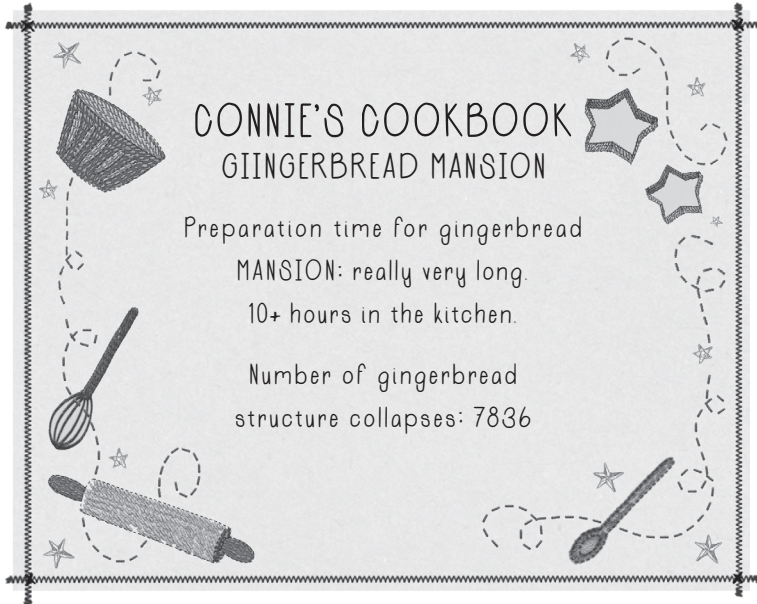




## CHAPTER 23



There's no yellow in the winter sun as it rises. It's just a big white ball, like a daytime moon keeping an eye on us.

I need to tell Mirabelle I spoke to a star and yes, they really do know.

It's December, and I'm thirteen. Thirteen years old and tasked with ending the world. It's an impossible task: make Avalon, and I'll survive but nothing else will.

Or, keep on blocking the stitch witch, stop Avalon and . . .

I imagine my heart inside me, hourglass shaped and counting down, just like Aunt Connie used to do, to the end.

I wonder if this is how Aunt Connie felt as a dragon, and after, that her heart just couldn't take the pressure of the magic any more.

I can feel the stitch witch pulling in close, threads tightening, grip closing. She's found her strength again, she's ready to make another attempt for her Avalon. Magic is heat and even if I had all of Aunt Connie's fire in me now, no flames alone can take down this tapestry.

*'It is time to join us now as The One True Witch. Can you not feel our fingers already? Around your heart?'*

Thread. The stitch witch has thread running through all of us. Anyone who has ever been inside this tapestry isn't safe from their writhing, wriggling threads. She is the knot pulled tight deep inside me. Not a stitch witch but a snag witch holding us all tight.

I remember the dark worm that Temmie coughed up. There was nothing worm-like about it at all, now that I think about it. It was a dark gold slimy thread. I know I saw it with my eyes so the picture must be filed

somewhere back there in my brain. I can remember Senara's foot coming down on the worm hard. And then, when Aunt Flissie transformed, she did the same. Hawked up something dark and wriggling.

And finally, hand to my own chest, I think about the cough that those of us who have been part of the tapestry have all been coughing, all December. Aunt Connie, rasping into a handkerchief. Kerra, spluttering as she came out of the tapestry.

But if my bird aunts can spit out the thread inside them, then I must be able to get it out too.

*'Enough of that!'* the stitch witch declares and I feel myself pulled tight to her as I try and dig as deep as I can for some of myself . . . some Clemmie that might be able to help resist her. But the stitch witch's threads are everywhere – round my heart and lungs, through my arms and fingers – and she is pulling them as surely as pulling a puppet on a string.

*'Avalon will not wait! We start here! We start now!'*

And I can feel my own mouth moving to shape her words.

Realisation comes in a flash: Mirabelle didn't 'oops' us here, the stitch witch brought us here and it was very, very much on purpose. This place loaded with

witch-history is the place she wants to make her Avalon.

I can feel my arms lifting, I can feel the hope that Aunt Connie just gave me dying.

I'm like a giant old-fashioned thermometer, filling up, temperature rising with One True Witchness.

*'Avalon!'* the stitch witch crows and takes aim at her target.

We are looking towards the ruin of the Morgan castle. It was once everyone's, before the Merlyns were banished.

I am the gun, she just has to point me in the right direction. Direct from my chest, as I've got so good at doing, I explode.

*'Raze it all,'* the stitch witch whispers.

A blast of pure magic passes through me and I shudder.

The walls of the castle start to crumble, ancient brick crashing down. Magic has been used to make the Morgan castle before and I've seen it at its picturesque best.

It's already ruined but that's not enough for the stitch witch, she wants it gone completely. Total destruction, so that nothing can stand against us and our Avalon. The thunder of the tumbling stone is almost as deafening as my heartbeat, squeezed tight with threads of magic.

I feel . . . a certain satisfaction in watching the old castle teeter over.

Aunt Nim runs towards me, both hands clamped over the baby at her chest. Her mouth is open in a silent 'O' of shock but she doesn't stay shocked for long.

'Not the castle!' she cries.

I've done it again, another horrible mistake. I've destroyed her beloved 'ancestral home'.

She's still running, still shouting, and it takes me a moment to understand her fury.

But then I realise. The rest of the world is still sleeping, including the children. The magic-seekers, the fans of Sister Christmas, they are inside the castle. In trying to keep them safe, I've put them in terrible danger. The sick satisfaction of the stitch witch disappears, leaving only me and my own horror at myself.

The Morgan castle, always a ruin, could collapse on them at any moment. Half a turret leans and falls in slow motion. My mum, my aunt, my cousins could be underneath it.

I feel like I could cough my heart right out of my chest right now, it's so close to the back of my throat.

What have I done?

I can see Vera, leading her army of Sister Christmas pilgrims, racing out of the castle. She is small, but absolutely furious. Potboy chases after them, herding

children. They have to move fast – quicker than that! – as rubble continues to fall from what was once the first home of all witches.

My arms begin to raise again. *No*, I tell the stitch witch, *I won't* – and I grind my feet into the soil of the clifftop, my teeth clenched together to hold her down.

*'Ava – lon – Ava – lon,'* my heart beats to her command.

The shriek that cuts across us all is almost not human. But it is a word.

*'No!'*

The stitch witch flinches inside her tapestry and her tight hold on me is, for the moment, loosened. I sag, the burst of destruction completely exhausting.

The scream carries on and on, so piercing that I want to cover my ears but I can't.

My arms fall, the explosion hasn't come, we're safe for a moment as someone holds me very, very tight.

The stitch witch's Avalon isn't complete, the Morgan castle is mostly flattened, but Mum and my aunts are running, helping children out of the wreckage.

The scream is from Kerra. She's found her voice for me.

When I can finally speak too, it comes out as, *'Are you OK?'*

*'No,'* Kerra gasps, *'but I think I will be.'*

Her arms around me aren't an embrace but a restraint. She's stopping me exploding with her whole self, voice and all.

I pat her back awkwardly so she knows it's me, Clem; not me, stitch witch.

She pats my back too, underneath the tapestry, and I can feel my red dress, slick with sweat, sticking to us both.

But I don't care, and I give Kerra a proper hug and hold as tightly as I should have done to stop her getting sucked into the tapestry in the first place.

As she pulls back, her hair is full of static, which makes me feel like she really has seen something hair-raising.

'I'm so sorry,' I say, then add, 'You helped me stop – but I'm sure I don't have long. Thank you.'

I can already feel the stitch witch writhing in her threads again, trying to get back to that position of power inside me. I try and shove her down and away.

'You're welcome,' Kerra replies.

'It's . . . good to hear your voice,' I say.

Kerra has been with me this whole month, but now she's really with me.

'I think I'm ready now. But I had to wait; I had to know,' Kerra says.

‘Know what?’ I ask.

‘If I was evil.’ Kerra shrugs. ‘I wasn’t sure – after everything that happened in November – if I could trust myself.’

‘You were never evil,’ I protest.

‘Yes, I was. Or at least, I was going that way. Last time I spoke out it was a mistake and I almost started a war. My voice is my weapon,’ Kerra says, hand hovering at her own throat. ‘It’s how I persuaded those knights to follow me. And now you have all that power in you, I didn’t want to say anything bad.’

Kerra gives me a little smile. ‘I’m recovering from being in the tapestry. Not just that but from all that time that I thought magic was everything. I think I’ve got a lot more recovery to do. So, I decided . . . the best thing I could do this month was let you get through it without going to the dark side.’

I don’t know if Kerra knows how selfless this is. Enough to make me, already magic-drained and stitch-witch-attacked, cry.

‘So how do you know, now, that you’re not evil?’ I check.

‘My sister,’ Kerra says simply, and I turn towards the castle, seeking Senara. ‘My *baby* sister,’ she adds.



*'Avalon.'* The stitch witch hisses into the moment of silence between us.

'No,' I say, slamming down hard on the voice inside me. 'I need to hear my cousin right now.'

I turn back to Kerra. 'Thank you.'

'Oh, I know queen behaviour,' Kerra says. 'I might not wear the crown any more but trust me, I'm an unselfish queen.'

Kerra's squeaky voice hasn't unsqueaked. I think people may say that she's on the 'shrill' side of high-pitched for ever. But she's learnt to measure her words. And they feel more important somehow.

'I like your voice,' I say. 'I don't want you to have to be silent.'

'I haven't been silent, I've been peaceful. Trying to . . . redeem myself,' Kerra admits. 'Be the best deputy The One True Witch could have.'

'You don't have to do that,' I say. 'You're already my best friend. I don't need anything other than that.'

'But Mirabelle is your best friend.'

'Best friends are like cake,' I say, and Kerra frowns. 'You should have more than one,' I add as explanation.

'But what is your favourite flavour of cake?' Kerra checks.

I shrug. 'I don't really mind. I like cheesecake.'

Kerra bursts out laughing. 'So, none of your aunts were right?'

Lemon is Aunt Prudie's favourite. Ginger is Aunt Connie's favourite . . . *was* Aunt Connie's favourite. I like them both too.

I grin. 'Yeah.'

'Look,' Kerra says, taking both of my hands in hers for a moment. 'The two things I like most in the world are you and magic. So, you having all the magic is very good news. I'd rather it was you than my mother. I'd rather it was you than Mirabelle . . . don't want animals everywhere. I'd even rather it was you than Senara. Cos she's trying really hard to be a doctor.'

I spin Aunt Connie's egg timer on the floor and it does about four rotations before the pointier end comes back round to me again. I pick it up and twist the timer mechanism.

'Can't believe you brought me back out of the tapestry to fight the tapestry,' Kerra says, but I check again and she's still grinning.

'All those times I asked you! All those times I needed your help!'

'You just wanted help. This time though,' she says,

pointing at the roiling stitch witch, 'yeah, you actually needed me.'

'Just like a hero,' I say with a smirk at her. 'To wait until the life-saving moment.'

Kerra grimaces. She's not ready to be teased again, I realise.

'How did you say no?' I ask. 'They didn't even give me a chance.'

'You can't wait for the opportunity to say no,' Kerra says with a smile. 'I realised, quickly, that inside the tapestry there was this . . . ick. It was like being inside a forest and the trees look weird. Then the trees are moving, then they're talking, then . . . I spent however long I was in there.'

'Three weeks,' I murmur, regretting every minute.

'I had to block her, stay . . . closed, all the time. She was trying to worm her way into my mind. My heart. She's an invader, Clemmie. She tries to invade you, take your body to use the way we used the pumpkin before: just a storage device.'

'The more she talks, the more she gets into you,' I say, knowing that the stitch witch is buried deep in my heart. That it still might be too late.

So how do I get her to let me go? Even a little?

I don't know how many more distractions will work.

'You're too open,' Kerra says. 'Too giving. You need to shut yourself down.'

'The stitch witch wasn't able to get her claws – I mean her threads – into you. But if I'm Sister Christmas . . . and giving is what I'm good at, then maybe I have to give the stitch witch a gift.'

'Go on,' Kerra says and leans in.

Next to me, the egg timer finishes its countdown with a shrill announcement.