

FELICITY GREEN

SAMPLE
CHAPTER



THE WITCH CLUB

A SCOTTISH WITCHES MYSTERY

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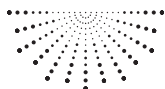
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CHAPTER ONE



ANDIE

The boat glided across the lake as if it floated on the dense fog. The tall woman at the bow resembled a figurehead: wooden posture, chin high, gaze fixed ahead.

The loch could have been any lake in the Scottish Highlands, but Andie knew, like you know things in dreams, that it was Loch Lomond.

When they reached the shore, the woman with the shoulder-length dark blond hair stepped off the boat. Andie recognized her. It was Dessie McKendrick.

Dessie turned to face her. By now, Andie was sure what kind of dream this was, because she, herself, was present in it. She followed Dessie to the cluster of houses close to the shore. It was Tarbet, Andie's hometown. Andie recognized the B&B signs. Every second house in Tarbet rented out guest rooms. The picturesque village in the Highlands lived off tourism.

Dessie was also at home in Tarbet. Having moved here a few years ago, Dessie too was the owner of a B&B. That appeared to be her destination now, in Andie's dream. Dessie kept looking over her shoulder to make sure Andie

was following her. Her gray eyes showed no emotion, yet her body language screamed tension.

Dessie's B&B was a whitewashed, sprawling cottage that Andie had never entered before. She followed Dessie into the house until they were standing in front of door number three. Dessie looked at Andie, paused for a moment, then took a set of keys from her pocket and unlocked the door. Suddenly, Andie found herself in the middle of the room with no recollection of having entered. The door was closed.

Dessie, or to be more precise, Dessie's double, slowly raised her index finger and placed it on her lips. Andie looked around the room. The walls were full of newspaper clippings, photos, and documents. She could spot the floral wallpaper peeking from behind the collage in places, but most of the wall space was covered. Countless items were strewn about the floor.

Beneath the chaos, Andie could make out an ordinary guest room. That had probably been its original function. A large desk was squeezed into a corner. The doors to the closet, overstuffed with men's clothing, were open. On the floor, items were piled in small heaps; a tower of CDs here, a stack of books there. In one corner stood a collection of dusty whisky bottles on a stainless-steel cart. In front of the bed was a large green backpack and other camping gear. A few more unusual items were spread out on the bed. At first glance, Andie had thought it was clutter, but now she saw the items had been sorted by size. A silver letter opener, a music box with circus animals, small modern art prints, a dartboard, pool cues.

Dessie's double took the music box in her hand, then put it down again. She walked to the wall, pointed to a photo, and twisted her mouth into a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

The photo showed a young man who looked attractive

in a Californian surfer kind of way. Bright blue eyes, tousled blond hair, dazzling white teeth, tanned. Dessie still seemed somehow mechanical, as was typical for doubles. But tears were flowing from her expressionless eyes, rolling down her pale cheeks.

Andie waited anxiously to see what would happen next. Maybe this really was just a dream. She hoped so. But deep inside, she knew what would happen in the end. This wasn't her first rodeo.

Dessie's skin became paler and drier until it resembled parchment paper. Andie tried to wake up. It didn't work. Dream-Andie remained frozen on the spot as Dessie's gray eyes receded into their sockets, her hair fell out in clumps, and the nails detached from her fingers. The tall woman shriveled before Andie's eyes, turning into a mummy.

Andie recognized all too well the feeling of helplessness that now overcame her. Again, she tried hard to awaken, but Dream-Andie didn't even manage to avert her eyes. She was forced to watch Dessie McKendrick disintegrate.

Then came the worst, the thing that had always scared Andie when she'd been younger. Little white maggots spilled from Dessie's orifices: the eye sockets, the ears, the mouth, the nostrils. The worms appeared to consume her from the inside, leaving only bones and the parchment of skin. Finally, the bone-skin structure also collapsed. Beetles and other insects appeared out of nowhere, feasting on the remains of Dessie McKendrick. The tiny pile on the wooden floorboards in room number three that had once been Dessie disappeared faster than Andie could feel repulsed by the spectacle.

From experience, Andie knew there was no point in trying to wake herself up. She had to watch the whole process to the end.

When Dessie was fully gone, the room turned cold. Dream-Andie's teeth chattered. She wrapped her arms

around her shivering body. Mist drifted into the room from under the door, through the open window, and from various cracks and crevices in the walls. Soon the entire room was full of dense fog, like the one that clung to the loch, so that Andie could no longer see anything. Panicked, she tried to remember which direction the exit was.

She had to escape this dream. This house. This room.



DESPERATELY, Andie groped for the door and got hold of a knob. When she opened her eyes, it took her a moment to realize that she was standing in her room in Edinburgh. She was no longer dreaming; she was awake, and she was sleepwalking. It was her door, her door handle, not the one in room number three in Dessie's B&B. Her breath came fast, and she was freezing.

It took her a while to trust the feeling of relief. She grabbed her robe from the hook on the back of the door and pulled it on. The room in the house she shared with other students was bathed in pale moonlight. Andie sat down on the edge of her bed, turned on the bedside lamp, and tried to remember everything about the dream.

Visions like that hadn't plagued her since she'd started her biotechnology studies here in Edinburgh. She had been quite happy to escape Tarbet, although she had always known that her special gift would probably take her back.

Even to a quiet, introverted girl like her, the village seemed boring. Edinburgh was a lot more exciting. And she had options. She didn't have to make herself small. Still, she had to work hard to succeed, and not just academically. She also had to take on jobs to finance her studies. Her parents weren't exactly well off. The spring term had just ended, and Andie had to find full-time employment,

anyway. This new revelation had dashed her hope of spending the summer break in Edinburgh.

Of course, there was always the option of ignoring the dream. But she didn't dare, and not just because she was a conscientious person. She knew by experience that if she suppressed her visions they would only get worse, and a consuming darkness would grow inside her. She would no longer be able to sleep, eat, or leave her room—until she responded to the double's cry for help.

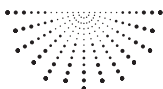
Dessie McKendrick needed her—and she probably didn't even know it.

Andie's friend Tara usually worked at Dessie's B&B over the summer. Maybe Andie could take her place. Tara would understand the special circumstances.

Andie pushed a strand of her long, dark brown hair behind her ear and sighed. Then she got up, pulled her suitcase out of the closet, and started packing. Tomorrow morning, she would leave for Tarbet. There was no reason to put it off.

She had a calling to answer.

CHAPTER TWO



DESSIE

Grayson pointed to the bottle of wine. Dessie just shook her head, picked up her empty glass, and went to the counter at the other end of the large kitchen/breakfast room. She placed the glass in the sink. When she didn't hear wine being poured from the bottle, her shoulders relaxed a fraction.

She couldn't afford to have more than one drink with Grayson. She had enjoyed the conversation as much as ever but now wished Grayson would retire to his room. Still, she was a little disappointed when she heard the scraping of the chair.

Raindrops pattered softly against the window above the sink. A typical Scottish summer. One reason she loved living here, Dessie thought bitterly.

Grayson cleared his throat. "I'd better get some sleep. An early start for me tomorrow."

"Oh, right, your trip," Dessie said, still staring out the window into the dark and rainy night. The thought of missing Grayson made Dessie uncomfortable. She tried to ignore the kaleidoscope of butterflies in her stomach that seemed to get bigger every year, ever since the American

businessman had become a permanent summer season guest at Dessie's B&B.

For a long time, Dessie had resisted the development of a friendship. But eventually small talk had turned into deeper conversations. Now they had gotten into the habit of ending the evening with a shared bottle of wine in the large room.

Of course, Dessie felt guilty. But there was another emotion, something delicious, dangerous, that she couldn't entirely ignore. Obviously, there was no way she would act upon it.

Dessie turned to face Grayson. She didn't have to force a smile as she looked at the handsome man with clear blue eyes and dark hair. His gray temples made him look older than he was, probably in his late thirties or early forties. They also gave him an air of respectability that could only benefit him in his work as a financial advisor.

At least, that's what Dessie thought his profession was. He was a little vague about the exact nature of his business. All she knew was that he had to be rather successful. After all, he could afford to take extended summer vacations every year. But sometimes he met with clients in Europe during this time, like the business trip to Paris tomorrow.

Dessie had to bite her tongue so she wouldn't accidentally let slip that she'd miss him. It was safer to say nothing at all. This wouldn't offend Grayson; he had to be used to her distant demeanor by now. He quietly wished her a good night, gave her a bright smile, and then went to his room.

Dessie took Grayson's glass, finished the last sip he always left—a habit of his—and put it next to hers in the sink. She toyed with the idea of not doing the washing up but quickly changed her mind. It would add to her long list of chores in the morning, and it might stress her out. Dessie didn't like to switch up her routine, as it sometimes was the only thing that got her through her day.

She was about to turn on the faucet when the doorbell rang. Dessie looked at the clock above the door. Her brows drew together.

The water taxi from the hostel, she thought, and an icy shiver ran down her spine. When guests arrived this late, it was usually West Highland Way hikers who couldn't get a room at the Rowardennan Youth Hostel across the loch. A queasy feeling took hold of Dessie as she walked to the front door.

When she opened it, she saw four young people with large backpacks. Dessie turned on the outside light. Two women and two men in their early twenties, soaked from the rain, stared back at her.

"How can I help?" Dessie asked.

"Your sign doesn't say No Vacancies," one of the young women whined. Her red curls were stuck to her face, black mascara had left marks on her cheeks, and her lipstick was smudged. Dessie couldn't muster much sympathy for her. Just another example of hikers who had underestimated the strenuousness of the famous long-distance trail from Milngavie near Glasgow to Fort William in the Highlands. This young woman, who was probably lugging a large make-up kit in her backpack, would most definitely not make it to Fort William. At least not on foot. Dessie suspected the girl and her friends would catch the West Highland Railway tomorrow and cut the nine-day hike short.

"Please tell us you still have rooms available." The young woman looked at her with big blue doll's eyes.

"I only have one queen room left," Dessie said, shrugging her shoulders apologetically. She was about to close the door when Red slid a foot in. She was halfway through the entrance before Dessie could do anything about it.

"We'll take it," she yelled, grabbing the young man

standing next to her by the wrist and pulling him into the house.

“One room with a queen-size bed,” Dessie repeated, taken somewhat off guard. “So not enough room for four people, I’m afraid.”

“You’re our last resort,” said the woman, brushing the wet hair out of her face. “We’ve been everywhere, but there are no vacancies in this whole effing place.”

“But Val,” said the young man, still attached to the redhead. “What about Nicole and Nate? We can’t just—”

“Well, first come, first served,” Val cut him off. “Do we all have to suffer and stand in the rain just because there’s only one room left?” She let go of the young man and shrugged off her backpack. “I swear, this damn thing gets heavier by the minute!”

“I’m sorry,” the very average-looking man said in the direction of the other young woman.

The petite brunette with big sad eyes still standing outside the door pulled up the hood of her raincoat. “It’s okay, Sam.” She sounded resigned. Then she turned to her companion, who stood a little further back. He just looked down at his shoes and mumbled unintelligibly.

“Do you have any advice where they could go?” Sam turned to Dessie.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she could hardly breathe. Without blinking, she stared at the young man for what felt like an eternity.

He looked uncertain. “Excuse me, but do you know if there are any vacancies in the area?” Sam repeated his question, probably assuming she had not understood him.

Dessie swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and cleared her throat. She had to pull herself together. Don’t be daft, she scolded herself.

She forced herself to say the words, even though it was hard to get them out. “I’m sure Mrs. MacDonald has a

room available. Two streets up the hill on the left. It's called the Thistle Inn, but it's actually..." Dessie trailed off.

"Why don't you try that," Sam said to the others. "Or maybe we should all go there...?"

He looked at Val. She shook her head. "We're staying here," she decided.

"Inn is a little misleading," Dessie continued. "It's just two guest rooms in Mrs. MacDonald's house. You'd share the bathroom with her. It's kind of a traditional B&B, if you know what I mean. Maybe you young people wouldn't like to stay in such an, uh, old-fashioned place," she added hopefully.

But it didn't help. After all, this was a last refuge for the unlikely hikers. A roof over their heads was better than standing in the rain, even if it was the worst B&B in Tarbet. Well, it wasn't exactly bad, but... Dessie shook her head as if she could shake off her gloomy thoughts.

The young woman with the big eyes looked back at the other man, whose face Dessie could not make out in the dark and the rain. "So...shall we?"

Nate shrugged indecisively and mumbled something that sounded like, "I don't care."

"Well then." Nicole sighed and waved goodbye to the other two. "See you tomorrow."

"Room number five," Dessie said tonelessly to Val and Sam. The two continued into the house, but Dessie stayed at the door for a moment watching the sad figures, one tall, one short, disappear into the dark night.

She knew it was completely irrational, but she couldn't shake the horrible feeling that she had sent Nate and Nicole to their doom.

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