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The Witches of Cambridge

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Chapter One

Amandine closes her eyes as the clock ticks past midnight. She tries to ignore the tug of the full moon and the flutter in her chest as its gravity squeezes her heart. Instead, Amandine focuses on her husband's soft snores and wonders, as she has every night for the last few months, why she feels so numb.

When they met thirteen years ago, she thought him the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Amandine Bisset was so passionate for Eliot Walker then that tiny silver sparks flew from her fingertips when she touched him. When they made love, her whole body filled with light so bright Amandine believed she might explode. Now she wonders, when was the last time sex was like that? Before the babies were born?

Now they have two rambunctious, full-blooded, glorious boys and hardly enough energy left at the end of the day for a goodnight kiss, let alone anything else. And any intimacy had quickly evaporated, like wet kisses scattered across warm skin. Thirteen years ago, when they were both undergraduates at Cambridge, Amandine's skin had shimmered at the sight

of him. The first time Eliot Walker entered her world she was standing in the foyer of the Fitzwilliam Museum gazing at *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt and wondering if, among all the glistening gold, she'd ever be blessed enough to feel the passionate desire depicted in that painting.

A moment later, the thought still lingering in her head, Amandine had heard laughter as bright and brilliant as moonshine. She turned to see Eliot standing alone in front of a van Gogh, his laughter flooding the painting and filling the room. Seized by a sudden urge she couldn't explain, Amandine found herself walking towards him. When she reached him, she didn't extend her hand and introduce herself.

'Why are you laughing?'

Eliot turned his smile on her. 'What?'

She asked again and he shrugged.

'I don't know. There's a quirky joy about it, the sky rolling like waves, the moon and stars like little suns. I think the artist wanted us to smile.'

'I don't think so,' Amandine said, feeling the need to contradict him. 'Van Gogh was a depressive. This painting was the view from his sanatorium window. I doubt he was smiling at the time.'

Eliot's own smile deepened, tinged with cheeky triumph. 'But he didn't paint it there, did he? It was done from memory, years later. He might have been laughing then.'

Amandine frowned, not because he was wrong – indeed she knew for a fact that he wasn't – but because he was so sure of himself, slightly arrogant and argumentative. Just like herself.

'Before or after he cut off his ear?'

Eliot laughed again. 'You don't like to be wrong, do you?'

Amandine's frown deepened. 'Does anyone?'

‘Not me,’ he agreed. ‘But that doesn’t matter, because I never am.’

Amandine laughed, despite herself. ‘Everyone’s wrong sometimes.’

‘Something you know more than most, I imagine.’ Eliot’s eyes glittered.

Amandine was just about to fight back when she realised he was flirting. So she reined herself in, suppressing a smile and giving a nonchalant shrug.

‘I’m as wrong about life as anyone, I suppose, but I’m rarely wrong about art,’ she said. ‘And you’re not even studying art, are you? I haven’t seen you around Scroope.’

‘Law. Finalist. Trinity.’ He gave a little bow with a flourish of his hand. ‘Eliot Ellis Walker-Jones, at your service.’

‘Ah, so you’re one of them.’ Amandine raised a teasing eyebrow, her glance resting for a moment on his thick dark hair. ‘I should have known.’

‘One of whom?’

‘A lawyer. A double-barrelled name. A snob.’

‘The first charge I already confessed to. The second, I can’t deny,’ Eliot said. ‘But how can you claim the third?’

‘Your accent, your name, your knowledge of art even though it’s not your subject.’ Amandine smiled, feeling a sparkle on her skin as it began to tingle. ‘You probably play the piano disgustingly well and row for Trinity. And I bet a hundred quid you went to Eton—’

‘Winchester.’

Amandine rolled her eyes, finding it harder and harder not to look into his: vivid green with flecks of yellow, bright against his pale skin and dark hair.

‘So, you’re an art historian then?’ Eliot asked, shifting the tone. Amandine gave a little curtsy, fixing her eyes on the floor, hiding her desire to know this man more deeply, though she knew him hardly at all.

‘Amandine Françoise Héloïse Bisset.’

‘Pretty name.’

‘*Merci.*’

Eliot met her eyes. ‘You don’t have an accent.’

‘My parents are French, but I grew up here.’

‘Well, I’m glad about that,’ Eliot said. ‘Your growing up here, I mean. Well, that you live here right now, anyway . . .’

Amandine stifled a smile. ‘Yes, me too.’

They stood for a while, both glancing at the floor, then back at the painting.

‘It’s very . . .’ Eliot trailed off.

Amandine waited.

‘And you – you’re, you’re very . . .’

And, although he didn’t finish his sentence, this time Amandine knew what he’d wanted to say, because she felt the wave of his feelings fill the air like smoke. Joy. Passion. Desire.

She could feel what Eliot felt just as she could feel what van Gogh had when he painted *The Starry Night* in 1889. Every artist – painter, writer, musician – put their spirit and soul into their work, along with their emotions, and Amandine had always been able to feel exactly what the artist had when she looked at a painting or read a book. Music was trickier because the emotions of the musician always mixed with those of the composer, and she was confused and cloudy when confronted with conflicting or unclear emotions.

And, amazingly, though he clearly wasn’t a witch, Eliot had been

right about van Gogh's *Starry Night*, though Amandine was loath to admit it. Besides, she couldn't say so without also telling him her deepest secret. And she had absolutely no intention of doing that. Even her father hadn't known about her mother. Héloïse Bisset had kept her true nature from her husband and so Amandine had always assumed that it wasn't safe to share such things with people who were purely human. It was likely, if nothing else, to shock them so much that they'd never see you in the same way again.

'I don't suppose . . . ?' Eliot began, tentative for the first time.

'What?' Amandine asked, though she already knew the answer.

'I don't suppose you fancy taking a cup of tea with a snobby lawyer? My treat.'

'Well,' Amandine pretended to consider, 'since you're not a lawyer yet, I suppose I could make an exception. And if you like van Gogh, you can't be so terrible.'

'Ah, high praise indeed. I should ask you to write my references,' Eliot said. 'And when I am a lawyer, what will you do about fraternising with me then?'

They began to walk past the paintings and towards the door.

'We'll still know each other then, will we?' Amandine swallowed a smile.

Eliot paused for a moment in front of *The Kiss*.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'In ten years or so I'll be a London lawyer and we'll be married with two kids. Both boys.'

Amandine raised both eyebrows. 'Oh, really?'

They began walking again.

'But I don't want children,' Amandine said, 'so I'm afraid that might put a little crimp in your plans.'

'You might not now,' Eliot said, 'but you will.'

Amandine laughed. 'Now you're taking arrogance to a whole

new level. But I'm afraid you're wrong this time. I admit I might change my mind in many ways in the next ten or twenty years, but not about that.'

'Ah, but I told you,' Eliot said, still smiling. 'I'm never wrong.'

And then, with one bold move following another, he reached out and took her hand. Amandine almost flinched, thinking perhaps she ought to be shocked, affronted at his arrogance again. But she wasn't. So she let her hand soften in his and, as they walked together, Amandine wished that her mother had given her psychic powers along with extraordinary empathy, so she could know whether it was possible that this man might be right.

Now Amandine lies in bed next to her husband, who has changed so much, from being the light at the centre of her life to someone currently trying to hide at the edges. Lately there's something else Amandine has begun feeling from Eliot, emotions coming off him in swells so strong she could swear she can almost smell them. Wafts of guilt and fear float around the house in great ribbons, trailing through corridors and lingering in the air so Amandine could track his every movement if she so chose. Her first assumption, of course, was that he was having an affair. It wouldn't be difficult. He commutes to London every day and often works late and on weekends, no doubt spending time with a wide variety of ambitious young paralegals who might set their sights on a successful and handsome barrister.

However, if Eliot's having an affair then he's as careful and cunning as an MI5 agent. No emails, no texts, no phantom phone calls. Amandine's routine investigations have failed to unearth anything remotely suspicious and she's sure he's neither discreet

nor deceptive enough to hide such an obvious secret right under her nose. Eliot Walker is clever, certainly, and as a lawyer he has probably pulled off a few tricks in his time, but as a husband and father he's always been transparent and true. It's just a shame that her gift for feeling what other people do isn't accompanied by the ability to know their thoughts. Empathy balanced with telepathy would make sense. It would provide the whole picture. Without it, sadly, Amandine is left knowing how people feel but not knowing why.

Noa Sparrow has never been much liked by people and she doesn't much care. That isn't strictly true, of course. She tries not to care, she pretends not to care, but she doesn't do a very good job. The problem is that most people don't like to be told the truth. They prefer to hide things from themselves, to act as if everything is okay, to pretend that stuff doesn't bother them when it does. They think, rather foolishly, that what they ignore will simply disappear.

Noa can't help that she's always been able to see the truth. What's worse, though, is that she's unable to keep silent about what she sees. The words escape her lips, no matter how hard she tries to clamp them tight shut. How often she longs for the ability to feign and fake, to be two-faced, to be a bold and brilliant little liar. Most people seem to manage it easily enough, but sadly it's never been one of Noa's gifts.

She was twelve years old when her need to tell the truth ruined her life. It was two weeks before Christmas and Noa was sitting at the dinner table with her parents, wondering what she'd get in her stocking that year, while they talked about fixing the dripping tap in the sink, when she saw something – a dark truth snaking beneath

benign sentences about faucets and the price of plumbers – that she couldn't keep secret. Every day since, Noa has cursed her awful truth-telling Tourette syndrome, wishing she'd been able to keep quiet on that dreadful December night. But, since she can't undo the past, she's spent every day instead hating herself.

Diana Sparrow didn't speak to her daughter for three months after Noa, reaching for more potatoes, suddenly burst out with the fact of her mother's affair with her tango teacher. The shocking secret had just slipped out. Noa clamped her hand over her mouth as the words tumbled into the air, but it was too late. Both her parents had turned to look at her in shock and the stunned guilt on her mother's face was unmistakable.

In the months of ear-splitting, heart-shattering pain that followed, Noa prayed every night that her 'gift' for seeing and telling the truth would be stripped from her. She cut off her long blonde hair in penance and denied herself any treats. She took a vow of silence, not opening her mouth to say anything at all, so no hideous, undesirable truths could sneak out. Noa watched, helpless, while her mother relocated to the sofa, then moved out altogether. She listened to her father sob behind his bedroom door in the early hours of the morning. And all the while she said nothing. Not a single word.

Noa had hoped she would somehow be able to go through the rest of her life like that, silent and unseen, never upsetting anyone again. But Noa found that her teachers weren't willing to let her tiptoe through her education undetected, especially when they noticed the quality of her written work. Seeing they had someone rather special in their school, they encouraged her to participate in class, to join in with everyone else. So, in spite of her desperate efforts to remain anonymous, Noa was frequently forced into class

discussions, team projects, and group assignments. And, although she tried desperately to monitor her words very carefully in her mind – planning them once and checking them twice – before she let them out of her mouth, every now and then someone’s secret would break free. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Noa’s childhood passed without the comfort of friends.

By the time she reached university to study the History of Art at Magdalene College, Cambridge, Noa had almost convinced herself that she didn’t need anybody else, she was perfectly fine going through life alone. She could quite happily spend entire days in the Fitzwilliam Museum on Trumpington Street, passing the morning with Renoir, Matisse and Monet, sharing her lunchtime sandwiches with van Gogh and Vermeer, having a quick supper snack in the presence of Picasso and Kandinsky. But at night, as she lies alone in her bed, all the unspoken thoughts of the day pinballing around in her head, Noa’s loneliness is bitter and sharp.

Noa sleeps with the curtains open, allowing as much moonlight as possible to flood her bedroom, allowing her to see each and every picture on the walls, if only as a pale glimmer. It took Noa weeks to perfect the art display. Reproductions of Monet’s gardens at Giverny blanket one wall: thousands of violets – smudges of purples and mauves – and azaleas, poppies and peonies, tulips and roses, water lilies in pastel pinks floating on serene lakes, reflecting weeping willows and shimmers of sunshine. Turner’s sunsets adorn another: bright eyes of gold at the centre of skies and seas of searing magenta or soft blue. The third wall is splashed with Jackson Pollocks: a hundred different colours streaked and splattered above Noa’s bed. The fourth wall is decorated by Rothko: blocks of blue and red and yellow blending

and bleeding together. The ceiling is papered with the abstract shapes of Kandinsky: triangles, circles and lines tumbling over one another in energetic acrobatics.

Noa adores abstract art. It quiets her mind; it creates, for her, fewer questions than figurative art. She doesn't wonder – though perhaps she ought – what intention lay behind the placing of a square or the choice of yellow or blue. Noa can simply gaze at the colours and shapes and enjoy the emptiness inside her, the rare absence of thought, together with a feeling of connection – the shadow of something she misses and longs for.

Other than her beloved aunt, Heather, and with the exception of a few cursory words exchanged with librarians and museum curators, virtually the only people Noa speaks with are her professors. So far, to her great good fortune, she's had only two teachers, who have been so boring and lifeless that they harbour no hidden truths for her to blurt out and offend them with. Today though, she's meeting a new professor, Amandine Bisset, and Noa can already sense that she won't be so lucky this time. This new teacher's name alone suggests sensuality and secrets, veiled lives and lovers, concealed longings and desires. Noa imagines her: tall and willowy with long black curls, enormous brown eyes, and lips that have kissed a hundred men and brought them to their knees with whispered French words coated in black coffee and chocolate. Noa is absolutely certain that this woman will be her undoing. After years of carefully clipped silence, she will be unable to contain herself.

It's a surprise, then, when Noa opens the door to Professor Bisset's office and steps inside. The room is large and the walls are bare – a strange quirk for a professor of art history – except for a big, bright poster of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* hanging opposite a

large oak desk, behind which sits Amandine Bisset, head down, scribbling into a notebook.

‘Give me a sec,’ she says, without a French accent and without looking up.

Noa stands at the edge of the room, not sitting down in her allotted chair, antique and upholstered in dark red leather, wanting to give her new teacher at least the semblance of privacy. While Amandine writes, Noa watches her. She was right about the beauty and the black hair, but it’s very short, Amandine’s eyes aren’t brown but green, and she isn’t tall and willowy but average height and verging on voluptuous. More importantly, however, Noa instantly sees that she’s absolutely accurate about one thing, the worst thing of all: Amandine Bisset is full of secrets.

‘It’s strange that your walls are empty,’ Noa says, before she can help it. ‘Why do you have only one painting? Don’t you get bored?’

Professor Bisset looks up from her writing. ‘I have a good imagination,’ she says, her voice a little sharp and a little shocked. ‘And you have a rather impolite way of introducing yourself.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Noa says as she sits. ‘I can’t help it. I . . .’

‘Oh?’ Amandine’s frown deepens, though she sounds more curious than annoyed. She studies Noa then, about to say something, but seems to change her mind. ‘I’d get bored looking at the same paintings every day, no matter how much I loved them.’

‘Except for the Klimt.’

‘Yes.’

Amandine glances back at her notebook.

Noa bites her lip, but she can’t stop herself. She sees what her

teacher isn't saying as if it were written on a teleprompter that someone is insisting she read aloud.

'Your husband. That's why you keep that painting. It reminds you of when you were happy.'

Amandine's eyes snap up again.

'How did you know that?' she says. Her mouth remains open, as if she wishes she could swallow the words back down. She can't, of course. And the truth once spoken is undeniable.

Noa gives a little shrug and starts fishing around in her canvas book bag for her essay. 'I've been looking forward to the French Impressionists,' she mumbles, hoping her teacher will appreciate the swift change of subject and let her off the hook. If Noa's really lucky she'll be able to get through the next hour without saying something really off limits, something that will have Amandine refuse to keep her on as a student. It's happened before.

'Fuck the French Impressionists.'

Having just pulled her essay out of her bag, Noa drops it. Five pages flutter to the floor but Noa just stares at her teacher, wide-eyed, her fingertips already sticky with fear. Mercifully, the shock empties her mind and silences her mouth.

'Sorry,' Amandine says softly. 'I didn't . . . of course, that was rude. But you can't say something like that and then expect to start talking about Monet. You have to explain yourself first.'

Noa nods. Her mouth is dry. She swallows. 'I didn't mean to upset you. It's just . . .'

Noa has no idea how to explain herself so that she doesn't sound crazy or scary or both.

Amandine takes a deep breath and sits up. She pulls her long fingers through her short hair. 'You don't have to give me a rational

explanation,' she says. 'I'm not a rational person myself. I'm . . .'

It's then that Noa sees what Amandine is. And she smiles, just a flicker at the edge of her lips, but a sense of relief floods her whole body from fingertips to toes. Now she knows it's safe, for the first time in her life, to reveal herself. Noa has only just met this woman, but she knows that Amandine won't judge, reject or punish her. She knows that it's finally okay to tell her own secret, to be honest about who she is.

'I see things I shouldn't,' Noa begins, her voice soft. 'I see all the things most people don't want other people to see . . . I don't want to say anything, I want to keep their secrets, but I can't seem to help saying what I see. I don't have any control over it, I don't know why not.'

Amandine sits forward. 'How do you see what you see?'

Noa shrugs, twisting a piece of her hair around her finger, then smoothing it against her cheek. 'I don't know. I've always just known things. That's okay, I guess, but not being able to shut up about it, that's a shame.'

Amandine nods. 'It doesn't make you many friends, I suppose.'

'No,' Noa says, 'not many.'

Amandine sits back in her chair. 'You mentioned my husband.' Her eyes flicker to the one painting on the wall. 'And how we used to be happy . . .'

Noa nods. 'Something changed, quite recently. It's like . . . a wall between you.' While Noa speaks she looks at her teacher, who's still gazing at the painting. 'You don't know what's happened. You wonder if he's having an affair. You wonder if he loves you any more.'

Still staring at the painting, Amandine nods, slowly, as tears pool in her eyes and drop down her cheeks.

‘Do you want me to leave?’ Noa asks, her voice so soft she almost can’t hear her own words.

‘No.’ Amandine pauses, taking a long moment before she brushes her cheeks with the back of her hand and looks up at her student again. ‘No, I don’t want you to leave. I want you to meet my husband. I want you to tell me the truth about him.’