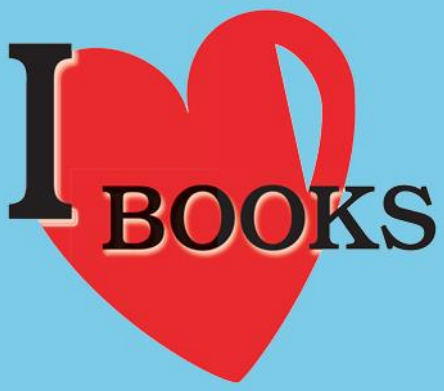


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Opening extract from

The Witch's Kiss

Written by

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THEN:

THE KINGDOM OF THE SOUTH SAXONS, 522 AD

WITCHES DO NOT kneel.

They do not grovel. They do not beg favours from any creature, mortal or immortal.

At the most, they bargain.

Meredith knew this; had known it for as long as she could remember. But, as she scrambled up the steep hillside, shredding her skirts and her skin on the long thorns of may trees, the things she had been certain of were no longer enough.

Finally, she reached the summit. This place was not holy, but it was old. Very, very old.

Meredith passed through the outer ring of pine trees, so tall and close growing they blocked out the sun and the wind, walking on until she got close to the single oak growing at the centre of the circle. The oak was twisted and split with age, green foliage flecked with cream. Not flowers, but bones: tied to the branches, littering the ground beneath.

Then, Meredith knelt.

She cleared a space in front of her, sweeping away the bones and dead leaves until the earth beneath was revealed, and pulled a knife out of her belt. She had no offering to bargain with. She had only herself.

'This I pledge—' Her voice was weak; she swallowed, ran her tongue over her cracked lips and tried again. 'This I pledge: by the time the charmed sleep ends, one of my children's children will be ready to face Gwydion, to defeat him and to remove all traces of his enchantments from the face of the earth. We shall have vengeance.' An echo seemed to come from the encircling trees, throwing her words back to her:

… *vengeance*… *vengeance*…

Without hesitating, Meredith pressed the point of the knife into her palm, dragging the blade slowly downwards to split the skin, allowing blood to drip from her outstretched hand on to the ground.

'I swear, not by the gods, nor by men, but by the bones and ancient soul of this land, to bind myself and my descendants to this fate.'

… *fate*… *fate*…

With one finger dipped in the blood, Meredith traced a shape on the ground: a binding rune. For a moment it glowed white against the dark earth, before burning away into smoke.

NOW:

ONE

MERRY WAS DREAMING about blood.

Blood, running in scarlet rivulets across the black tarmac at her feet, pooling around her toes. So much blood that she could smell the coppery-tinny scent of it, like a palmful of coins warm from being clutched in her fist. She put her hand up to cover her nose and mouth, tried not to breathe too deeply. In the distance, someone was screaming.

She looked up. A boy was walking towards her across the flat, grey-lit landscape. Memory stirred in her mind. She knew this boy, and not just from her recent nightmares. She recognised his clothes: a cloak, pinned with a gold-coloured

brooch, some sort of tunic and – trousers, she guessed they were, but not like anything she'd ever seen boys actually wearing. She recognised the evil-looking knife he carried. The boy was tall, with long, blond hair tied back – the same colour as her brother's, but straight, not curly – and a handsome, angular face. As he came closer she saw for the first time, or maybe she just remembered, that his eyes were brown; brown, with little flecks of gold. And she gasped, not because his eyes were beautiful, but because they were hard and cold and full of cruelty.

Another memory floated to the surface of her mind. Somehow, she knew the boy's name.

Jack?

The boy smiled at her, and it was like looking into the maw of a shark.

Meredith…

Merry woke with a gasp, swore, rubbed her eyes and tried to remember where she was.

In her bedroom, of course – she must have just dropped off. In the lamplight, she could see nothing had changed. There was no one else there: no strange boy with dead eyes staring down at her, threatening her with a knife.

Just another bad dream, that was all.

It was after midnight now. A quick peek into Leo's room

on the opposite side of the landing confirmed that her pain-in-the-neck older brother still hadn't come home; it was just her and their mother's two Burmese cats, and they were probably asleep on top of the boiler in the kitchen. Mum herself was working in France for the rest of the week. A self-employed graphic designer, one of her major clients was in Paris, and she spent a *lot* of time there. But that didn't bother Merry any more. Not really. As she turned back into her own room, Merry's glance took in the half-completed homework on the desk, the half-read magazines piled next to the wicker chair in the corner, the half-reorganised wardrobe. She picked up a couple of pairs of ankle boots and half-heartedly arranged them on the shoe rack, but it was no good. She hadn't been able to settle, to actually finish anything, for days. The restlessness was like… ants, crawling over her skin. But there was definitely more to it than that. A person who was merely restless didn't check under her bed every night before she turned out the light, or sleep with a tennis racket handily positioned against the bedside table.

Unwilling to risk another nightmare, Merry texted and played games on her phone for another hour or so, until her eyelids grew too heavy for her to focus on the screen any longer. She got up to close the curtains and peered

through the window for a moment, hoping to see some sign of her brother. But there was nothing. Just the darkness and her own reflection – auburn hair half-falling out of a ponytail, shadows underneath hazel eyes – thrown back in fragments from the uneven panes of leaded glass.

Behind her, something began to rattle. Among the photos of her and her friends, which she kept on the dressing table, the one of her and Leo was shuddering. The motion grew, the frame rocking more and more violently until it hurled itself off the dressing table and smashed into the wall opposite. Merry yelped and flinched.

Oh no, not again –

She inspected the damage: the frame had taken a big chunk of plaster off the wall. That didn't matter – Mum never came into her room. But she felt stupid. It had been four years since her power first began to emerge; eight months since she'd decided it was too dangerous for her to practise any more. Her capabilities were hardly a surprise.

It's these attacks, and the nightmares, that's all. Making me tense.

Ha. That was a lie and she knew it. Sure, the situation in Tillingham was making everything worse – that was obviously why she was dreaming about scary, imaginary blond boys. But the power she had… Recently, in the last

few weeks especially, her magic seemed to be developing a life of its own. It didn't shock her any more.

It frightened her.

In bed, Merry pulled the duvet up close around her neck and shoulders, breathing deeply, trying to force herself to relax. The familiar outlines of her room gave contours to the shadows: the bedroom furniture, the laptop open on her desk, the pile of clothes and shoes on the floor. She could hear the usual night-time noises of the house: doors banging slightly in the draft, floorboards and ceiling beams creaking as they cooled and contracted, the wind sighing in the chimneys. But tonight it all felt – alien. Like the recognisable shapes and sounds around her were fakes, put there to conceal something utterly strange, something that was crouching in the darkness just waiting for her to fall asleep…

She shivered, and pulled the duvet tighter.

Yellow light lanced through the curtains. There was the chug of a diesel engine pulling up outside, followed by the sound of a car door slamming – a taxi. Her brother was finally home. Merry's shoulders relaxed and she glanced at her alarm clock.

I can't believe Leo. There's a bloodthirsty maniac running

around town, and he decides to stay out until two in the morning? I could be lying up here bleeding to death, for all he knows.

She slipped out of bed. It was time to make Leo pay.

Thirty seconds later she was downstairs in the dark, quietly sliding home the bolts on the front door. She pressed her ear to the cold wood. Leo was stumbling up the path, swearing as he tripped on one of the uneven paving stones. He reached the door and she heard him drop his keys, pick them up, drop them again. More swearing. Then the tapping sound of Leo trying to fit the key into the keyhole, turning the lock. The door shifted in the frame.

'What the—?' Leo turned the key again, pushing against the door, trying to force it open. Merry grinned and ran back up the stairs. She'd let him in eventually, but –

Knock, knock, knock.

Merry froze. That wasn't coming from the front door. That was coming from up above her, from the attic. She reached for the light switch. Nothing happened. She flipped the switch: on, off, on, off – still no light. A fuse must have gone somewhere. Or –

Or the maniac is up in the attic, and he's cut the power –

Knock, knock, knock.

She stared up at the ceiling. And there was that feeling again, the same feeling she'd had in her bedroom but worse, tendrils of fear snaking up between her shoulder blades and giving her goose pimples. And now the unknown presence was right behind her, reaching out to engulf her –

Merry scrambled down the stairs and dragged back the bolts. Her hands shaking, she opened the door just as Leo was trying to ram it with his shoulder. He stumbled forwards and lay on the floor, groaning.

'Leo! Leo, get up. I think there's someone in the attic.' She pulled ineffectively at her brother's elbow.

'Merry, I – couldn't get door open. I'm jus' – jus' gonna lie here for a minute. It's all – dizzy.'

'Oh my God, you're totally wasted.' Merry stopped trying to drag Leo upright and slapped his arm instead. 'I can't believe it. We're probably about to be attacked and you're lying there completely—'

'I had a couple – a couple of pints, that's all. Three, maximum. Maybe six.' He squinted up at her. 'What d'you mean, attacked?'

'The electricity's gone and there's a noise coming from the attic. A banging noise. I think someone's broken in. What if it's the maniac who's been in the news – the one who's been knifing people?'

Leo pushed himself up into a sitting position, cradling his head in his hands.

'Merry, don't be daft. Town's full of police: whoever it was, he's long gone. No way is he gonna be in our attic. Just – go back to bed.' He pressed his hand to his mouth, grimacing. 'On second thoughts, make me some of that mint tea you drink. Then go back to bed.' The lights in the hallway suddenly flickered into life. 'See? It was just a power – thing. Cut.'

Merry looked back up the stairs, frowning.

'I don't know, Leo. When I was on the landing, it just felt really… scary.' The words sounded pathetic, but she couldn't think of another way to explain. 'You're meant to be the responsible one. You should check the doors and windows, that kind of thing.' She paused, and tried to make her voice soft and coaxing. 'Just a quick look? Please? Then I'll make you some tea. You know I don't like being alone in the house. I mean, it's so isolated…'

'Leave it out, Merry.' Leo grabbed hold of the newel post at the end of the staircase and used it to heave himself upright. 'I've got to get to bed; I'm working tomorrow.' He checked his phone and groaned. 'Today, even. You want me to do anything else, you're going to have to get your

wand and make me.' He smirked at her. 'Seriously, why don't you go and cast a spell, or something?'

Merry stared at him, eyes narrowed.

'I really hate the way you are when you've been out with Simon and the rest of those idiots. You know we don't use wands. And you know Mum hates us even mentioning the craft.' She started examining her fingernails. 'In fact, when she gets back I might just tell her what you said. And what time you got in. And that you're—' she sniffed and made a face. 'Geez, you reek. Have you started smoking again?'

'No.'

'Yeah, right.'

Leo scowled at her.

'Y'know, if you were the witch in a fairy story, you'd be the kind that eats the children. *Meredith*.'

Merry scowled back.

'Don't call me Meredith.'

'Whatever, Maleficent. Maybe I'll tell Mum exactly how many parties you've been to in the last couple of weeks, and how much time you've spent not studying.' He yawned and started walking up the stairs, weaving slightly, only narrowly missing the cats as they streaked past him. 'Damn cats! Honestly, Merry, I'm knackered.

And you're crazy.' He tapped a finger on his temple. 'I'm going to bed.'

Merry quickly locked the front door, then hurried up the stairs behind her brother.

'But Leo – what about those people who've been attacked? Three couples in two nights, just stabbed and left to bleed to death on the street. What if—'

'Just give it a rest, Merry.' Leo yawned and rubbed his eyes. 'Look, you have got to stop obsessing about that. It'll probably turn out they're connected in some way, like…' He screwed up his face in concentration, 'I dunno, they're all criminal overlords. Doesn't follow whoever attacked them is wandering around town looking for his next victim.' He yawned again. 'But if it makes you feel better I'll leave my door open. If anyone dodgy shows up, scream. I'll come and – and—' He waved his hands around vaguely.

'Rescue me?' Merry guessed.

'Yeah. That.'

'Fabulous. That makes me feel so much better.'

Leo shrugged his shoulders, went into his bedroom and promptly collapsed on to his bed. He almost instantly started snoring – loudly. Merry stood and watched him for a moment. Leo was probably right. The banging noise she'd heard was most likely to do with the central heating.

And as for that feeling she'd had, that horrible, sickening fear – it was probably just stress, or too many late nights. She sighed and went back into her own room. But she left the landing light switched on.

'What the—'

Leo sat bolt upright, pushing the cats off the bed. They yowled and jumped straight back on to it, tails fluffed up like feather dusters.

'What is wrong with you two?' He checked his phone: just after five in the morning. Still dark outside. Collapsing back on to the pillows, he closed his eyes against the pain in his head. It was stupid, to have drunk so much. But being with Simon and Dan and the rest of his old friends, and having to keep pretending… He could understand how Merry felt. He was starting to hate himself, the way he was around them.

Knock, knock, knock.

The sound was coming from the attic. Just the plumbing, or some woodworm in the old timbers. Probably. He glanced at the cats. Both were bristling, their ears twitching back and forth. Leo sighed and got out of bed. This was all Merry's fault, putting ideas in his head. The whole thing was ridiculous. Still, he was awake now. He lifted his cricket

bat down from the top of the wardrobe and padded across the landing to his sister's room. She was muttering faintly, frowning in her sleep, her hands clenched into fists.

'Merry? Merry, wake up.'

He shook her shoulder and switched on the bedside lamp, causing her to screw up her eyes against the light.

'Leo – oh, thank God.' She covered her face with her hands for a moment. 'I was having another—'

'Shh.' Leo put one finger on his lips.

'Huh? Why are we whispering? And what's with the bat?'

'Listen.'

Knock, knock, knock.

The knocking was more frequent now.

'That's the noise I heard earlier,' she murmured. 'What is it?'

'No idea. But it's coming from…' He pointed upwards. The noise stopped for a minute. Then it started again, slightly louder. 'I'm sure it's just a squirrel, or a rat, or something. A burglar wouldn't be, you know, tap-dancing on the floor.' He patted the cricket bat. 'But I like to be prepared.'

'Tap-dancing?' Merry yawned and squinted up at him. 'What the hell are you on about, Leo?'

Leo straightened up, running a hand through his hair.

'Honestly, I don't know. I've had less than three hours sleep and I'm tired, OK?'

'Hungover, more like.' She stared up at him for a minute. 'Damn. I suppose you want me to come up there with you?'

'Well, you're the one who's making me paranoid. What do you think?'

Three minutes later, Leo was switching on the light in the attic. Merry was standing, shivering, on the bottom rung of the metal pull-down ladder.

'Well, I think we can rule out an intruder,' Leo shouted down at her. 'Unless he's really, really tiny.'

'Huh?'

He poked his head back though the hatch.

'Come on up and I'll show you.'

Merry muttered under her breath, but she climbed the rest of the ladder and came to stand next to him, hastily brushing a cobweb off her pyjamas. It was years since either of them had been up here. The attic – really a whole bunch of attics connected by odd steps up and down – was huge, and just as well. Mum was a chronic hoarder; she never threw anything away, on the basis that 'it might come in handy someday.' Or alternatively, 'this is bound to be

worth something eventually.' After sixteen years the attic was crammed with cardboard boxes of various sizes, old pieces of furniture and artwork, unidentifiable things draped in sheets. It would be a tight squeeze for even the smallest burglar. Leo and Merry manoeuvred their way through the dust and detritus. The knocking was getting more frequent, more insistent.

'What the hell is it?' Merry asked.

'I don't know, but it's coming from over there.' He waved a hand towards the corner, where a dark oak chest had been wedged between a broken armchair and an old-fashioned sewing machine table.

The two of them went over to the chest and carefully lifted Merry's old doll's house and a stack of commemorative issues of the *Radio Times* off the top of it. Something inside was banging noisily against the wooden frame.

'Right,' said Leo. 'You open it.'

'How about you open it and I stand over there at a safe distance and watch you?'

Leo sighed.

'No, you need to open it. Then, if anything jumps out, I'll hit it with the bat.' He waved the bat around a bit, to demonstrate.

Merry shuddered and stepped away from the chest.

'But what's going to jump out?'

'Oh, for – something less annoying than you, hopefully. How on earth should I know? Just open it.'

'Ugh, fine. After three, OK?' Merry counted; she got to three, lifted the lid and leapt back quickly.

Nothing jumped out at them. Merry gave a little 'oh' of relief and surprise and went to peer inside. Leo came and craned over her shoulder. The chest was empty, apart from a pile of children's picture books and a seven-sided wooden box, tucked away in the corner.

The box was twitching.

As they stared at it, the twitching got worse. The box started slamming against the side of the chest again.

'What is it?' Leo asked.

'Er, it's a jewellery box?'

'Yes, so I can see. But why is it doing *that*?'

'How on earth should I know?' Merry scowled, then turned away and started fiddling with the dials on an old record player sitting nearby, shaking her hair forwards so Leo couldn't see her face.

Leo rolled his eyes.

'Come on, Merry. This has got to have something to do with your lot.'

'My lot?' Merry swung round. 'You know I've never

been allowed to practise. You know I'm completely untrained.'

'Seriously?' Leo pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Look, I also know you do stuff on the quiet. Or you used to, at any rate. You *know* I know. But I'm not going to tell on you to Mum. Just make it stop – jumping, will you? The noise is really starting to get on my nerves.'

'I still don't know what you expect me to do about it.'

'Merry!'

'OK, OK,' Merry huffed. She reached down slowly, carefully, and picked up the jumping trinket box. It stilled immediately.

Merry looked up at Leo and smiled.

And then she fainted.