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A WITCH'S GUIDE TO *Magical Innkeeping*

a novel



NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE VERY SECRET SOCIETY OF IRREGULAR WITCHES
SANGU MANDANNA

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MAGICAL
INNKEEPING



SANGU MANDANNA

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*This one is for Past Me,
for all those times she kept going.
Future Me finally gets it.*

CHAPTER ONE



*I*t was hardly ideal weather for the resurrection of one's great-aunt, but Sera Swan's magical power, while impressive, hadn't the slightest influence over the obnoxiously blue skies. Autumn had only just arrived in the northwest of England, bringing with it an unseasonably merry sky, leaves of toasted gold and burnt orange, and, most distressingly, the corpse in the back garden.

"You could do with a cup of tea first," Clemmie remarked. "You're a mess. You can't go resurrecting people when you're all blotchy and snotty."

Sera chose to ignore the insult, as well as its dubious logic. "Are you sure this will work?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"You lied to me an hour ago when you told me the Tooth Fairy ate the last of the peanut butter. The Tooth Fairy! How old do you think I am?"

"Yes, yes, all right," Clemmie cut in hastily. "I may have been known to fib in the past, but new leaves have been turned."

Sera was quite sure a barren wasteland stood a greater chance of turning new leaves than Clemmie did but decided not to say so.

With a swish of her bushy red tail, Clemmie turned and trotted back to the house. "Well? Are you coming? Jasmine's dead and I haven't got opposable thumbs. That tea won't make itself, you know."

It was just as well the inn was empty this weekend and there were no bystanders to observe this scene, for as scenes went, it was decidedly

peculiar. It was like the beginning of a bad joke. *A corpse, a witch, and a fox walked into a bar...*

(Actually, it was more like a corpse and *two* witches, and one of those witches happened to be trapped in the form of a small, chubby red fox. Sera wasn't sure if that would improve the joke or not.)

Sera, who was fifteen years old and frankly out of her depth, hesitated beside her great-aunt's body. Was she really going to cast a spell with nothing but Clemmie's word to go on? Clemmie, who had turned up out of the blue a few weeks ago and had yet to offer any real answers about who she really was or how she'd ended up trapped in fox form? She was the very *opposite* of trustworthy, but Sera was going to have to trust her today or she would lose Great-Auntie Jasmine for good.

The upshot was that Sera had plenty of power and not enough knowledge, while Clemmie had plenty of knowledge and not enough power. That was all that mattered right now. And anyway, if Clemmie *was* lying to her, what difference would it make? Jasmine was dead. A failed resurrection spell couldn't exactly make her any deader.

The azure skies wheeled above, still objectionably cheerful. Sera couldn't believe that it had only been a few minutes since Clemmie had found her in the kitchen, said "There's a situation you have to deal with outside, but just so you know, I hate tears and hysterics," and led her out to where Jasmine had dropped dead in the garden. Sera remembered little of what had happened after that, though her raw eyes informed her that there had indeed been plenty of tears and probably one or two hysterics.

Sera *did* remember that she'd stood up to go find a phone. The sensible thing to do, she'd reasoned, was to dial 999 and let a grown-up take charge.

Then Clemmie had tutted, stopping her in her tracks. "How tiresome. I expected Jasmine to have more sense and better manners than to die in the garden. On a warm day like this, she'll get icky very quickly. We'll have to work fast."

"What are you talking about?"

Whereupon Clemmie had revealed she knew how to resurrect the dead. As a collector of rare, powerful spells of dubious legality and even more

questionable morality, Clemmie knew all sorts of spells that other people didn't. Sera already knew this because Clemmie could not resist telling her at every available opportunity. She had never had the power to *cast* most of said spells, she'd admitted somewhat petulantly, but that had not dampened her fondness for knowing more than everybody else.

Sera hadn't known that *this* particular spell was in Clemmie's hoard, however, because the legality of a resurrection spell wasn't dubious at all. It was, in fact, *very* illegal.

"It's a law from back when witches actually had the magic necessary to cast a spell of this size," Clemmie had explained. "None of us have had that much power in yonks." Then she'd cocked her fox head, eyeing Sera with a bright, speculative gaze. "*You* might, though. You're the most gifted witch the Guild has seen since Albert Grey. You might actually be able to bring Jasmine back."

"Tell me what to do," Sera had said at once.

"Don't you want to think about it first?"

"No." *Thinking* was exactly what Sera wanted to avoid. If she started thinking, her heart would crumple at the thought of losing the woman who had been more of a parent to her than her own parents had ever been. No, *thinking* was out of the question.

"A spell like this will require a great deal of your magic," Clemmie had warned.

"I have plenty to spare."

"And what about the Guild? What happens if they find out?"

Choosing her love for Jasmine over her loyalty to the British Guild of Sorcery wasn't exactly difficult for Sera. The Guild was strict, stuffy, and entirely too fond of looking down their noses at almost everybody. Their snobbery (and the inevitable generations of inbreeding that came with it) meant that of all the witches born in the country each year, the vast majority were born into the fifteen or so families who could trace their magical history all the way back to the founding of the Guild in the 1600s. As soon as these precious darlings took their first steps, off they toddled to be

educated in the ways of magic and their own intrinsic superiority at the Guild's opulent estate in Northumberland.

And while it was true that even young witches born outside these lofty circles were invited to share in the same education, it was worth mentioning that the ones who accepted were certainly not given the same treatment once they got there. (Luckily, most sane outsiders, upon ascertaining that magic was a real thing and, moreover, that they could do it, were understandably of the view that mysterious, hitherto unheard-of guilds were not to be trusted, and chose instead to remain in their homes and study the textbooks the Guild sent them there.)

Sera's Icelandic mother didn't have so much as a magical hair follicle. Also, she was Icelandic, ergo *foreign*. Sera's witch father, meanwhile, had limited power and had been the first known witch in the history of his Indian family. Also, he was Indian, ergo *extra* foreign. Sera's lack of Guild-approved pedigree was the reason, therefore, that no one from that prestigious society had bothered to pursue the matter when Great-Auntie Jasmine, left to care for tiny, mischievous, terrible-twoing Sera after her parents had ambled off on one of their many adventures, had declined their token offer to educate her at the estate.

Eight years had passed, during which time Sera had practically memorised every book that the Guild had sent her, before Albert Grey, who was by far the most powerful witch in the country, had noticed that one of her monthly progress letters mentioned the successful casting of a spell that was *well* beyond the talents of most fully grown witches, never mind those of a ten-year-old. He had descended upon the inn with the Chancellor of the Guild in tow, whereupon they'd ridden roughshod over Jasmine's objections and insisted that Sera be sent to their country estate at once to be appropriately educated as Albert's apprentice.

That had been five years ago. More than enough time to discover exactly what the Guild was and what it wasn't.

All of which was to say that Sera knew the Guild hadn't given her a second thought until she'd proven herself too gifted to ignore, so as far as

she was concerned, Jasmine, who had loved her without question since the day they had met, came first.

Now Sera wiped the last tears off her face, turned away from the corpse at her feet, and followed Clemmie back into the house.

As she crossed the kitchen to turn the kettle on, Sera could smell sugar, the soda bread she and Jasmine had baked that morning, and the familiar scent of Jasmine's Nivea cream. A lump settled into her throat and made itself thoroughly at home. What if the spell didn't work?

It was horribly unfair. Jasmine was only fifty-six. She had a clubfoot and used a cane, but Sera couldn't remember the last time she'd even had a cold! Why hadn't she been allowed to have another thirty years?

An excessively sweetened cup of tea soothed her nerves a little and, thanks to Clemmie's impatient tsking, almost burned her tongue right off as she drank it too hot and too fast.

"Done?" Clemmie demanded. "Ready? Let's go. We've done quite enough dillydallying. What if someone turns up looking for a room? We could do without a witness."

Her phone rang and Sera jumped.

"Ignore it," said Clemmie.

Sera ignored her instead. The only people who ever called Sera on her own phone were her parents (infrequently) and her best friend, Francesca (at least twice a day). Knowing full well that whichever of them it was, they would keep calling until she answered, and that that was hardly going to help her concentrate on the most difficult spell she'd ever cast in her life, she sought out the phone and answered it.

"Hi." Sera's voice was a little raw from the tears and the nerves, but she felt sure she sounded mostly normal.

"I have the *most* exciting news!" Francesca squealed on the other end of the line, her usually crisp vowels and faultless enunciation lost in what was obviously very great excitement indeed. "You'll never guess!"

"Francesca, I can't—"

"Father wants you to come skiing with us this Christmas!"

It took Sera a moment to make sense of these words. With her thoughts full of death and illegal spellwork, *skiing*, of all things, felt like a concept from another universe altogether.

“Um, that’s very kind of him,” she said politely, and winced as she heard the lack of enthusiasm in her voice.

Sera had a complicated relationship with Albert Grey, who, in addition to being her instructor, also happened to be Francesca’s father. When he’d first accepted her as his apprentice and introduced her to the strict but dizzyingly magical world of the Guild, she’d had a childish, naïve hope that he’d become something of a father figure to her. They were the two most powerful witches in the country by a mile, after all, which was an immense privilege but a lonely one too. There was no one else like them.

To anybody looking in from the outside, Albert probably *did* seem fond and parental, but Sera had never been able to shake the feeling that he was faking it. That, in truth, he resented her intrusion into a space he’d enjoyed ruling alone.

Fortunately, Francesca was too excited to notice Sera’s tone. “Please say you’ll come, Sera! I know you won’t want to leave Great-Auntie Jasmine alone at Christmas, so I persuaded Father to invite her too. You’ll both come, won’t you?”

Sera was touched by this gesture, but with Clemmie pacing in front of her and jabbing a paw pointedly at the clock, it was difficult to give it the response it deserved. Guiltily, she tried to rush her friend off the phone. “I’m so sorry, can we talk about this later?”

“What’s the matter?”

“I feel a bit sick. I’ll call you this evening, okay?”

“I notice they didn’t invite *me* to go skiing,” Clemmie remarked as soon as Sera had ended the call.

“They don’t know you exist,” Sera pointed out. “Which was what you wanted, I might add, or have you forgotten the eighteen times you’ve warned me not to tell anyone outside this house about you?”

Clemmie made a disgruntled sound. “Come on. We’ve wasted enough time.”

The garden, green and summery and overgrown, sloped quite dramatically downhill and was drenched in sunshine and the pinks, yellows, and whites of wildflowers. At the bottom, past a tiny orchard of fruit trees, the beehive, and the little mound of grass beneath which they'd buried Jasmine's beloved pet rooster, a low stone wall and latticed arch gave way to a narrow lane and rolling green hills.

As Clemmie circled Great-Auntie Jasmine's silent corpse, muttering under her breath about compass points and gravewitchery, Sera knelt on the grass in the shade of the citrus trees and squeezed her great-aunt's cold hand.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered. "I promise."

Clemmie came to a halt beside Sera and sat back on her hind legs. "Ready? Repeat after me."

Magic was a funny thing. You were either born with it or you weren't, but how much you had and how it made itself felt was as unique to the witch wielding it as a fingerprint. For Sera, it was a wild, joyous updraft that set her soaring into a night sky lit by thousands of tiny twinkling stars, each shining as brightly as suns. (For Clemmie, before she'd lost the ability to use it, it had been teeth and claws, which was rather fitting considering she now quite literally had both.)

The act of spellcasting wasn't quite as chameleonlike as magic itself, but spells could still be wrought in a dozen different ways. Some, for instance, were cast with just a thought, while others were cast with a wiggle of one's fingers, with the meticulous tying of tidy knots, or with a set list of ingredients. And then there were the rare spells, the enchantments that only a handful of witches had the power to conjure: these spells had to be spoken aloud, *had* to be shaped and contained by the eerie, musical dialect of sorcery, or else they might go wildly wrong.

Sera had cast such spells before, but the stakes had never felt so high. Her throat felt too tight and her heart thumped so fast it almost made her dizzy, but she said the words without faltering.

The moment Sera finished speaking the incantation, her magic rose to answer her. Whole galaxies of stars exploded behind her closed eyelids, and

she felt better at once: her heart took wing, her grief lost its sharp edge, and her fingertips tingled with joy.

This. *This*. This was why she loved magic so much.

She opened her eyes.

Her hands were wreathed in threads of warm, soft light, each as delicate as if it were made out of the easily dissolved substance of dreams. The spell had taken shape and was ready to cast.

Sera gathered the threads, placed her hands over Jasmine's heart, and *pushed*. The shining strands spun through her fingers like she was Rumpelstiltskin at a loom.

Light flooded from Sera's fingers to Jasmine's heart, suffusing cold skin with warmth and magic.

Beat, Sera silently ordered the silent heart beneath her hands. *Beat*.

The glorious, dizzying joy gave way to needles of pain. It was so unfamiliar and disconcerting that Sera felt a moment's doubt. The spell was pulling more power from her than she'd ever had to give before.

It wasn't too late to undo it, to break the connection and pull the magic back, but she couldn't do that. She had to do this for Jasmine.

The world tilted. She pressed one hand into the grass to keep herself upright, not noticing as she did so that a little bit of the spell burrowed into the earth.

Then, miraculously, Jasmine's stiff limbs softened. Her greying skin flushed with new colour, a healthy, rosy shade of pink setting into the warm brown of her cheeks. Her heart gave a vigorous thump.

Her eyes opened and settled at once on Sera. She offered the gentlest of reproofs. "But, my love, how *could* you let me fall asleep out here? The sun is the *worst* possible thing for the skin!"

Sera's shoulders dropped in exhaustion. A happy, overwhelmed sob caught in her throat, but she choked it back, scrubbed a hand across her wet eyes, and offered a wobbly smile.

"You weren't asleep," she confessed, reaching for Jasmine's fallen cane. "You were dead, so Clemmie and I brought you back."

Jasmine, who never liked to make a fuss and held good sense in great regard, accepted this revelation calmly. “That was very clever of you, dearest,” she said. “You’re much too young to fend for yourself, and your parents are dreadful cooks.”

“Dreadful parents too,” Sera pointed out. Jasmine tsked.

With her cane in one hand and Sera’s arm in the other, Jasmine clambered slowly back to her feet. She was a delicate, bony woman who looked like a strong breeze would knock her over (and indeed, the strong breezes of Lancashire had been known to do so), but even after her untimely demise, she was impeccably put together. Her hair, luxuriantly black through the religious application of henna, was still in its neat bun; her berry lipstick had not budged; her long, prim, lace-edged nightdress remained miraculously unwrinkled; and neither of her specially made boots had slipped off her feet in all the hubbub.

Sera put her arms around her great-aunt, hugging her fiercely. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“Oh, pet,” Jasmine said tenderly.

At that precise moment, there was a small commotion from the bottom of the garden. The bees in the hive, who were usually placid and gentle, were abuzz, enormously offended by something.

That something turned out to be the disturbed lump of grass near the hive, from whence there came a shrill and cheerful disembodied crowing that made Clemmie rear back in outrage. The crowing was followed swiftly by the appearance of an energetic jumble of bones that clattered straight over to Jasmine.

“Bok,” said the skeleton, which, on second glance, bore a striking resemblance to a chicken.

Sera’s mouth fell open. Jasmine let out a cry of unalloyed joy. “Roo-Roo!”

“Marvellous work,” Clemmie said to Sera. “I was *just* thinking this morning that what we really needed in our lives was not a new fireplace or a nice car but, in fact, a resurrected fucking rooster.”