The DECEMBER Witches

JENNIFER CLAESSEN

Previously in A Month of Magic . . .

In **October**, Clemmie's magic descended from the stars for the first time, but despite being under pressure from her Merlyn aunties, she couldn't really use her power. She found out Aunt Prudie, Aunt Connie and her mum had a plan to try and keep their month of magic for longer, only for their rival coven, the Morgans, to steal the three elder witches and their plans and giant pumpkin away.

Clemmie and her cousin Mirabelle begrudgingly made friends with young Morgan hags, Kerra and Senara. Together they pieced together an ancient tapestry about the original Morgan and Merlyn witches, realised how dangerous magic is and that they must return it to the stars.

They rescued their coven elders in a spectacular battle at the Morgan castle and released the magic from the pumpkin with a magical sword. All their magic returned to the stars and they celebrated Halloween!

But then – in **November**, Clemmie, ignoring her cousin Kerra, tried to fix their family tapestry as a way to apologise to her aunties for all the October chaos and spoiling their plans to keep their magic for ever.

Despite knowing there was no magic left for the Merlyns, knights kept arriving at their home and, fleeing them, the young hags returned to the Morgan castle.

The Morgans too were facing threats from wild loose magic as fires sprang up everywhere and a forest began to grow and cover everything. The Merlyns and Morgans took shelter together and realised the twisted magic was spilling out of their ancient family tapestry.

Young Morgan hag Kerra, tired of being ignored, made herself Queen Knight to seize the tapestry and, in a chaotic battle, Clemmie found her voice and confidence to lead all the witches to victory against the knights. They wrestled all the magic back into the tapestry – but lost Kerra.

The witches celebrated Pie Night with fireworks, but Clemmie couldn't stop thinking about her cousin, now stuck inside the tapestry . . .



The December Witches is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

First published in the UK 2024

Text copyright © Jennifer Claessen 2024
Cover artwork © Heidi Olivia Cannon 2024

978-1-916747-16-6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 11.5/18pt Kingfisher by Amy Cooper

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

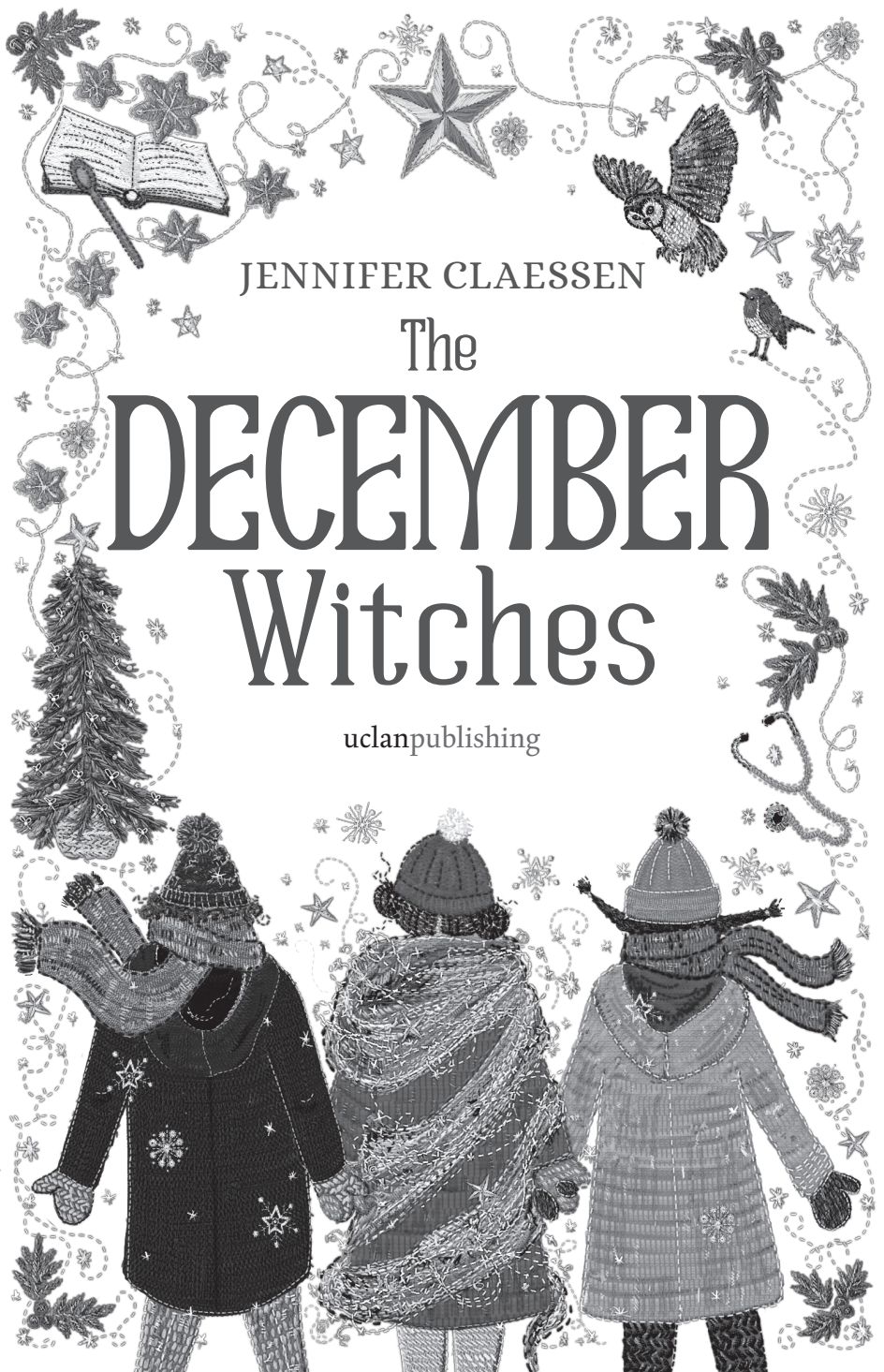
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For Maarten Claessen,
donkey-whisperer

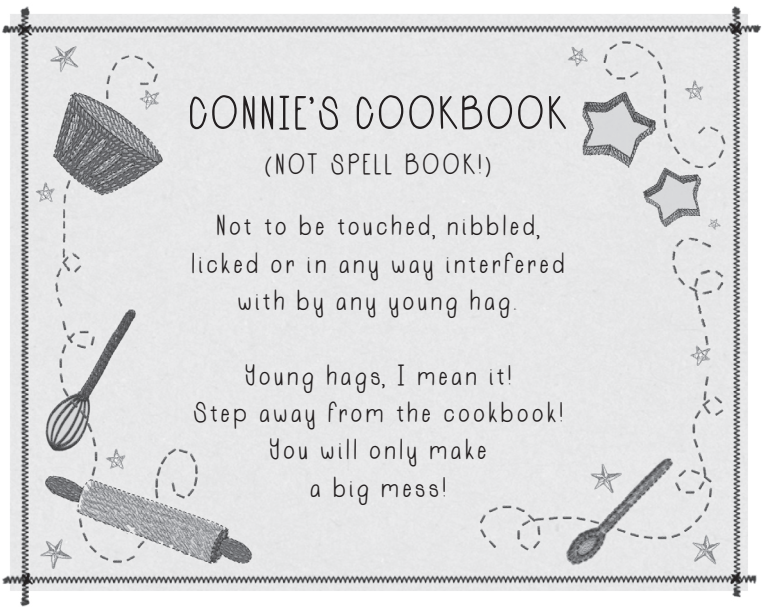
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CHAPTER 1



I think this is the end of me.

This is a mistake, another horrible mistake.

In the reddish darkness behind my eyelids, I remember: Kerra. I have to free her, that's why I'm here. In defeat, she got herself trapped in our ancient family tapestry.

I squeeze the memory from my mind: I had scraped the wool gently with a fingernail.

'I'm here to get you out,' I'd whispered to the tiny stitched crowned figure.

'Come on, Kerra,' I'd urged. If anyone could get herself out of a tapestry, it would be her.

'Please.' And suddenly, I couldn't feel the wool under my fingertips any more. They were burning with hot, hot heat.

Something exploded.

Now, it's like there isn't enough air in my lungs, like my lungs don't go deep enough. My throat is closed, no air is reaching me.

It is bright, so bright. Like a rabbit, I freeze as lights come at me from all directions. No, not just lights, stars. I am blasted from all sides and the stars hit me, all over, lodge in me like barbs.

And a small, hard knot forms inside me.

I can't see anything, I can't feel anything, but then, as I start to think I might never be able to use any of my senses ever again, a hand reaches mine.

It's just fingertips at first but they are real and I pull and pull because I have to finish this for Kerra. My cousin who couldn't be a witch so tried to make herself a queen. My cousin who turned on the rest of us and so, in turn, we let her be sucked into the tapestry

when we should have tried harder to save her.

And then, a lightning bolt of a voice.

'A gift.'

All of a sudden, the resistance isn't there any more and we both fall backwards. I open my eyes enough to see – yes! Kerra! And then everything goes dark.

Now I'm as still and silent as if I've been bound.

Memory rises with nausea: Kerra on the floor in front of me, gasping, shaking, sobbing. She was stitched, sucked into the tapestry, and now she's real.

'Clem?' a voice asks, and my limp hand is gently pressed.

I can't orientate myself – where am I, post-explosion? But I know that voice.

'Mirabelle? Will you come? Your aunt won't rest!' another voice says. That one, not so much. I can't put the face and voice together in the darkness.

'I'm coming,' Mirabelle replies. 'But just so you know: we've never been able to get any of our coven elders to do anything they don't want to do.'

My cousin, my first friend, my favourite person even when I'm not hers. Her voice gets closer to me. 'Clem, I'll be back in a minute, OK? Senara, she's got a lot of patients.'

Patients? Patience? But no, Mirabelle means Senara Morgan, the least young of us young hags. If I strain my ears, I can hear Senara talking and moving fast in the background. She's stressed.

'I don't know how much more I can do to help Clem,' Senara says. 'Everything I bring to check her over breaks. I've got nothing. I think if she's going to get out of this, she's going to have to do it herself. I can't hear a heartbeat, I can't see her lungs moving.'

'Her eyes though, look, her eyes are moving under her eyelids.'

I feel fingers palpate the centre of my chest as if it is a trampoline and the fingers want to jump.

'Feel that,' Senara says and another hand, less firm, less certain, seems to go looking for my lungs.

'What is that?' Mirabelle asks.

'I don't know. I have to go,' Senara calls as a rasping sound fills the room. It's a cough, I realise, and in hearing it, my own cough rises to meet it. I hack and hack, but my eyes still don't open. They're weighed down more heavily than by just tiredness alone.

I know now I'm laying down. I can feel the pressure at the backs of my shoulders and thighs, of something that must be a mattress. I need to sit up to finish this

cough, get whatever is stuck in my lungs out.

I sit bolt upright in bed. Eyes open.

It's my bed, in my bedroom. Our shared bedroom. And one of the people I share it with is right next to me. I blink and then blink again to be sure.

'She's back!' I roar then choke. 'Kerra's back!'

Laying in the bed opposite me is our ex-Queen.

Mirabelle and Senara come charging back in as I heave myself out of bed, approaching Kerra immediately.

'Kerra! Are you OK? How? What happened?'

'Clem, she's not awake yet.'

I got out of bed too fast. I cover my face with my hands, darkening the world so I can get a hold of my spinning body. Stomach, head, stomach, head.

But the world doesn't darken. I open my eyes into the cave of my palms. The light there should be dark red, shadowy, filtered through my cupped hands. But it's not. It's golden.

I take my hands away from eyes slowly as I realise what the golden light reminds me of.

I'm magic. I'm . . . full of magic.

As soon as I know it, I recognise the feeling. The heaviness, the heat, the pulse of it. I've had magic inside me before, the normal October stars that all of us witches

have for one month a year. But this is something else.

The stars were barbed, sharp little things digging their way into me and now I'm full of magic like a vial full of poison.

My eyes dart across the pyjama-clad young hags: Mirabelle, her hands out like double doors blocking my path as if she wants to tame or contain me; Senara, clutching a big black bag as if it is the answer; and worst of all, Kerra, person-shaped but lying in bed completely still, eyes shut.

My fingers inch up towards my temples. Maybe I've fallen and hit my head. Disbelief isn't what witches usually do. We're believers. But this is beyond belief.

I don't want to tell them or show them I'm full of magic. I still need answers. What happened when I saved Kerra from the tapestry?

'You're not going anywhere till I've checked you over,' Senara says, but it's too late, I've already dashed across the corridor.

Our little house at Pendragon Road only has two bedrooms, one for young hags, one for coven elders. So, it's into my mum and my aunts' rammed room that I run.

And I stop as soon as I see it. My fingers are throbbing as I point.

'I was standing here,' I demonstrate. 'Last night. My . . . birthday eve. I went to see Kerra. And then I got hit. Here, here, here – and here.'

If I keep saying 'here', they'll think that I've lost my mind. But I can still feel the shocks as the stars hit me.

'Got hit with what, Clem?' Mirabelle asks.

Panels of big square fabric hang around the walls of my aunts' bedroom like a shrine to the bad old days. I squat down in front of the tapestry that holds all of witch history and stare at our two warring ancestors in there.

Did you speak to me? Did you offer me a gift? I want to ask, but I don't.

I wanted Kerra back and safe. And I got what I wanted. But did I get something more from the tapestry?

'We found you unconscious,' Mirabelle says. 'Yesterday. I came looking for you and you were out cold, on the floor – here. And Kerra was with you. How did you get her out?'

I stare at the tapestry. Gift or curse? Merlyn or Morgan?

I'm always guessing, never knowing. But my guess would be this: that it wasn't just Kerra who came out of the tapestry, but everything. All that gnarly, snarled up old magic that caused so much trouble for us in November is somehow in me.

I'm so accident-prone when it comes to magic. Nothing, no mistake, no matter how huge, is impossible. And with magic, I expect agony. I've been taught to expect agony. But I was hoping for Kerra, just Kerra.

'What hit you Clem?' Mirabelle asks, less gently this time.

I feel dizzy. So dizzy and sick, I'm suddenly overwhelmed and feel faint.

'Magic,' I murmur, head down. Then I look up to clock their reactions. There aren't any. Or, at least, not big ones. Mirabelle is gnawing a nail, Senara's nodding. I remember the hands feeling my lungs. They already know.

'Can I check you over now?' Senara asks as I sit down heavily. 'You haven't eaten. You're going to need to rest if you've got . . . magic.'

For a moment I feel a flash of fury. So typically Morgan to care about magic, not Merlyns. But that's not fair. Senara does care.

'You are . . . glowing,' Senara says.

'Thanks,' I say and submit to inspection. My heart is fluttering like it has wings and they are beating, beating against the inside of my chest.

First, Senara takes my hand in hers and turns it this way and that.

‘The stars are right there, just under your skin,’ Senara says. ‘More than I’ve ever seen before. You look like you’re stuffed full of stars. But how do we get them . . . out?’

My fingers throb as she tilts them and scowls into my fingernails. If she was expecting stars discharging from my fingertips like bullets from a gun, she’s disappointed.

‘But we know you’re not a handy witch,’ Mirabelle says and is rewarded with scowls from us both.

Pun aside, she’s right. My power has never worked the Merlyn way. My aunts always have beautiful, long, elegant fingers when using their power, but even though I’m a Merlyn, I don’t.

I collapse into another fit of coughing. It feels like something should come out with the cough but nothing does.

Senara’s face creases up into worry.

‘Allergic to puns,’ I say and Mirabelle smiles through the creases of worry on her face.

‘So, what’s going on, Doctor Morgan?’

Senara’s eyes turn spacy for a moment. ‘Doctor Morgan,’ she murmurs.

Then she comes back to earth and peers deep into my eyes.

'No stars in your pupils,' she says. 'But you're . . . shaking a bit? Can you feel that, Clem?'

She's caught my nickname from Mirabelle. I nod.

Morgan witches channel their power through gold-starred eyes. But I know that the Morgan way isn't for me either.

'Stick out your tongue,' Senara says.

'What's that got to do with anything?' I ask, but do it anyway.

'We need to think about this logically,' Senara says, which I'm very happy for her to do. As our resident future doctor, she's the most logical one.

'Usually, stars come down from the heavens. They stick to us and then softly . . .' she emphasises softly with her fingers like she's about to do a rendition of 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.'

I know that feeling. I felt it at the beginning of October: feathery light stars landing on us, being drawn into us and settling. And I've also felt the more harsh tug of Morgans drawing the stars out of us. But I've never been beaten by stars before.

'Humans are cool, you know?' Senara says, opening up her bag and staring in awe at her blood pressure monitor and thermometer. 'They've got really great kit.'

Senara has never really had anything to do with any humans but now she holds up an ear checking thingy as if it really is magic. 'This is an *otoscope*.'

'What will it tell you?' I ask.

'I don't know,' Senara says. 'I know I'm not a young-young hag any more. But I'm not actually a doctor either.'

'I trust you,' I say. And better to have Senara use her cool, calm logic than all of our hectic coven elders descend on me. She clicks the light on her otoscope and puts it to my ear.

Her immediate sad little 'oh' makes me worried about my ear but Senara pulls back, shaking the otoscope, the light now off.

I'd never thought about that before: about magic clashing with medicine. But the disappointment on Senara's face as her cool otoscope fails makes me sag. The disappointment is directly my fault. I'm the liability.

'I'm sorry,' I say. My insides are beating, pulsing too fast, way too fast. Even when I ran, my heart has never raced like this before.

'No, I'm sorry,' Senara says, resting two gentle fingers on my chest. 'I don't know where . . . any of the rest of your organs are. The stars all seem to be clustered

around your heart and I can't get any proper reading of your vital signs.'

She pauses to tuck an invisible stray hair away, as if at least she can bring order to her braids.

'Clem, your heart doesn't seem to be . . . um, heart-shaped. They don't actually look like this,' she says, fingers curling into a 'm' at the top and a 'v' at the bottom. She drops her hands. 'Hearts are soft, many-chambered, full of blood. Yours is . . . spiky. I don't understand how it's working at all.'

I put my hand where hers was. A star-shaped heart?

'This magic, wherever it came from, is going to overpower your body. I don't know how much longer your body can work.'

I'm too much magic, not enough person.

'How long have I . . . got?'

'I don't know the rate of growth of this thing inside you, maybe days, maybe weeks. Humans have things called heart attacks but . . . no body of flesh and bone – human or witch – can hold this much star energy. It's a danger to your health, Clem.'

I've never liked magic. I've always been suspicious of it, not trusting what it might do inside me. But this is more than that.

Is there magic in my molecules? In my veins, like blood? How deep are the stars in me?

'Clem – we have to get that magic out of you. Before your heart gives up.'

CHAPTER 2



'What did you do, Clem?' Mirabelle asks. She could never be a doctor, she doesn't have the bedside manner.

'Nothing!' I protest, still staring at the tapestry panels which . . . attacked me with their magic?

'I just . . . I only . . . I kind of touched it. I was talking to Kerra. When she was, y'know, *in there*.'

Now there is the shape of a small figure, blasted in

the fabric in white like a reverse tattoo. It's an absence of thread. Kerra was sucked into the tapestry and became stitched.

'Can you tell us exactly what you said?'

'No.' I shrug. 'Not exactly.'

But there's a word that bounces round my brain and does manage to find the way out of my mouth.

'I said "please",' I tell her.

'You downloaded all the magic from the tapestry into you,' Mirabelle double-checks, 'with the word "please"?'

'I guess I did. I didn't mean to.'

Mirabelle rakes purple curls back from her forehead and leaves her hands in her hair as if it could hold her together.

'We couldn't have the magic when we cut the tapestry open and forced it. But when you asked for it, the magic came out of the tapestry? You mean no witch, for thousands of years . . . no one just asked?' Mirabelle is absolutely outraged. 'Witches are rude, you know.'

'I think,' I say, still hearing that echoing voice and nervous to share it. 'That it is . . . a gift.'

Mirabelle looks around our aunts' room like it's the scene of a particularly unpleasant crime.

'Worst. Gift. Ever,' she says.

‘Could you just . . . say no? Politely? Tell them we’ve already had a rough autumn. That we need to hit the pause button before we go in for another month of chaos this December?’

It’s December! That realisation hits me with almost the same force as the stars did. The feeling that everything is ending, maybe that makes sense. December is the end of the year. The death of the year, I guess.

‘Does your gift come with instructions at least?’ Mirabelle asks and Senara almost laughs, despite, or maybe because of, it all.

‘My stethoscope comes with instructions,’ Senara says. ‘Humans, they think of everything.’

I stop listening to them. Senara is right, I’m jittery with stars that won’t settle.

Last month, with only a pair of scissors and some ambition, I decided that I could give sewing a go. I wanted to prove myself, mend myself and my mistakes. And I caused complete chaos instead.

Now, I stand in front of our family’s ancient tapestry. Our ancestors are pictured in there, made of thread, fighting and reconciling, using their magic and then deciding it was too much for them and limiting themselves to just a month of magic.

But the tapestry itself is pure magic, magic that I unleashed and caused a lot of November trauma.

My eyes rove over every knobbly woollen stitch. The tapestry is thick with knights of shiny silver, parading boldly towards ancient Merlyn and ancient Morgan, ready to stop their nonsense by burning them. Kerra made herself queen of those knights with a knobbly crown of sticks.

But the two central figures who appear in every single panel are our ancestors – ancient Merlyn and ancient Morgan. Morgan – tall, elegant, braids coiled like Senara. Merlyn – short, with billows of puffy curls and a jutting chin like Mirabelle.

'It was her. Them. They gave me the magic.'

'If they gave this to you, all of this power, it's no gift. What if it's all one big, silly, festive joke?' Mirabelle suggests.

'I don't know if these witches have a sense of humour,' Senara says. 'I've always thought of them as a bit like Mother.'

All three of us do a little shudder. Senara and Kerra's mother, Aunt Morgan, is the worst witch I've ever known.

'We've always known too much magic is a sickness. Or at least your aunt Temmie has.' Senara says. 'That's

no gift.'

'No returns,' I say. 'It's not like they left a gift receipt.'

'And the worst gifts are the ones that come with terms and conditions,' Mirabelle says. 'If they've given you power, then there must be something they want you to do with it?'

'*Avalon.*'

'What did you say?' I ask and Mirabelle's face creases into a slight frown.

'I said, that if they've given you power . . .'

Another voice cuts over hers immediately.

'*Avalon*,' it insists in a whisper.

Something isn't quite clicking into place in my head. I put my hand to my forehead and it comes away glistening. Sweat not stars. Maybe I've got a magic-induced fever.

Someone is purring, very close by. If feels like the voice is coming from inside me.

'*It is a worthy witch.*'

Where is this voice coming from? Does the voice mean . . . me? Am I a worthy witch?

I am freezing. The coldest I've ever been. My hand is the coldest part of me. Almost pins-and-needles numb. I rub it absently, shoulders-hunched in the cold. Then I rub my hand again, because what I just felt wasn't right.

My hand felt rough, rougher than any skin should be. I look down and see something scrabbly and scratchy. A crosshatch of darkness across my skin. I scratch it – and it blooms.

'*It's a gift, young hag, enjoy it*,' the voice says.

'*Accept it*.'

'*Embrace it*.'

'Merlyn?'

'*Yes*?' she answers. Her voice is low. A night-time voice for the telling of secrets.

'Morgan?' I ask.

'*Yes*?' she answers again.

'Are you one witch? Or two?'

And then, startling me so much I scramble backwards and bang into the posts of my mum's bed, I watch as the witches pictured in the tapestry begin to move inside it.

Merlyn, Morgan . . . no Merlyn, turn so I can see their side profile, the bumps of two noses, two chins, but one always right behind the other. They are one body and yet somehow separate.

'*I'm Merlyn*,' the foremost witch says.

'*No, no, you are Morgan*,' her shadow replies.

I wait for their squabble to pass because there's nothing else I can do. Mirabelle and Senara are talking

but I can't hear them any more.

'*Matters not*,' they say, turning back to me. The voice comes doubled. They are each other's built-in echo.

'*We were twin stars. Our own constellation*,' the voice says with a hiss. I don't know how sound is travelling through the wool of the tapestry, but it arrives in my ears buzzing slightly.

There might be two of them, but they speak together.

I'm midnight-deep in this now, unable to turn away to see my cousins.

'But which one of you is Merlyn?' I ask. Senara and Kerra, and yes, fine, even Vivi and Evaine, have proved that Morgans aren't out-and-out evil, but the original Morgan is probably an original bad witch.

We know it's not as simple as good Merlyn, bad Morgan. But still, not many witches get to sit down and have a one-to-one with their ancient ancestors.

Morgan or Merlyn, whoever she is, smiles at me.

'*So, worthy witch*,' she, they, say. '*Do you know*?'

Know what? Witches say, 'the stars know', offering the words up with hope and trust. I've spent most of my life being resentful that the stars know and I don't. I don't know now what I'm meant to know.

'*You have all the power*,' Merlyn and Morgan say.

'Um, thank you,' I say, which feels totally inadequate. 'But um, can I . . . give it back?'

Merlyn-Morgan, this stitch witch, slinks from side to side inside the tapestry, like she's shaking her head 'no' but with her whole body.

I wish the stars inside me would calm down a bit but they must know this is the fated moment. Inside, I am hopping and twitching.

It feels so silly to ask it now, of these grand stitched witches in front of me.

'Why me?' is the worst question, but I have to ask.

'*You said "please"*,' the fabric witch says and her mouth grows a couple of stitches at either side. A smile.

I wonder if this was paint and the stitch witch was in a picture whether they'd be able to move like this. But the thread has give, it bends around them.

'*You wanted to save your cousin. Such a soft heart. We decided you were the one for us.*'

A soft heart isn't a bad thing, I suppose, but I wish they'd said 'strong'. In a battle of strong hands versus soft heart, I feel like the latter will never win. I'm not a confident, successful witch. I'm a soft one.

'*We caught you unawares. Worried, stressed, anxious and alone! The perfect candidate.*'

I don't know if those feelings make me perfect for anything, to be honest. But they're right, that was exactly how I felt.

'*You know that magic objects are dangerous*,' the stitch witch says. '*You have observed the problems with this tapestry. The perfect vessel for magic is only a witch*.'

'*We offered you an invitation. You and your cousin, so close to war with each other. We thought you might need some help. But she has refused. She has refused everything.*'

They mean . . . Kerra.

'*We were seeking a mind divided against itself. You let us in, your cousin did not. But we don't need two, one will do. It can be so extremely difficult to tell friend from foe. But now it is time – time for Avalon*.'

'But what is Avalon?'

'*It is a witches' world*.'

'Please,' I say, 'Please – my cousin, she's . . .'

They like being asked politely, my ancient ancestors. They bloom in the asking, swelling with their own importance.

And finally, I can pull loose.

I hear one last hiss. '*Do not forget Avalon, worthy witch*.'