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Opening extract from

# A Witch in Love

Written by

## Ruth Warburton

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# A Witch in Love

Ruth Warburton




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*For Meg, Kate and Eleanor*

# CHAPTER ONE

'Merry Christmas,' I said, and leant forward to kiss him. As our lips met I felt a small flurry of snowflakes swirl around our heads.

'Damn.' I pulled back, feeling my cheeks flush scarlet with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. The snow fell on Seth's dark curls and melted on the restaurant table-top. None of the other diners had noticed and Seth only smiled his wide, devastating smile. I didn't smile back. Instead I shook my head at him, my cheeks still hot.

'Don't smile – I've got to get this under control, Seth.'

'Sorry. It was just so beautiful.'

Beautiful was hardly the point. My slips could get us both into serious trouble – perhaps even killed, if I didn't get a grip. Seth saw my expression and took my hand under the tablecloth.

'It's getting stronger, isn't it?'

I nodded.

It was rarely the same reaction – sometimes the plants nearby would burst into bud, sometimes the sun would come out in spite of the pouring rain, sometimes all the lights would dip, just for a second, as if there'd been a fault in the power supply.

'Don't worry,' Seth said. 'No one noticed.'

I looked around the dimly lit restaurant. It was true, all the other tables were full of chatting couples and families reunited for the Christmas holidays, far too preoccupied to notice two out-of-towners, still less the little swirl of snow at their table. I'd been lucky. This time.

I turned back to Seth. He was watching me quietly, the candles reflected in his slate-grey eyes. He'd dressed up for the night, discarding the usual worn jeans and ripped T-shirt that he wore out sailing for a crisp white shirt – ironed, no less – open at the neck, revealing the line of his throat and a triangle of skin, deeply tanned from day after day spent out on the water. He was distractingly beautiful and I still couldn't quite believe that we were a couple, even six months on – but I tore my mind back to the important issue.

'Someone will notice one day. What about the time I scorched all the grass under our feet? If it hadn't been

a rainy day that could have been a forest fire there and then.'

'But it *was* a rainy day,' Seth pointed out. 'So no harm done. You've got it under control, more or less.'

More or less. It was the *less* that was the problem. I put my head in my hands.

'This doesn't happen to Emmaline.'

'Emmaline's had seventeen years to get used to being a witch. You've had six months and your power's building all the time. It's not surprising you're taking a bit of time to get used to it. You'd have to be superhuman to handle all this straight away.'

'And I'm not superhuman. Depressingly average in fact.'

'There's nothing average about you, Anna,' Seth said fiercely. 'And you *can* handle this. I know you can.'

'I hope so.' I swallowed against the weight in my chest and tried to smile. 'Whatever made you think it would be a good idea to have a witch for a girlfriend, hey?'

'I *love* having a witch for a girlfriend. Snowfalls, electrical disturbances and all. I wouldn't swap any of it.'

'Oh really? Not even in the constant worry over whether you really love me or our relationship is just a very long side-effect from an accidental spell?'

'Anna . . .' Seth said, and there was a warning note in his voice, 'Not this again. For the last time, I *don't* have any worries on that score. If you do, you've got to get over them. End of.'

I bit my lip, sorry I'd raised the subject and soured the happy atmosphere. Seth was right. I'd made my peace with those fears, I'd *had* to. I'd broken that spell every way I could think of – and as far as Seth was concerned it was over and done with, its magic snapped.

I couldn't go on inflicting my doubts on both of us, punishing us both for one long-ago mistake. And anyway, for six months I'd been living the life of an ordinary seventeen-year-old girl, albeit one with an extraordinarily lovely and good-looking boyfriend. No spells. No magic. Well, I corrected myself thinking of that swirl of snow, *almost* no magic.

And it was working. We were together. Everything was fine. As long as I could hold myself in check, everything would be fine.

*Oil and water*, whispered a treacherous voice in my head as I lifted the last forkful of dinner to my lips.

I pushed the plate away, suddenly full to nausea.

As if on cue, the waiter bustled up and began clearing.

'Dessert, mademoiselle, monsieur?' He began brushing crumbs with a little silver knife. 'Coffee? Tea?'

'Not for me, thanks.' I looked at Seth. 'Do you want anything?'

He shook his head. 'Just the bill please,'

The waiter gave a little half-bow and disappeared.

'So what're your plans for tomorrow?' Seth asked as we waited for the bill. 'Want to come out for a sail? I'm trying out the new rudder.'

I shuddered at the thought of the icy grey water and biting December sea wind, but only said, 'I can't; I'm taking Emmaline up to London for some Christmas shopping.'

'Are you mad?' Seth looked horrified. 'Only, what, three shopping days until Christmas and you're going to brave the London shops? It's as much as I can do to cope with Winter on a Saturday.'

'We'll cope. You're all right anyway; you're the only person I've already bought something for.'

'I don't mind.' Seth took my hand and kissed the soft skin inside my wrist. 'I don't need anything else, as long as I've got you and my boat.'

It was true; I had never met anyone less attached to material possessions than Seth. At the look in his eyes my breath caught in my throat and I gave a shaky laugh.

'Well you have to put up a good show on Christmas

Day. I'll be mighty peeved if you forget to open your presents and go sailing instead.'

Seth grinned and was about to reply when there was a tap on his shoulder from behind.

'Excuse me . . .' It was a gorgeous flame-haired girl from the table behind us, where she was sitting with a group of friends. 'Don't I know you?'

'I don't think so.' He smiled pleasantly but shook his head.

'No, I do,' she insisted. 'Aren't you the barman at that pub in Winter – what's it called, the Crown and Anchor?'

'Oh, yes.' Ever since he'd turned eighteen a couple of months ago, Seth had been helping his mum out behind the bar on nights when they were short-staffed. 'Yes, I am. You might have seen me there.'

'Do you remember me?' She smiled at him flirtatiously, completely ignoring my presence. I would have been annoyed, except that Seth was so transparently uninterested.

'Sorry, no.' Seth shook his head again. The girl looked a little piqued and then tossed her hair.

'Oh well, you will next time. It's Zoe, by the way. See you next time I'm in Winter!'

Seth only shook his head and laughed, and at that moment the waiter turned up with the bill. We paid and

turned up the collars of our coats and then plunged into the cold night air waiting outside the restaurant door.

We'd had to park quite a way away, but I was so full that I didn't mind the walk, and we strolled slowly through the back streets of Brighthaven, hand in hand, looking at the lighted windows of the shops. They all had their Christmas displays out, twinkling lights and fake snow frosting, and it gave me a warm inner glow. All my life I'd loved Christmas, every moment of it, from the first feel of the lumpy misshapen stocking in the darkness of Christmas morning, through to the last turkey sandwich, stuffed with leftovers, on Boxing Day night. This year would be our first at Wicker House. Dad was putting up the tree tonight, and I could already imagine how beautiful it would look against the dark Tudor beams of the living room, decked with our old-fashioned decorations, the firelight glinting off the coloured glass. It would also be my first with Seth. In fact, everything was pretty close to perfect. Oh, I could moan about A-levels and revision, but at bottom I was so happy it almost hurt. Sometimes I wondered what I'd done to deserve all this – it almost felt too good to last.

I was so wrapped up in thought that it was only the increasing pressure of Seth's arm on mine that warned me

something was wrong. I looked across at him; his face was set in anxious lines and his pace had speeded up to an almost uncomfortably fast walk.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Shh,' he said, almost under his breath. 'Don't look round, but there are two men following us.'

In spite of his warning I turned and, sure enough, there were two men in hoodies walking casually behind us.

'They're probably just going our way,' I whispered back. Seth looked uneasy.

'Maybe, but they're going a very odd route. We've zigzagged around like anything, looking at the shops, and they've followed the whole way.'

'Let's turn back here,' I suggested, indicating a very small side street that led back in the direction of the restaurant. 'There's no way they could be going that way by chance, it's pointing directly back the way we came from. If they follow us down here we'll know for sure and we can knock on a door or something.'

Seth nodded and we turned down the alley. The two men behind turned too, one with a quick glance up and down the main street to see if anyone had noticed. Coldness coiled in the pit of my stomach and I suddenly got the feeling we'd been very, very stupid to turn off the beaten track. It was only when I heard Seth swear under

his breath with a note of panic I'd rarely heard in his voice before, that I realized quite how stupid we'd been. The alley was a dead end.

As we reached the end I felt Seth squeeze my hand. There was nothing for it. We'd have to face them. My stomach clenched as if the ground had shifted beneath our feet, and we turned around.

'Give us your phones,' said the taller of the two, his voice hissing from beneath his hood.

The words should have scared me, but instead I sighed with relief. They were only ordinary men – boys really. Not what I'd been fearing since I saw the shadows of their faces, dark beneath their hoods. And I could give them what they wanted. I fumbled in my handbag, happy to hand over anything that would get us out of the alley.

'And yours.' He nodded at Seth.

Seth sighed and yanked his phone out of his pocket.

'Wallet.'

'You can have the cash,' Seth said, getting out his wallet and opening it, 'but not the wallet.'

'Shut up and hand the thing over.'

'Look, it's worthless. It's just a cheap leather wallet.' Seth held out a handful of notes. 'This is sixty quid cash – but leave me the wallet. You know I'll cancel the cards anyway.'

My heart was in my mouth and I had to clench my teeth to stop myself from screaming, 'Hand over the wallet you idiot!' but I knew why he didn't want to – it was his dad's, one of the few things Seth had left since he died four years ago.

'Hand. Over. The wallet,' the bigger hoodie said, spitting each word like an insult. Seth shook his head. Then the smaller one sprang.

I screamed. For a short eternity there was a struggle, the sickening sound of fists hitting flesh and bone, and then the attacker staggered back and collapsed to the ground, blood pouring from his nose. Seth was panting, wringing his knuckles with pain from where he'd decked the boy, but otherwise unhurt. With his hood back it was clear the kid was a just a scrawny sixteen-year-old, pale from too many hours spent in front of the TV. He was no match for Seth, who spent every spare hour on the sea hauling on ropes and cables.

I was just about to run to Seth when I felt someone grab my hair from behind. There was the press of something cold at my throat. Seth went suddenly still, pale with fury, every muscle in his body tensed.

'Hand over the bloody wallet or do you want your girlfriend breathing out of a different hole?' the bigger guy whispered, the quiet hiss more frightening than any

shout. I kept very still, feeling the chill of the blade against my throat as Seth took out the wallet and held it silently out. The guy let go of my hair to grab it and I stumbled forward to Seth.

'Tosser,' spat the hoodie, and he turned to leave. As he did, the knife flashed again. This time towards Seth.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. I saw the flash of the blade towards Seth's ribs, heard the rip of cloth and Seth's gasp of pain as he doubled up against the blow. Blood blossomed on his shirt. And I felt my power, so long suppressed, rise and boil and explode within me like a scream.

'*NO!*'

There was a flashing white blast, like a bomb blast, a rippling circle of power that pulsed outwards. The two hoodies were flung backwards, crashing against the alley walls with a sick smack like the sound of roadkill. The searing light burnt an image into my retinas: ragdoll bodies splayed against rough stone. Then darkness flooded back. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light I saw them both, lying quite still on the ground, bleeding from their nostrils and ears.

I staggered, my legs weak with the sudden expulsion of power, and then Seth was beside me, hugging me, gripping my face and my shoulders with fierce strength.

'Anna, Anna, are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' I gasped. 'Are you?'

He looked down at his shirt, torn and stained with blood, and then lifted it to inspect his ribs. A bloody gash crossed his side.

'It's a scratch. It'll heal.'

'Ugh!' I sobbed. 'How could they? How could they? I was so frightened . . .'

We both looked down at the bodies and a new fear came over me.

'Do you think . . . ?'

'I don't know,' Seth said. He knelt gingerly beside the older boy and touched his neck. 'He's got a pulse.' He touched the other boy. 'They're both alive, thank God. I think you just knocked them out.'

He picked up the knife and wiped it clean on his bloody shirt, and then extricated his wallet and the phones from the older boy's grip. Then, from quite close by, we heard a police siren start up, and we both stiffened as if any movement might attract the car. It passed, heading on up the high street, and I heard Seth's shaky gasp of relief echo mine.

'We need to get out of here,' Seth said. 'Is there anything that could lead them back to us?'

'Just the knife, your blood . . .' I wiped it again

and then rinsed it in a puddle. It wouldn't help if they bothered with forensics, but I prayed it wouldn't come to that.

'Hopefully when they come to they'll just think they had a fight they can't remember,' Seth said, buttoning his coat over the bloodstains.

'*If* they come to.'

'They'll be *fine*,' Seth said with fierce emphasis. 'Anna, listen to me – they're both breathing; they'll be OK. Now come on, let's get out of here.'

We walked swiftly up the alleyway. The high street was empty as we left, and we made our way as quickly and inconspicuously as possible to the car. My hands were shaking with spent adrenaline.

In the car Seth started the engine. He was about to move off when I suddenly said, 'Wait, wait a sec . . .'

There was a phone box in the corner of the car park and I ran over to it and dialled 999.

'Ambulance,' I said breathlessly in response to the operator's question, and then when I was put through, 'Please send an ambulance to the alleyway off Brighthaven high street. I don't know what it's called, but it's a little dead end between Topshop and Milly's Tea Room. There are two men; they've been in a fight. They're unconscious but breathing.'

'Right. Can I take your name please?' the operator asked.

I hung up and ran to the car.

In the car on the way back I was silent, trying to keep myself under control. Seth looked at me sideways in the darkness, and I could feel his concern.

'It's OK, Anna,' he said at last. 'It'll be OK.'

'You don't know that.' I stared into the golden tunnels of the headlights; a frightened rabbit leapt into the hedge with a flash of white scut. 'I ruined our evening; I ruined everything.'

'*Don't* say that,' Seth said angrily. 'You didn't ruin anything. Those blokes could have killed us both. You got us out of there the only way you could. Would we be having this conversation if you'd hit them over the head with a rock?'

Probably. But anyway there was one massive difference, and Seth knew it. I was a witch and the two boys were just ordinary people, outwith, with no powers to defend themselves. I'd used an illegal weapon in an unfair fight – and put myself and Seth in danger.

Ever since my run-in with the Ealdwitan last year I'd promised myself, once and for all, never to use magic again and, so far, it seemed to be working. I'd

had no more terrifying visits from the Ealdwitan's grey-suited 'employees', no more back-door recruitment attempts, only a dry, official letter with an embossed crow crest, regretting 'an unfortunate incident in June of this year, in which certain of our personnel exceeded their responsibilities and committed certain errors of judgement'.

Those 'errors of judgement' had resulted in the death of one of our friends, the flooding of Winter town, and the destruction of most of Winter Castle. And it all stemmed from my inability to keep my powers under control.

The Ealdwitan's letter had promised 'no further action, providing our previous terms and conditions are adhered to'. Which meant, in plain English: no casting spells on ordinary people and no practising magic. It wasn't only the actions of the police we had to fear over tonight's outburst, but the fury of the Ealdwitan too, if they ever got to hear about it.

The drive back from Brighthaven was a longish one, and I'd got myself under control by the time Seth bumped down the wooded track to Wicker House. He drew up in front of the house and took my hand.

'Want me to come in?'

I shook my head, thinking of his bloody shirt and Dad's probable reaction.

'Better not. Your shirt. You know. Dad would ask questions.'

Seth nodded.

'OK. But listen, Anna, please don't fret about this. You did what you had to do. No one needs to know about this.'

I nodded soberly, but Seth must have read my unconvinced expression, because he pulled me to him and kissed me very hard.

'I love you, Anna. Please, please don't beat yourself up. Promise me? Sleep well, have a good day with Emmaline tomorrow and put this out of your head. Promise?'

'I promise,' I said, a lump in my throat.