chided me. “The veil between this world and the next becomes very thin – a lot of spirits creep through, especially those that are invited, and they bring a lot of magic with them. The air literally hums with it. Everything you do on Halloween is more powerful, and being born on the 31st of October makes you doubly powerful. The planets line up in the same place they were at when you were born; don’t you think that would have some effect? Not to mention that this particular Halloween is also a full moon. It’s like a cosmic overload out there today.”

“So, I’m like the witch version of ‘The Omen’?” I felt really out of my depth.

“I don’t know ‘The Omen’, Mistress, but I do know you need to be careful, today of all days, not to do anything stupid.”

I sighed, “Why do people keep telling me that?” I had a feeling that maybe I should just spend the day in bed with the duvet over my head.

Chapter Four

"I'm up now," I said more to myself than to my two strange companions. "Why don't you two take yourselves off so I can get dressed?"

Bob nodded obediently and flew out of the open window. I closed it behind him to keep out the October chill.

Peter settled himself back in my chair. "Don't mind me," he said, "I've seen you getting dressed hundreds of times."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know you were there then! The free porn is over." I went over to my chest of draws and started pulling out clothes.

"Wear the black lace undies, they're my favourite," he teased.

I collected a bundle of clothes, and added some huge grannie knickers to make a point, and said, "I'm going to change in the bathroom. If you even think of following me in there I will personally locate your bones and stomp on them, got it?"

He leaned back in the chair and laughed, but I figured he was smart enough not to push me.

Half an hour later I'd showered, dressed, and was fixing my makeup back in my bedroom.

"So I guess we should go and see my aunt?" I addressed Peter, who hadn't moved. "She might be able to give me some advice about helping you."

"I can't leave the house, remember?" Peter sighed.

"Oh, right, of course. I'll go see her and get back to you. I have a party to go to tonight so I need time to get ready for that. I'm going to have breakfast and then I'll go straight there. I should be back around four, is that OK?"

Peter shrugged. "I've waited this long, I can wait a few hours."

Breakfast was great. Clare, my dad's girlfriend, had laid the table for a birthday brunch, with me at the head and several presents in front of my plate. She can be quite nice sometimes.

"Hello, Pumpkin." My dad put down his paper and gave me a kiss. "Happy birthday." I think he calls me Pumpkin because I was born on Halloween.

They had all been waiting for me, and Clare went and made scrambled eggs with smoked salmon, which are my absolute favourites.

I opened my present from Duncan first; he'd got me all the Batman films in a box set, which was pretty cool, even though I suspected he just wanted to see them all again himself. I thought that Peter would probably enjoy them too.

Next I unwrapped one of the parcels from my dad and Clare. It was soft and black. I held it up. It was a floor-length black cloak, with fur trim and a velvet-lined hood. It was gorgeous, and just perfect for the party tonight.

"Thank you, I love it!" I gave my dad a hug, and even gave Clare a kiss on the cheek as she appeared with our food. She looked surprised and quite pleased.

I opened the others after we'd eaten and got a pretty good haul. Grannie Mara had sent me a book on the magical properties of plants, as well as fifty pounds. I wondered if she knew I would be getting my powers today.

Taking it all upstairs, I dumped it on my bed and then picked up my mother's wand and Grimoire before heading out to see Iris.

I entered the shop behind a guy and two girls. Lyra was sitting on the counter giving all the customers a once-over. She was looking at the three people in front of me.

"Dead-beat. Time-waster and possible thief. Really ugly skirt," I heard her say, commenting on each of them.

“Lyra!” I chided, really excited that I could hear her talking.

“Miss Emily.” Lyra jumped down off the counter, looking flatteringly pleased to see me. She rubbed her face against my ankle. “I’ll go and tell my Mistress you’re here.”

“Thank you.” I said it quite quietly because the girl that Aunt Iris employs to help her on a Saturday was looking at us.

Iris came out of the stock room at the back, cleaning charcoal off her hands.

“Emily, how lovely. You haven’t done anything, uh, unusual yet, have you?” Iris glanced at Jill, who was serving “ugly skirt”.

“Not really. But I would like to talk to you. Are you very busy?”

“Fairly. Halloween is always my best day, plus I have an awful lot to do before my Coven meeting tonight. But I think your needs probably merit some special attention, so Jill will just have to cope.” She raised her voice to Jill: “I’ll be upstairs, just push the bell if you need me.”

“Lyra said that one of those girls was a potential thief,” I whispered as we went over to the stairs.

“Not a problem,” Iris smiled. “There’s a protection spell on the shop. If she tries to steal anything in her pocket or bag it jumps right out again before she gets to the door. Very embarrassing for the thief; they never try it twice.”

Up in her flat, I noticed white powder along all the windowsills, and even a line across the doorway. “What’s that? Something magical?” I asked.

“Just regular salt,” she said. “It keeps out the evil spirits, they can’t cross a line of salt. And there will be a fair few of them out tonight. You should do the same at your house.”

“Yeah, I can just imagine Clare’s face if I put salt in all the windows!” I grimaced. “Speaking of spirits...” I filled her in on my encounter with Peter.

“Oh, that poor boy!” she said. “Do you have any idea what his unfinished business might be?”

I shook my head. “He doesn’t seem to remember much about his own life. Not even his last name. I can’t quite work out what his clothes are, some kind of suit I think, so it’s hard to date when he died; but I think it might be quite a long time ago. He speaks as if he is modern-day, but he does like to watch TV, so he might have caught up.” I shrugged. “If he died a long time ago then presumably anyone connected with his unfinished business would also be dead?”

“That is a problem.” Iris tapped her foot whilst she considered it. “It’s quite a specialist subject. If only your mother were here; she was great with helping ghosts pass on.”

“Really?” Another new bit of information about my mother, and perhaps another gift I might have inherited from her?

“Hmmm, but it takes a while to master—we really need someone who already knows what they are doing. I know!” She turned to me, excited, as a thought struck her. “You must come to my Coven meeting tonight. It would be a great chance for you to meet other witches, and I know they would all be thrilled to meet you too. There’s a witch there, Theresa, who has some experience with spirits. Bring Peter with you.”

“But he can’t leave the house,” I said, not at all enthusiastic about going to her Coven meeting.

“Can’t you bind him to you instead of to the house? I’m sure the instructions will be in your mother’s Grimoire. As I said, she did quite a bit of work with spirits.”

I shrugged, “Maybe. But I have a party to go to tonight. Would it take long?”

She pulled a face at my selfishness. "I don't know, I'll ask Theresa for you. We meet at eight at The Seven Sisters; you should have plenty of time to get to your party as well."

The Seven Sisters were a famous group of beech trees on the town common near my house. It was right on the edge of town, so fairly private, but also fairly easy to get to. Planted hundreds of years ago, the trees were now incredibly tall, and stood in a large circle surrounded by open space. I could see how they would make a good place for a Coven to meet.

Despite several interruptions from the shop downstairs, Iris managed to teach me quite a lot over the next couple of hours.

I learned about casting a circle and about the four elements. It turns out my aunt is an Elemental Witch; her element is fire. I was excited about the idea of being able to control one of the elements, but after a lot of failure at trying to get a response from fire, earth, water and even the air, we had to conclude that I probably wasn't one of the elemental witches.

I couldn't imagine being a Kitchen Witch like my mother; my dad and I lived mainly on baked potatoes before Clare and Duncan moved in and Clare took over our meals. I could chop up a salad, no problems, but cooking was not my strong point. Only last month I had tried to microwave some eggs, but they had all exploded quite spectacularly; apparently you can't microwave eggs still in the shell.

I also seriously doubted I was a Hedge Witch, like my Grannie. Years ago I had tried to grow cress and mustard for a school project. I was the only person in the class whose seeds did absolutely nothing at all.

Iris patted me and said we would find my "metier", whatever that was. "You're probably an Eclectic Witch, Emily," she said, which confused me even more, "It means you have a bit of this and a bit of that, but hopefully a bit of everything you need. It would make sense."

We went thorough some of the spells in my mother's Grimoire. All the spells had to be said in rhyme, and some of them had to be said three times over, which seemed rather a faff.

We took a break for afternoon tea, and I slumped down on the sofa. I was starting to get frustrated. Apart from being able to hear animals talk and seeing a ghost, I had not actually managed to perform any magic at all so far.

I had waved my wand and said spells but nothing had happened. I had put ingredients in a cauldron and stirred it anticlockwise while chanting, but it could have been done by anyone; nothing magical occurred at all.

I could see Iris as well was beginning to wonder if I really had any magic. I felt a total idiot waving a wand, and like a total cliché stirring a cauldron. It was hardly inspiring.

"I think I'll go home," I told Iris. "I'm clearly not a risk as a witch. Less of the 'powerful' and more of the 'pathetic', I think."

Iris gave me a hug. "It will come, Emily. I don't think we've found where your talents lie, but I'm convinced you will have some. You *must* do." She said the last bit forcefully and I wondered if she were trying to convince herself as much as me.

"Try to *feel* it a bit more," was her last piece of advice as we went downstairs. "It's not a mental thing, magic must come from the heart."

As a birthday present, Iris said I could have any supplies I felt I needed from her shop, so I went round with a basket picking out the things that took my fancy. I stocked up on tall thin candles of all colours as well as some thick white pillar candles. I got some incense called Halloween, which had a lovely cinnamon smell,

and a wicked-looking “ceremonial” knife called an Athame. I also selected a red velvet cushion, as a little present for Bob to sit on.

“Please think about coming to the Coven meeting,” Iris said as she showed me out.

“Mmm, maybe,” I said, deliberately not committing myself. There was no way I was missing the party for that.

When I got home the house was empty. I ran up to my room to get ready.

“Peter, are you in here?” I called. I got no response so I started to undress.

“Boo!” He popped out of my wardrobe.

“Aghh! You creep!” I was already down to my bra and knickers. “OUT!” I pointed at the door. He smirked at me and went through the wall instead.

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