

the VERY
SECRET SOCIETY
of IRREGULAR
Witches



a novel



"A warm and witchy
hug of a book."
—TASHA SURI

SANGU MANDANNA

Praise for *The Very Secret Society of Irregular Witches*

“Mandanna crafts a cast of winningly quirky characters, each with their own part to play in Mika’s path to belonging. . . . This charming romantic fantasy is a gem.”

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The
VERY SECRET SOCIETY
of
IRREGULAR WITCHES



SANGU MANDANNA

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To Steve, because it's past time I dedicated one of these to you

CHAPTER ONE

The Very Secret Society of Witches met on the third Thursday of every third month, but that was just about the only thing that never changed. They never met in the same place twice; the last meeting, for instance, had been in Belinda Nkala's front room and had involved freshly baked scones, and the one before that had been in the glorious sunshine of Agatha Jones's garden. *This* meeting, on a cold, wet October afternoon, happened to be taking place on a tiny, abandoned pier in the Outer Hebrides.

A pier. In the Outer Hebrides. In *October*.

Of course, they weren't actually called the Very Secret Society of Witches. They weren't called anything at all, which was why Mika Moon had decided to come up with a name for them herself. She had cycled through several alternatives first, like the League of Extraordinary Witches and the Super Secret Society of Witchy Witches. She was still rather fond of the latter.

The ridiculous names were mostly to annoy Primrose, the ancient and very proper head of the group, a position Primrose had presumably bestowed upon herself at some point in the past hundred years or so. (This might have been something of an exaggeration on Mika's part, but it was impossible to tell how old Primrose really was. She wouldn't say.)

Now, huddled as deep into her coat as she could get, Mika rocked impatiently on the balls of her feet as twenty other witches joined her on the pier. This, she supposed, was another thing that almost never changed: their number. Mika was one of the newest additions to the thing-that-was-definitely-not-a-society, and *she'd* been part of it for almost ten years, which meant it had been a very long time since they'd welcomed anyone new. This was not to say that there were only twenty-one adult witches in

all of Britain; witches were uncommon, certainly, but Mika knew that there were others out there. Primrose, who had appointed herself the duty of finding and inviting new witches to the not-society, had mentioned that some had turned her down over the years.

Mika found it difficult to believe anyone had been able to resist Primrose's persuasions (which an uncharitable person might say better resembled genteel bullying), but still, it was rather comforting to know that this small, soaked group on the pier wasn't all that was left of them.

Not that their numbers mattered. These meetings were the only time any of them were ever supposed to speak to one another. Primrose Beatrice Everly would never dream of telling anyone how to live their lives (so she said), but she was of the firm opinion that Rules would keep them all safe and so those Rules really ought to be followed. Too much magic left unchecked in one place, she said, would draw attention. For the sake of all of them, they had to lead separate lives. There could be no connection between any of them, no visits, no texts, no emails—nothing, in short, that could lead anybody from one witch to another.

(Primrose, of course, was an exception to the Rules. Mika supposed it was just one of the many privileges of being the oldest, most powerful, and most bossy.)

Consequently, any sense of community and kinship in the group had to be crammed into these short hours once every three months, which made it a very nebulous sense of community indeed.

As rain dripped steadily down from the cold, muddy-grey sky, Primrose cleared her throat. "How are we all, dears?"

"Wet," Mika couldn't resist pointing out.

"Your contribution is noted, thank you, poppet," said Primrose, unperturbed.

"We're pretending to be a book club, Primrose," Mika replied, exasperated. "We don't need to hide in the middle of nowhere! Why couldn't we just meet for a sodding coffee somewhere with central heating?"

“I, for one, think our safety is worth more than our comfort,” Primrose said, and then went straight for the jugular. “But, considering the most irregular way you spend your time, dear, I am not in the least surprised that you don’t seem to feel the same way.”

Mika sighed. She’d walked right into that one.

At thirty-one, she was a rather young witch in a group that mostly skewed older. While she didn’t exactly have a handy spreadsheet with each witch’s age on it, she was quite sure that she, Hilda Kim, and Sophie Clarke were the only ones this side of forty, so she should perhaps have been a lot more intimidated by Primrose than she actually was. But the truth was, she knew Primrose a lot better than most of the other witches here, and she and Primrose had had a wobbly relationship since before Mika could remember.

The problem, really, was that witches were always orphans. According to Primrose, this was because of a spell that went wrong in some bygone era. Mika was certain this tale was a figment of Primrose’s imagination, but she also had no better explanation because the fact remained: when a witch was born, she would find herself orphaned shortly thereafter. It didn’t matter where in the world the witch was born, and the cause of death could be anything from innocuous illnesses to everyday accidents, but it was inevitable. Some witches were then raised by grandparents or other relatives and, in time, came to discover the existence of their own magic. All things considered, assuming that they weren’t catastrophically reckless with their spellwork, they grew up to lead quite normal lives.

But some witches, like Mika, were the daughters of witches. And some of those witches, like Mika, were also the *granddaughters* of witches. It was unusual, certainly; most witches, only too mindful of the axe over their heads, chose not to have children of their own, but it did sometimes happen.

And so, when Mika Moon, the orphaned child of an orphaned child of an orphaned child, found herself left in the care of an overworked social worker in India in the early nineties, Primrose found her, brought her to England, and deposited her in a perfectly proper, comfortable home with perfectly proper, comfortable nannies.

Mika remembered none of this, of course, but she remembered growing up in the care of nannies and tutors of all genders, ethnicities, and temperaments, each of whom was only permitted to stay for as long as it took to catch a glimpse of something magical (which was not long) before they were replaced. So Mika remembered having plenty to eat, a warm bed, and all the books she could possibly read, but very little in the way of companionship or love.

And she remembered Primrose, who visited from time to time, usually to hire a new caregiver or to remind Mika of the Rules. Mika's feelings about Primrose were, thus, mixed. Primrose had kept her safe, for which she was grateful, but she also resented having such an inconsistent, autocratic figure in her life. Once she reached adulthood, the nannies and tutors went away and Mika declined Primrose's offer to stay. She moved out of the house and, for the past thirteen years, she had more or less only seen Primrose on the third Thursday of every third month.

While it seemed to Mika that she had never done anything Primrose approved of, she had not done anything Primrose especially *disapproved* of, either. At least, not until last year, when Mika had started uploading videos to her social media accounts.

Witchy videos.

Hence their present feud.

For the moment, Primrose seemed to have moved on. "Is anyone having any trouble?" she asked the gathering.

"I'm having a hard time not telling my fiancée the truth about my magic," Hilda Kim offered. "I feel like I'm hiding so much of myself from her, and I hate it."

"You could always try *not* getting married," said Primrose, who felt it was everyone's duty to make sacrifices for the greater good. "And while you ponder that, dear," she went on as Hilda opened her mouth and then shut it again as if she'd thought better of whatever she was about to say, "Is anyone having any *actual* trouble? Any inquisitive neighbours asking too many questions? Any uncontrollable magical outbursts?"

There was a round of shrugs and heads shaking. Primrose shifted her gimlet eyes from one witch to the next, lingering a little too long on Mika. She looked rather disappointed when no one spoke, like she'd been hoping to be able to chastise someone for being careless.

"Then," Primrose continued, an enormous spellbook materialising in her hands, "does anyone have any new spells to share?"

There were a few: a spell for more restful sleep, a potion that would temporarily turn cat fur pink (only cat fur, and only pink), a spell for the finding of a lost thing, and a spell to instantly vanish dark circles under the eyes. (Upon hearing this last one, Primrose, who hoarded her own spells like a dragon hoards gold, looked incredibly annoyed that she hadn't been able to figure it out first.)

When the spellwork part of the meeting was complete, Primrose cleared her throat. "Finally, does anyone have any news they'd like to share?"

"It's okay to say it's time to gossip, Primrose," Mika said merrily. "We all know that's what comes after the spellwork."

"Witches don't *gossip*," sniffed Primrose.

This was patently untrue, however, because gossiping was precisely what they proceeded to do.

"My ex-husband wanted to get back together last week," said Belinda Nkala, who was in her forties and never had time for anyone's nonsense. "When I turned him down, he informed me that I am apparently nothing without him. Then he left," she added calmly, "but I fear he's going to be suffering from an inexplicable itch in his groin for a few weeks."

Several witches laughed, but Primrose set her lips in a thin line. "And have *you* been playing such petty tricks lately, Mika?"

"Oh, for the love of fucking god, Primrose, what does this have to do with me?"

"It's not an unreasonable question, precious. You do like to take risks."

"For the millionth time," Mika said, irked beyond belief, "I post videos online *pretending* to be a witch. It's just a performance." Primrose raised her eyebrows. Mika raised hers right back. "Hundreds of people do the same thing, you know. The whole witch aesthetic is very popular!"

“Witchcore,” Hilda said, nodding wisely. “Not quite as popular as cottagecore or fairycore, but it’s up there.”

Everyone stared at her.

“I didn’t know fairies were real!” shouted Agatha Jones, who was almost as old as Primrose and tended to believe all young people needed to be shouted at lest they miss the import of her pronouncements. “Whatever next!”

“You see, Primrose?” said Mika, ignoring this interruption. “People call themselves witches all the time. I’m not putting myself or you or anyone else at risk. Nobody who watches my videos thinks I’m *actually* a witch.”

It was unfortunate for Mika, then, that at that precise moment, over five hundred miles away, in a big house in a quiet, windy corner of the Norfolk countryside, a skinny old man in a magnificent rainbow scarf and enormous fluffy slippers was saying exactly the opposite.



“Absolutely not!”

This came from Jamie, the scowling librarian, who was not in fact the skinny old man in the scarf and slippers. That was Ian. And the third person in the library was Lucie, the housekeeper, a chubby, round-cheeked woman in her fifties, who sighed as if she knew exactly how this argument was going to go. (She did know, and she was right.)

Ian smoothed down the tail of his scarf and replied, in the deep voice that had charmed audiences in many a small theatre over his eighty-odd years, “Don’t be difficult, dear. It doesn’t become you.”

Jamie was unmoved by this criticism. “You can’t seriously be considering bringing *that*”—and here he jabbed a finger at the dewy, sparkly face on the screen of Ian’s phone—“into the house?”

“Why not?” Ian asked.

“Well, for one thing, there’s no way she’s a real witch,” Jamie said irritably. This was not unusual. Most of the things Jamie said were said

irritably. “What kind of witch would show off her magic on a platform with millions of viewers?”

Mika would have been immensely gratified to hear this, had she been there, but it looked like her double bluff had not hoodwinked Ian.

“She’s a real witch,” he insisted.

“How the hell can you possibly know that?”

“I have excellent observation skills. Just watch part of the video.” Ian wiggled his phone like he was dangling a lollipop in front of a toddler. “A minute. That’s all I ask.”

Jamie’s glare stayed firmly in place, but he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against his desk to look over Ian’s shoulder. Gleeful, Ian tapped the screen and the video started to play.

The woman on the screen looked like she was in her late twenties or so, and was pretty in the way most people with bright eyes and merry smiles are pretty. Jamie narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out what had caught Ian’s attention. Nothing about the woman seemed out of the ordinary. Her hair was a very dark brown, long and curling loosely around her bare shoulders. Brown eyes, large like a doe’s and framed by thick black eyelashes, blinked cheerfully out at them from a dewy face that had been dusted with some sort of shimmering powder, presumably to make her look more otherworldly. She obviously wasn’t white, but it was hard to pinpoint her ethnicity beyond that: her skin was a peachy, brown, golden *something*, but maybe that was the glitter. The name at the top corner of the video, @MikaMoon, didn’t offer any answers, either.

“The secret,” she was saying, her smile full of mischief, “is to harvest the moonlight at exactly two minutes past midnight.” Her accent was English, but he couldn’t pin it down to any one part of the country. She held up a bowl of liquid silver. “Take a tiny spoonful of the harvested moonlight,” she went on, stirring the silver substance with a glass spoon that tinkled pleasantly against the sides of the bowl, “and add it to your cauldron.”

As she emptied a spoonful of the supposed moonlight into a cauldron, tiny sparkles drifted up from within, dancing in the air like fireflies before

fading away.

“And there you have it!” she said triumphantly. “The perfect potion for a wounded heart.”

Ian paused the video. Jamie looked at him in confusion. “Was I supposed to be impressed by the special effects she added to the cauldron? The nonsense about a wounded heart?”

Ian scoffed. “The cauldron? No, I’m not interested in the cauldron. *She’s* what interests me. Don’t you see it? She’s practically *aglow* with magic.”

At this, Lucie spoke for the first time. “You’re using your stage voice, love,” she said sensibly, patting Ian’s hand. “It never works on Jamie. But,” she added, this time to Jamie, “I reckon we should hear Ian out. You know he has a knack for this sort of thing. If he says she’s a witch, he’s probably right.”

“See?” said Ian, looking rather pleased with himself. “She’d be perfect!”

“Ian!” Jamie was incredulous. “Even *if* she’s a witch, her face is all over the fucking internet! The risk—”

Rolling his eyes so dramatically that they practically vanished into the back of his head, Ian said, “She has fourteen thousand followers. *I’m* more famous than that and you don’t seem to mind *me* being here. Of course,” he added quickly, lest Jamie take the opportunity to inform him otherwise, “we’ll make it clear that if she does come to stay, neither Nowhere House nor the girls are to appear in her footage in any way.”

“And what makes you think this woodland sprite will even *want* to be involved?”

“We won’t know until we ask.”

Lucie stood, obviously fed up. “A vote is the only way to settle this,” she said.

Ian shrugged. “Then we’ll need my husband, won’t we?”

“Ken must have gotten the girls to bed by now,” said Lucie. “I’ll fetch him.”

“I get the tiebreaker,” Jamie reminded them.

“Which is only useful if there’s a tie, dear,” said Ian.

The library door clattered shut as Lucie left. Gritting his teeth, Jamie stormed up and down the rows of old wooden shelves, putting books back where they belonged. The library at Nowhere House had been built as an extension to the main house fifty or so years ago and it was beautiful, with big windows and a spiral staircase leading up to the second floor, and crammed full of books, manuscripts, and globes. On one side, the windows looked out at the sea below the dunes, and on the other, you could see the trees, swing set, and lavender in the front garden.

It was easily Jamie's favourite place in the world, but just at that moment, he couldn't appreciate it. He was too busy picturing all their secrets coming unburied and all their lives coming undone.

When he returned to the front of the library, Ian was exactly where he'd left him, watching the video again.

"I wish you could see what I see," Ian said a little wistfully. "There's so much magic around her, it's like she's on fire. Like the girls."

Jamie loved Ian dearly, but Christ, it was like the man had wandered straight out of a book of poetry and no one had had the good sense to send him back in.

"As none of the girls look like they're on fire to me, Ian," he replied somewhat acidly, "that's not much help. And like I said, it doesn't matter if she *is* a witch. It's too much of a risk to bring someone new into this."

Ian put a hand over Jamie's and held tight. "We have no other ideas, James. We're running out of time."

"Edward will—"

"It's not just Edward," Ian cut him off. "He's absolutely our biggest problem right now, but I'm also thinking about what comes later. After. This is about the rest of the girls' lives, too. Lillian, God love her, has well and truly cocked this up. Is this life really what we want for those beautiful, precious children? They can't go to school. They almost never leave Nowhere House. All they have is each other."

"And us."

"And us." For a moment, the ever-present twinkle in Ian's eyes was gone. He pointed at a photograph propped against a stack of books on

Jamie's desk. "Look at us. Even with the best of intentions, we can't give the girls everything they need. I'm eighty-two years old. I know what it is to hide who I am. I know what it's like to live on the edges of society. The girls may always have to keep a part of themselves secret, but I still want them to be able to go out there and *live*. They need someone who knows what that's like, what it is to look like they do and feel like they do, and who can show them how to bravely and safely chart a course across the rest of their lives."

"I know that," Jamie said gruffly. "I *know*, Ian. But that can wait until *after* Edward. And trusting this hypothetical witch to help us is a massive gamble. I'm not so sure it's going to pay off."

"Unless you have a better idea, it's a chance we can't afford *not* to take."

By the time Lucie returned to the library with Ken in tow, the vote wasn't necessary. All that was left to decide was how to convince Mika Moon to come to Nowhere House. (Ian wanted to send her a message that would start with the words *WITCH WANTED*. It would, he felt, set exactly the right tone. The others did not agree.)

And all the way up in Scotland, Mika continued to shiver on a rainy pier, completely unaware of the wrecking ball headed her way.