



The Witches of Cambridge: A Novel

By Menna van Praag

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For fans of Alice Hoffman, Sarah Addison Allen, and Adriana Trigiani, *The Witches of Cambridge* reveals an astonishing world where the heart's deepest secrets give way to the magic of life-changing love.

Be careful what you wish for. If you're a witch, you might just get it.

Amandine Bisset has always had the power to feel the emotions of those around her. It's a secret she can share only with her friends—all professors, all witches—when they gather for the Cambridge University Society of Literature and Witchcraft. Amandine treasures these meetings but lately senses the ties among her colleagues beginning to unravel. If only she had her student Noa's power to hear the innermost thoughts of others, she might know how to patch things up. Unfortunately, Noa regards her gift as a curse. So when a seductive artist claims he can cure her, Noa jumps at the chance, no matter the cost.

Noa's not the only witch who's in over her head. Mathematics professor Kat has a serious case of unrequited love but refuses to cast spells to win anyone's heart. Kat's sister, Cosima, is not above using magic to get what she wants, sprinkling pastries in her bakery with equal parts sugar and enchantment. But when Cosima sets her sights on Kat's crush, she conjures up a dangerous love triangle.

As romance and longing swirl through every picturesque side street, the witches of Cambridge find their lives unexpectedly upended and changed in ways sometimes extraordinary, sometimes heartbreaking, but always enchanting.

Praise for *The Witches of Cambridge*

“Intriguing and original . . . The magic that works wonders for modern-day English witches also charms readers in this delightful and quirky romantic tale.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A lively and whimsical tale of romance, family, and friendship sure to delight her fans and newcomers alike.”—*Booklist*

“Fans of Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* are sure to enjoy *The Witches of Cambridge*. . . [Menna] van Praag's writing is lyrical and the story sweetly

affirming.”—*BookPage*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Menna van Praag was born in Cambridge, England, and studied modern history at Oxford University. Her first work of fiction, *Men, Money, and Chocolate*—an autobiographical tale about a waitress who aspires to be a writer—has been translated into twenty-six languages. Her first novel, *The House at the End of Hope Street*, was inspired by an idea van Praag had to set up a house for female artists to give them a year to fulfill their artistic ambitions. She is also the author of *The Dress Shop of Dreams*.

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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 and he’s still a handsome man, strong and lean and dark. Amandine Bisset was so passionate for Eliot Walker that tiny silver sparks flew from her fingertips when she touched him. When they made love her whole body filled with white 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 good night 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 toward 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.”

Now 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 realized he was flirting. So she reined herself in, suppressing a smile and giving a nonchalant shrug.

“I’m as wrong about life as anyone, 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.”

“Same difference.”

“Well, not unless twenty thousand pounds a year means nothing to you.”

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.”

A rush of warmth rose in her throat. “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 fraternizing with me then?"

They began to walk past the paintings and toward 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 in his. 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 center 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.

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