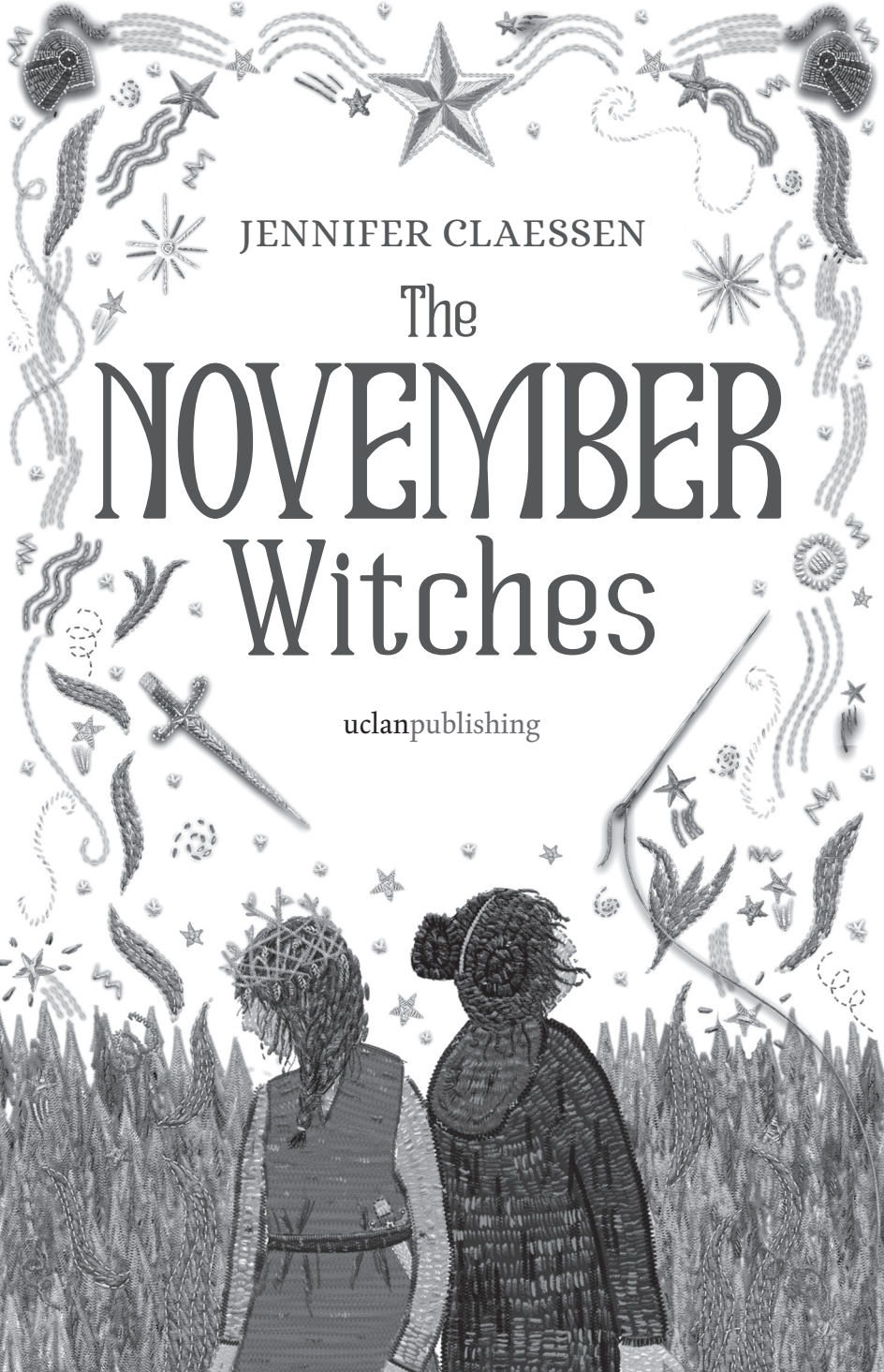
The NOVEMBER Witches

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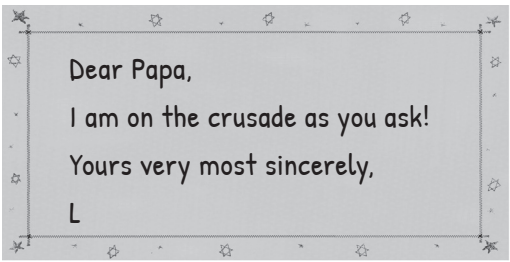
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For Lyra Claessen,
a small and sleepless young hag
who napped just enough for me to write this book

CHAPTER 1



'You can't start in the middle!' a voice behind me says. The voice is scandalised and squeaky.

I drop the needle and turn around in my chair.

'I wasn't going to!' I protest.

Mirabelle drops into the chair next to me with a grin. That wasn't her real voice. She was doing an impression of Kerra.

Mirabelle is my cousin. And Kerra is also our cousin. But Kerra is a second, a third . . . or a twenty-third-degrees-away kind of cousin. I'm starting to be grateful for that bit of distance.

The grin I give Mirabelle back fades when I turn to stare down at the knotted mess in front of me.

Mirabelle reaches out a hand, slowly hovering it over

the fabric but not quite touching it. She's being very careful with what she's touched so far this November, and I saw her inspecting her fingers closely before buttering her toast this morning. Everyone gave the new toaster a wide berth too, but bread isn't going to cook by itself.

'So, what *are* you doing?' Mirabelle asks, taking her hand back and folding it carefully onto her lap.

'I dunno,' I say, slumping backwards away from the tangled threads. 'I wanted to . . . it might help . . .'

'Clem – you don't have to fix this,' Mirabelle says. Her hand hovers over mine this time.

I spent all of October worried about what I could and couldn't do. I'm trying not to do that now.

'I thought maybe the aunts . . . I thought maybe I should try . . .'

Mirabelle frowns just a little and then her hand firmly takes mine. We both flinch, but only for a second. Nothing sizzles, nothing tingles.

Mirabelle's hand is warm and solid and pretty normal for a witch's hand.

'You don't have to feel guilty. We young hags did the best we could and now it's November. That's what happens. Months just roll on. And the aunts will get over it.'

I raise my eyebrows at her very obvious lie.

'OK, so Aunt Connie won't get over anything, ever. And Aunt Prudie probably won't either. And my mum and Temmie have a *lot* to get over so . . . OK, forget that last bit. But this tapestry business isn't your responsibility, OK?'

'The whole coven is annoyed with me,' I say, sounding pathetic because it's the truth and the truth is pathetic. If I can make amends with some mending, then maybe I won't feel so much shame for how much my coven suffered in October. But I can't say something so silly out loud.

There's a pause while Mirabelle considers lying.

'Cup of tea?' she asks instead, hesitating for only a moment before clicking on the brand-new kettle. It gurgles and starts to fizz with heat and Mirabelle beams. No magic to melt the human-made things means at least one witch is happy that it's November.

I tilt my head at the tapestry. It's about the size of a single garage door and one of many panels. The background fabric for most of the panels is green – a deep, foresty green. But in the centre of this scene, the colour shifts to red. There isn't enough space to unroll the whole thing in the middle of our tiny kitchen . . . Why is it red?

What I need is to have it up on a wall so I can see it all in one look, instead of bunched up on the table. But our house isn't big enough for grand wall hangings.

'All right Merlyn, all right Morgan,' I mutter, greeting the women who are stitched there – our ancient ancestors.

And then I ditch the needle and pick up Mum's neat little silver scissors instead.

At first, I just trim a few loose threads. Then I decide I'll start on what Mum calls the re-hemming. I line up the scissors and make my first incision, right where the green turns to red.

'And what are you doing?' a voice behind me asks. My scissors slip and slice through a chunk of the tapestry.

An electric shock fizzes through me.

Wow, these are sharp.

'Nothing,' I say automatically. After what happened in October, saying 'nothing' is better.

'You are no seamstress witch!' The voice is squeaky and scandalised, and I turn around to see the real Kerra with her hands on her hips.

She tries to peer over my shoulder and I block her so that she can't see the wonky slice I've taken out of the centre of the ancient tapestry.

I push the scissors away from me and start to roll the tapestry. I'm already out of patience with it. My attention span isn't good enough for sewing, I think.

'You know that is a priceless family heirloom,'

Kerra tells me. She loves to tell us things, always in her bossiest tone.

'Priceless because no one would ever buy it, right?' I say, but I still roll the panel I had in front of me away, the damage turned inwards.

We don't need the sewn story of our ancient ancestors to see us through November. I frown at the shabby, dirty, old tapestry.

'Woah, those old witches were cruel to each other,' I say.

Kerra picks up an edge of the tapestry where it has flopped over the side of the kitchen table. She is a Morgan, I am a Merlyn. Enemy covens.

'Not any more,' Kerra says with a smile. 'We have a new way.'

I'm too busy hiding my accidental snip to smile back at her. And then Mirabelle grabs my shoulder.

'Need to show Clem something,' she says, with another massive grin. She can't stop smiling this month.

In the hallway, Mirabelle points. 'Ta-dah!'

There's a suitcase. A big one.

'So, you're really going,' I say. If she notices my lack of enthusiasm, Mirabelle doesn't say.

'Yeah. I mean, I hope so. Mum's booking the train today.'

She checks her phone, then looks up and frowns at me.

'So, what about you then, huh? What are you planning to do while I'm away?'

I shift away from her gaze. 'I don't know.'

'You can't sit under a bush all month.'

I react as if this is an outrageous suggestion. 'I've got lots of plans! Exams before the end of term, to start with. While you're on *holiday*.'

'Maybe I could make you a bucket list,' Mirabelle murmurs. 'Some resolutions?'

'Who makes new year's resolutions in November?' I say. 'Embarrassing.'

'You do!' Mirabelle says, not to be put off from this idea. 'November resolutions: number one, nothing is too embarrassing.'

But even the idea of November resolutions is making me cringe.

'How about the Cousin Commandments?' Mirabelle offers. 'I'll leave you some rules to abide by while I'm gone?'

'Like what?'

'And maybe a photo of my judgy face. Look, here, like this.'

Mirabelle, with eyebrows all the way up, makes an extremely judgy face.

'So that you don't just mope the whole time I'm gone.'

'Calm down,' I say, 'I'm not going to mope without you. You're not that important.'

'Oh yes I am,' Mirabelle says in a sing-songy voice, and I'm not happy about the fact that she's right.

My cousin is too important to me for her to go away without me.

'And then, depending on how you do with the Cousin Commandments, you might get a Cousin's Cuddle.'

'What's that?' I ask, as Mirabelle tackles me backwards.

'This! Is not! A cuddle!' I say, and stagger away from her.

'Then follow the Commandments!' Mirabelle demands. 'Or you'll be cuddled into submission.'

November Mirabelle has more energy for silliness.

'You know what November has in it?' I ask her.

'What?'

'The word "no",' I say and Mirabelle laughs.

'So, your commandments, cousin . . .' Mirabelle says, voice boomingly majestic.

'You shall not feel self-conscious and silly! You shall not feel lonely! You shall not feel fed up with our family!'

'I don't have control over any of those things,' I say. 'And that's just a big list of nots.'

'Fair,' Mirabelle says. 'And I can't really be going round telling you how to feel. Why don't you start by just . . .

saying how *you* feel? You know . . . not hiding it all month.'

I shrug.

'Saying nothing doesn't make you cool,' Mirabelle says. 'I don't know where you got that idea from.'

I raise my eyebrows at her and say nothing on purpose.

'OK, fine, I know where you got that from, I haven't always been good at saying stuff. Especially feelings stuff. But new month, new us. Why don't you make a start now?' Mirabelle suggests.

I can't tell her that she can't abandon me. I'm not a baby or a puppy. I can't cry or mew about it.

'You are going to be a brand-new Clem,' Mirabelle says. 'A November Clem. You're turning over a new leaf. It's going to be unbe-*leaf*-able.'

She sees my face.

'Oh come, you've got to let me have that one. In the world of puns, leaves are good game and we never hang out anywhere leafy. So, I've got to get them in when I can. And you and Kerra will have a great time,' Mirabelle says.

But Kerra is not some replacement best friend that means Mirabelle can just leave me behind.

I check where Kerra is. '*That's not the Morgan way*,' I say in her squeaky voice.

Mirabelle laughs. 'You'll love it,' she insists, 'showing her all that human stuff that we get and she doesn't.'

It's one thing to agree to have two more witches come and live with you like we did at the end of October. It's another thing to actually have to think about them being in every area of your business, for ever.

That's a lot of Kerra. She's already quartered our tiny bedroom. And I don't even want to think about her bathroom rotas.

Mirabelle reaches for her phone the way a cowboy would reach for their gun in an old Western – continuously and nervously.

'Still working,' she reports as she checks it for the hundredth time. She puts it back in her pocket then pulls it out again just to double check. It's not just her checking that her human-made technology is still working. The magic that we have, only in October, repels all humans and fries all human-made things. But I know now that she's checking on her mum. Making sure Aunt Flissie is still here.

'So, Aunt Flissie is at the train station?'

'Aunt Flissie is right here,' my aunt announces as she comes down the stairs. But between Mirabelle, me and her giant suitcase there isn't really anywhere for

her to go. Especially not when she's got Aunt Connie, Prudie and my mum on her tail.

Nine witches now live in 15 Pendragon Road, but the house is resolutely not at all Octoberish and everything is a squeeze.

'Off to work,' Mum says with a smile. She's wearing her dry cleaner's uniform. 'First day back after the October break!'

Aunt Connie glowers. We absolutely did not have a break in October, but if that's Mum's cover story then I'm sure she's got the happy charm to carry it off.

'Allotment!' Aunt Prudie declares, stumping down the stairs and yanking the front door open.

'Train station for me,' Aunt Flissie says, swinging round the banister to hug Mirabelle. Even if I can't be happy that they're about to go away, I can't help smiling every time I see them reunited.

'And Temmie's in bed,' Mum adds. 'Not feeling great, so leave her to sleep – but check in a few hours if she'd like anything to eat.'

'OK, Mum,' I say, even though Temmie is my oddest aunt. And they're a very odd bunch.

And then, without really realising it, everyone is kind of waiting for Aunt Connie's announcement

before getting on with their own business.

'Very well. Kitchen, I suppose,' Aunt Connie says and sighs heavily.

'Oh, we're all very . . . Novembery aren't we?' Mum says, voice still warm in the otherwise cold air that is coming in through the door. 'Everyone wrap up, it's chilly today. Prudie, do you have a scarf?'

Aunt Prudie, who was halfway out the door, peers back in at her younger sister. 'Scarf?' she says, crinkly face crinkled in deeper than usual suspicion.

'Oh here, take mine,' Mum says and wraps a thick yellow scarf over the top of Aunt Prudie's green gardening dungarees.

There's a flurry of activity as these witches, who are not really witches in November, head off.

Mum looks vague in the doorway for a moment. 'And you young hags . . .'

'We're going to human school, Aunt Patty!' Kerra says, too loud for how many of us there are crammed in the hall.

'We don't call it human school,' I mutter. 'It's just school.'

'For humans!' Kerra adds.

'Lovely,' Mum says, smile blooming.

'I will pack the lunches,' Kerra says and whisks back into the kitchen. 'Packed lunches! For human school!'

she sticks her head back into the hall to exclaim.

It's literally day one of November and I'm already exhausted by Kerra.

Senara, Kerra's older and more chill sister, is wisely taking a break from her by staying upstairs.

Then there's just me and Mirabelle in the corridor, awkwardly watching Aunt Connie through the doorway.

In a rare quiet moment, Aunt Connie picks up a small plastic egg-timer from the kitchen table. She inspects it closely then brings a finger to it – slowly, carefully – and taps it. The egg-timer stays an egg-timer.

There's a knock on the front door.

Stooped over the kitchen table, head in hands, Aunt Connie has enough fight left in her to lift one finger and then bring it down with a swish.

I don't know what she wanted to happen, but of course nothing does. There is no magic in November for her to use.

Then she looks up and sees us watching her.

'Humpf,' she exhales her displeasure at us both, and the kitchen door slams in our faces.

Mirabelle raises both eyebrows at me. 'Poor Aunt Connie,' she whispers and heads to the front door.

That isn't something I ever thought we'd be saying

but October hit her the hardest and she's still recovering. I'm not sure even soup will help Aunt Connie deal with the untimely loss of her magic at the hands of the Morgans . . . and me.

'Clemmie,' Mirabelle calls over her shoulder. 'You need to see this.'

Mirabelle stands to one side so that I can see, clearly outlined in the doorway, a giant robot. Its more-than-life-size head half above our doorframe. It's shiny and silver with a huge barrel-like body and piston arms and legs. It glints in the sunshine, even though the sun isn't October-bright.

'Oh, my stars,' I say.

'Exactly,' Mirabelle says.

The robot lifts up one arm and in clunky slow motion opens each of its jointed claw-like silver fingers.

'What . . . is . . . happening?' I say, not sure whether I should step forward to Mirabelle or away from the massive faceless thing.

We're defenceless. We don't have any power to turn on this metal figure.

'Aunt Connie?' I call into the kitchen. There's no answer from behind the door she closed on us.

Then the robot makes a muffled noise, which

sounds exactly like a human in a tin can. I step forward.

'What did you say?' I ask it.

'Muff – scruff – ruff,' it repeats, then it seems to shiver all over and lifts both hands to its head, which it pulls off in a single gesture.

Underneath is the tousled hair of a young man with dark, serious eyes who, I realise immediately, is swamped in a giant suit of armour. He's not a robot. He's a person wearing a lot of protective metal.

And, I realise, far too late, he has a shield across his back and a sword strapped to his side.

'Oh,' I say.

'Ohhhh,' Mirabelle agrees.

'Greetings fair maiden and fair maiden,' the stranger says.

'Oh,' I say again, then decide to try once more for a coven elder. 'Aunts?' I shout, louder this time.

There's only Temmie, who can't answer, and Connie, who won't, left in the house. And there's no magic to repel this person from us.

'Fair maiden, please aid me on my quest,' he says, specifically to Mirabelle this time.

'Um,' Mirabelle says, eyes flashing over her shoulder at me.

‘Fair maiden, I am set out on a noble and honourable quest.’

‘Oh dear,’ I say.

‘Fair maiden,’ the man says again and, with the clunkiest movements you’ve ever seen, he begins to fold downwards until he’s on his knees, imploring Mirabelle. ‘Fair maiden – I am truly determined to go on a most noble and honourable quest.’

He looks up at Mirabelle with big doe eyes.

‘Fair maiden,’ he says hopefully, ‘do you need rescuing?’

With the terrible scraping sound of metal against metal, he struggles to take off one massive glove. When it’s finally off, he reaches up to take one of Mirabelle’s hands.

She’s rooted to the spot.

‘I am a gallant knight, and it is my task and my honour to rescue fair maidens.’

‘Um,’ Mirabelle says.

‘The fairest maidens are always the quietest!’ the man announces, looking delighted at Mirabelle’s inability to find anything to say.

Mirabelle tugs her hand free from his grip.

‘You’re a knight,’ I repeat.

‘A knight errant!’ the young man declares. ‘On a noble and . . .’

‘Yeah, yeah, a quest. Right,’ I say.

The knight, clanking, tries to stand, but he’s too weighed down by the armour.

Mirabelle glances back at the kitchen door and looks at me then twitches her head to one side.

For a moment I think she’s trying to use magic to close the door, and then I realise that there must be magic in the world to send a knight to our front door.

The knight takes Mirabelle’s arm to heave himself upwards. I quickly open the kitchen door and peer inside at Aunt Connie sat like a miserable magicless statue at the kitchen table, then slide the door silently shut.

This is young hag business.