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**Witches in**

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**Secret**

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**Val Thame**





# Chapter 1

**W**ell, I wouldn't want to live there. It's an awful place. They have bathrooms in every house, soap in every room and they wash every day. Every day, whether they need it or not!"

Evilyn spoke from the depths of the wardrobe where she was hanging upside down, her long thin legs hooked over the clothes rail, her arms folded across her chest and her red hair trailing. She was talking to Goodrun, her elder sister by two years, who was busy packing a suitcase.

"And don't expect me to visit you," said Evilyn. "It's bad enough having a sister that's only half-witch, without having to explain to my friends that she's gone to live

in the mortal world, *and* with a batty old aunt who doesn't know a good spell from a plate of cabbage."

"I wish you'd stop moaning and do something useful," said Goodrun.

"Like what?" asked Evilyn, who thought being useful was about as boring as being sensible.

"Like helping me pack," said an exasperated Goodrun, suddenly throwing a pile of clothes into the air. "I'll never get all this in." She punched her hips. "I'm fed-up with packing."

"I don't know why you're bothering." Evilyn sniffed. "Only a mortal would pack things."

"All right!" Goodrun's patience was thinning rapidly, "Since you're so clever, what do you suggest?"

Evilyn shrugged her shoulders. "I'd just go as I am and conjure up what I wanted when I got there. NOT," she added with great emphasis, "that I intend coming with you, in spite of what Mother says."

Goodrun sighed. "But I can't rely on my powers. They don't always work properly. I was never good at magic."

"Unlike your brilliant sister," crowed Evilyn, "who got her witches' diploma with double-black honours. Mother and Father were extremely pleased with me."

“You don’t have to show off to me. I’m your sister, remember?”

“Half-sister. And one who failed her final exams. Who was it who flooded out the Academy? Who destroyed hundreds of years of research into evil, *and* got herself expelled?”

“Me. OK? Satisfied now?”

“No. I’m enjoying myself.” Evilyn began to swing to and fro on the clothes rail. “And,” she continued, “you’ve been expelled from the witch world, too. You know, of course, that you’ll never be able to come back.”

“You can be really nasty at times,” said Goodrun, stuffing a load of socks into a corner of her case.

“Yes, I can. I’m pleased to say. Your trouble is that you aren’t nasty enough. Do you realize you’re the first member of the Badmanners family to be nice and it’s not something I’m proud of.”

“But I’m not a Badmanners,” said Goodrun. “Blackheart Badmanners is *your* father, not mine. My father was Cornelius Smith and I shall use his name from now on.”

“I’d like to forget about Mother’s first husband,” said Evilyn. “Can’t imagine why she married a mortal. She couldn’t have been feeling well at the time. How on earth did she meet him?”

“He was doing a magic act . . .”

“Magic? A mortal? I don’t believe it.”

“Well, he was a furniture salesman really, but he did a magic act in his spare time. He called himself Marvo the Magnificent.”

Evilyn laughed so much she nearly fell off the clothes rail. “Oh, how terrible — and I bet *he* was too.”

“No, he wasn’t. If he impressed Mother he couldn’t have been that bad.”

“Bet he was,” said Evilyn. “Actually, when I think about it, I’m glad we’ve got different names. I wouldn’t want anybody to muddle us up.”

“Huh! Hardly likely,” thought Goodrun.

And she was right. For although the sisters were of similar size and had the same startling red hair and dark green eyes, there were differences. Evilyn had a long witchy nose and thin, mean eyes, but Goodrun’s nose was small and her eyes wide and large. Goodrun was also pleasant and polite, always knew where her temper was, and rarely lost it. Evilyn frequently lost hers, did not care, and never bothered to find it. Being all witch, and proud of it, Evilyn had a naturally nasty streak in her nature but Goodrun had inherited much of her father’s kind and compassionate nature.

“What happened to him?” asked Evilyn, as if she had been reading her sister’s thoughts.

“He died just before I was born. Mother said he was moving some furniture and a

particularly heavy chest of drawers fell on him.”

“That’s not what I heard,” sneered Evilyn.

“Oh? And what did you hear?”

“I heard he turned himself into a bottle of lemonade,” Evilyn began to cackle, it was a spiteful, grating sound, “and — and somebody drank him before he could turn back again.” Evilyn’s ghastly laughter filled the bedroom.

“Oh, very funny,” said Goodrun. “I think you’re horrible.”

Evilyn sighed happily, “I know, I’m so lucky.”

Then a pink cloud wafted into the bedroom and a voice from its fluffy depths said, “Are you ready for the journey, my witchlings?”

The cloud gradually faded and the girls’ mother, the beautiful Witch Hayzell appeared. Evilyn, who had no intention of going anywhere, zapped herself into an old raincoat as soon as she heard her mother’s voice.

“Have you got everything?” asked Hayzell.

“I suppose so,” said Goodrun. “I really don’t know what to take.”

Her mother opened the wardrobe door. “Well, you’d better take this,” she said, yanking the raincoat off its hanger and stuffing it into the suitcase. “You may need it.”

But the raincoat did not want to be packed. As fast as Hayzell pushed one sleeve into the case so the other one fell out. Hayzell's beautiful brow creased into a frown as she struggled to close the suitcase. "And where's Evilyn? She was supposed to be helping you pack."

"She was here a moment ago."

Hayzell sat on the case and snapped the case locks. "Well, we can't wait about. Nettle's expecting us."

Goodrun was so excited she could hardly breathe. This was it.

"No more trying to be nasty, no more struggling with spells that go wrong, I shall be an ordinary person, well — almost." She added "almost" because she knew there was nothing she could do about the witchy bits inherited from her mother. Some of her powers would always be with her. She took a last look round the room. Goodbye Badmanners Mansion. Goodbye witch world. Goodbye to all her friends, although, if she were truthful, she had not made many. She had never really fitted in at the Academy of Black Art, not like Evilyn, who had been a hideous success. But Goodrun wanted to forget about all that. She was going to start a new life without witches and magic.

Ever since her mother had told her she was half-mortal, Goodrun had dreamed

about this moment of leaving Badmanners Mansion and going to live in the ordinary world with her dear old aunt. Nobody knew quite how old Nettle Patch was, but it was well into the hundreds in witch years. Her powers had faded dismally and she made so many mistakes that the Witches Council had been forced to retire her.

Knowing that Goodrun could never be a successful witch, her mother thought it would be best if Goodrun went to live with her retired aunt. One was really too young to live alone and the other too old, so the suggestion that they look after each other seemed a good one.

“Stop dreaming and grab that suitcase,” said Hayzell. “I can’t be sure where we might end up if you do the zapping, so shut your eyes, hold on tight, and leave the travel arrangements to me.”

And in the ticking of a tock, or the flicking of a tail, they had both disappeared. A breeze blew in the window, dusting the empty bedroom with its summer sighs and rattling the doors of the empty wardrobe where a single hanger swung gently to and fro.



## *Chapter 2*

**O**nly seconds after closing her eyes Goodrun felt strangely light-headed and light-bodied, fragile, as if her skin was made of eggshell. It was very odd. Then she began to tingle, a feeling which started in her toes and rushed through her body up to her scalp. She was sure every hair was standing on end.

“It must be the zap rising,” she thought.

She had no idea where she was or how long the strange feeling lasted. It could have been seconds or minutes, or no time at all, until Hayzell said, “Well, you won’t see much with your eyes shut.”

Goodrun opened her eyes. She and her mother were standing in a small unkempt

garden full of weeds, thistles and nettles. “Is this it?”

“Yes,” said Hayzell. “Not bad, is it?”

In her dreams Goodrun had seen this cottage a hundred times. She had seen a pretty black and white beamed building with a thatched roof, roses growing round the front door and a garden full of sweet-smelling herbs and country flowers. Inside she saw painted white walls, polished wooden floors, russet rugs, china ornaments and chintz curtains. She saw a red-brick fireplace and an assortment of old and comfortable chairs full of squashy cushions. She also saw dear old Nettle, whom she could just about remember, welcoming her at the door, tea and toasted teacakes ready-laid on the table, and the smell of freshly baked bread wafting in from the kitchen.

“Yukky, yuk-yuk!” said Evilyn, when Goodrun had foolishly confided in her. “That’s mortal enough to make me sick! No proper witch would live like that. Not even silly old Aunt Nettle.”

Goodrun was reminded of Evilyn’s words as she made her way along the overgrown path towards the very ordinary brick-built cottage wrapped in an overcoat of rampant ivy. It had a grey slate roof and a small chipped chimney struggling to support a lopsided aerial. No beams and no thatch. It

had two dirty square windows upstairs and another, equally dirty, beside the front door. There was a porch but it was covered in bindweed, not roses. There was no welcoming smell of home cooking and nobody waiting to greet them. The cottage looked cold and empty. Goodrun stared in dismay at the rain-spotted windows, at the decaying bricks, at the broken lionhead knocker on the door, and all her happiness disappeared in one gulp.

“It’s a bit smaller than Badmanners Mansion,” said Hayzell, cheerfully, “but you’ll soon get used to it.” She rapped on the door.

“Mother? Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Oh yes. Quite sure.” She knocked again. “Where is she?” Hayzell bent down and called through the letterbox. “Auntie? We’re here.”

“I thought I heard something,” said Goodrun.

Both stood with their ears to the door.

“Silent as the grave,” said Hayzell. “Something’s wrong. I’m going in.” And with a flick of her elegant fingers she disappeared.

“I wish I could do that,” thought Goodrun, admiringly. But it was a trick, among many others, that she had never perfected. She

picked up her case, which she had dropped on the path when they arrived, and dragged it towards the front door. It was very heavy.

“Ouch! Do you mind!”

Startled, Goodrun dropped the case in the porch.

“Who said that?”

“I did. Get me out of here, can’t you?”

“Get who? Out of where?” There was nobody there. Then she had a thought. Perhaps her elderly aunt had fallen over and lay injured somewhere under the weeds? Or perhaps there was a well and she’d fallen down it? “Is that you, Aunt Nettle? Where are you?”

“Festering pimples! Don’t keep asking silly questions. Get me out.”

Although difficult to believe, Goodrun thought the voice was coming from her suitcase. Very cautiously she undid the locks and, to her amazement, a crushed and crumpled, creased and crochety Evilyn flew out. She was in a terrible rage. Surrounded by her own darksome cloud of fury she stamped and cursed and fretted and fumed.

“How would you like it?” she shouted. “Squashed in there with your smelly old clothes.”

“I wouldn’t and they’re not smelly. But, if it’s not a silly question, what were you doing in my case in the first place?”

“It *is* a silly question and Mother put me there.”

“Mother? Why?”

“Because she thought you wanted a raincoat.”

“What?”

“Well, I didn’t want to come on this trip,” said Evilyn grumpily, “and when Mother came up to fetch you I zapped myself into a raincoat, the same one that she insisted on stuffing into your suitcase.”

“I see,” said Goodrun. “That’ll teach you.”

“It will.” Evilyn’s eyes flashed angrily. “It’ll teach me to disappear completely next time. Which is what I intend to do now.”

And she did, fizzing off into the sky like a demented rocket.

“Oh, bats!” thought Goodrun. “She could have zapped me inside the cottage.”

She repacked and locked the case, then leaned back against the door to wait for her mother. But, as if the old wooden door had suddenly melted away, she found herself falling helplessly backwards and the next thing she knew, she was lying flat on her back. Stunned and surprised she lay there for quite a few seconds looking up at a dusty, cobwebby ceiling. Soft fronds of grey, velvet stalactites shivered in the unexpected breeze. The front door had been open all the time, and Goodrun had fallen into the living room.

She scrambled to her feet, just as her mother came down the stairs.

“I’ve found her,” said Hayzell. “Nettle’s in her bedroom but she can’t come down.”

“Why not? Is she ill?”

“No, she’s . . . well, she’s a bit up in the air, poor thing.”

“You mean, angry?”

“No. You’d better come and see for yourself.” Hayzell led the way up the narrow stairs, which led off the sitting room up to a small landing. She marched into one of the bedrooms. “See!” she said.

The room was small but the furniture was large. There was a huge and lumpy brass bed covered with a brilliantly-coloured patchwork quilt, a desk covered with books under the window, an armchair, and a large, wooden wardrobe, but no aunt.

“Is she invisible?” asked Goodrun, wondering what it was she was supposed to see.

“No. She can’t do things like that any more. She’s too old.”

“Oh. Has she gone back to the witch world?”

“No, no,” Hayzell tutted impatiently. “She can’t do that, either. She’s earth-bound, or she was.” Hayzell jabbed a thumb towards the ceiling. “I’m afraid she’s up there now.”

Goodrun gasped. “Oh, Mother. You don’t mean she’s — dead?” Goodrun swallowed hard to push down the tears.

Hayzell shook her head, irritably, and wondered how a child of hers could be so stupid. “Of course not, silly! She’s stuck to the ceiling. Under that carpet.”

Goodrun had not noticed the carpet but even if she had she would not have thought it unusual to see one on the ceiling. Her mother was always changing the furniture round in Badmanners Mansion and sometimes *everything* was on the ceiling.

Then, to her horror, a corner of the carpet fell away and a thin hand sprang out and waved frantically.