

Unbound

(An excerpt)

By Kirsten Weiss

Dear Ms. Hayworth:

Where to begin? I suppose I must begin with my hometown, Doyle, which is located on a fairy gate. A fairy queen came through that gate in the 1800s, decided she liked the look of the place, and stayed. It did not go well.

In all honesty, I'm not sure if that's the beginning of the tale either. It's only as far as our records go. At any rate, the fairy queen tormented the town until the Bonheim sisters, triplets and witches, booted her out. However, when they returned the queen to her land, they were unable to completely shut the door behind her.

That's when we learned the queen's presence in our world had had its benefits. It seems she prevented other creatures from Fairy from invading our world. Now that the queen is gone, they're returning.

The Bonheims have done a yeoman's job dealing with these incursions. But the open gate has attracted the attention of dark magicians, including, most recently, a black lodge.

You've been recommended as someone with deep experience in dealing with both black lodges and solo practitioners of the dark arts. I propose to engage you to mentor the Bonheim sisters in magical self-defense. Enclosed is a retainer, in the hope that you will accept the commission.

(Please note there are two Doyles, so be sure to come to the correct Doyle, located between Angels Camp and Bear Valley. Please note there are also two Bear Valleys. The one nearest to Angels Camp is the correct one).

Sincerely,

Helena Steinberg

JAYCE - CHAPTER ONE

I'll say it. Being a witch is freaking awesome. True, a lot of spells that seem innocent actually aren't, and I've learned the hard way that magical ethics matter. But generally speaking, magic is *fun*.

At least, it is when something from that world isn't trying to kill you. I had the bad feeling one of those somethings was on its way to Doyle.

Usually, these feelings showed up as a prickling at my scalp, or a tremor deep in my veins. Today, it came as an insistent ringing in my skull, like a telemarketer who wouldn't give up.

It was super annoying.

I scanned my coffeeshop, Ground, on the off chance the ringing was coming from one of the pockets of my customers. If it did, no one answered.

Coffee drinkers chatted at tables and tapped at laptops, oblivious to the clatter of mugs, laughter of customers, whoosh of the espresso machine.

I glanced down the aisle behind the long wooden counter. My assistant manager, Darla, filled a small white cup. Her pale brow furrowed with concentration. We take our java seriously at Ground.

The bell jangled above the red-paned front door, and my head whipped toward the noise.

My sister, Karin, hurried inside. She glanced around the crowded café, then strode to the cash register.

“Hey.” Karin scraped a strand of auburn hair off her smooth forehead. Her face had taken on a sort of “mom” softness over the last two years. My sister hated the extra few pounds, but she wore them well. “Is everything okay?” she asked anxiously.

My stomach butterflied and not in a good way. If I wasn’t the only one who felt it, then this was no mistake. Something bad *was* coming. “Yeah, but— So you hear it to?”

“Hear what?” She adjusted the massive purse over her shoulder, wrinkling her navy cotton blouse. I tried not to notice the spit-up stain above her heart. Keeping shirts neat was tough when you had a new baby.

I shook my head and came around the counter. “Never mind. I just thought— Why wouldn’t everything be okay?” Maybe I was getting tinnitus. My aunt *had* warned me not to listen to loud music in my youth. And I hadn’t listened. *Ha*. That’s irony for you.

“I don’t know...” She trailed off, staring absently at one of the ferns hanging above the counter.

The bell jingled above the door. Blond-haired Lenore strode in inside, her long, wheat-colored vest wafting behind her. Our sister Lenore usually seemed to float—or maybe it seemed that way because of the cloudlike clothing she favored—but she moved with purpose today.

Lenore scanned the room, an anxious expression on her face. She took in the customers, the hangings on the brick walls, the blue and white curtains between the counter area and the kitchen.

Frowning, she joined Karin and me at the counter. “Hi. Is everything... all right?”

Karin met my gaze. “I guess not,” she said, “since I came here for no good reason and just asked Jayce the same thing. What are you sensing?”

“It was Crow.” Lenore’s blue-gray eyes seemed to darken. “He sent me a warning.”

Lenore was a shamanic witch. Ghosts and messages from animal spirits like Crow were her groove. Since she also saw creepier, human spirits, she was welcome to that world. I loved my own earth witch magic, thank you very much.

Lenore, Karin, and I were triplets, but we each had different talents. Karin worked with knot magic, which made sense since she was the tightest wound of the three of us. I mean, I loved her to pieces, but only Karin would wear a silk scarf around her neck when it was eighty out.

“What sort of warning?” I asked.

“Death. And a trial.” Lenore bent her head, her blond hair cascading over the shoulders of her pale tunic.

My chest tightened. *Death?* I ran my fingers along the chain of my short necklace and gripped its pentacle charm.

“When Crow said *trial*,” Karin said slowly, “I’m guessing he didn’t mean the legal kind.”

“Forget the trial.” I jammed my hands on the hips of my green apron. “What about the death? Who’s going to die?”

“You know Crow’s never specific,” Lenore said. “He didn’t give me a name.”

“Well, this bites,” I said and shuttled them to a table.

“Have you heard anything from Mrs. Steinberg?” Karin asked, pulling out a chair.

I shook my head and sat. Mrs. Steinberg was an elderly ex-witch who lived in Doyle. She usually had the inside track on magical happenings. She’d also promised to

get us a trainer so the next time we had to deal with a magical baddie, we'd be better prepared.

We were still waiting.

The bell trilled above the door.

A man walked into Ground, and I cocked my head, an odd sense of familiarity cascading through my veins. He wore new-looking hiking gear, and his hair was the color of mine—mahogany. The man did the same scan of the crowd Lenore and Karin had, finishing at the counter.

His brown eyes lit, and he waved at us. "Jayce!"

I blinked, incredulous, finally realizing who he was. "Mac?"

Laughing, I scraped back my chair and stood.

He strode toward me and pulled me into a rough hug. Mac thumped my back. "You have no idea how good it is to see a familiar face." He released me and stepped away. "How are you?"

"Surprised." I grinned. "What are you doing back in Doyle?"

A coffee cup crashed, and I winced. Darla hurried from behind the counter with a broom.

"I had to come home sometime," he said.

I turned to my sisters. "Lenore, Karin, you remember Mac? We went to the same college for a little while." We'd been the only two students from Doyle. Marooned on the faraway East Coast, we'd become close friends, though we'd barely known each other back home.

"And then Jayce changed majors and colleges and ditched me," he said.

"You were studying folklore," I said. "Did you keep it up?"

“I’m about to defend my PhD thesis.” He rocked back on the heels of his hiking boots. “And I have other news.”

“Oh?” Karin asked.

“I got married.” He raised a hand, displaying a simple gold ring.

I gaped. “Congratulations!”

He glanced at my own hand. “I see I’m not the only one.”

My face warmed. “Brayden Duarte and I tied the knot. So who and where’s the lucky girl?”

“She’s antique shopping in Angels Camp. I can’t believe how much that town’s changed since we lived here.”

“Since *we* lived here?” Hold on, he wasn’t talking about me. My eyes widened. “Don’t tell me you found a girl from Doyle? Who is she?”

“Oonagh Francoer.”

“The Francoers,” Lenore said, expression thoughtful. “Her father liked spy thrillers.” Lenore owned a bookshop and had the town’s reading habits memorized.

“She’s a couple years younger than us,” he said. “You might not remember her. She wasn’t in our cla—” His face reddened. “Oh, you weren’t in my class either. I forgot you three were homeschooled. Anyway, I’m back for a research vacation.”

“Research?” Karin asked.

“On Doyle,” he said. “It inspired my thesis.”

The ringing noise clanged like a firehouse alarm. I gritted my teeth and fought not to clap my hands over my ears. It wouldn’t help when the sound was coming from inside me. I rubbed my head.

Karin folded her arms across her navy blouse and shifted her weight. “In folklore?”

“So much ground has already been covered,” he said. “You have to get pretty granular with a PhD thesis these days. This town’s got interesting legends attached, but they’re not well-known outside of Doyle. Or inside of it, for that matter. Anyway, I figured more research would be a good project while I’m here.”

“Interesting.” Lenore’s lips pursed.

“I thought you’d find it so,” he said.

“Oh?” She cocked her head. “Why me?”

He nodded. “Your name came across my computer a few times when I was looking for rare books on the subject. Unfortunately, your prices are slightly out of a poor PhD student’s range. I was sort of, um, hoping you might let me take a look at a few of them? I know you’re not a lending library, but—”

“Of course,” Lenore said. “Let me know which ones you’d like to read.”

The lines in his pale face relaxed. “Thanks. That could be really helpful.”

“Well, it’s great to see you again,” I said, “no matter what the reason. How about a welcome coffee on the house?”

He grinned. “I won’t say no to that. Like I said, poor PhD student here.”

“What’ll it be?”

He ordered a mochaccino, and I busied myself at the espresso machine.

“Who’s he?” Darla whispered, nodding toward Mac. “He’s cute.”

“That’s Mac Davidge,” I said, “and he’s sadly taken.”

She laughed. “All the good ones are.”

I picked up a wooden stirrer and smiled. Rooting myself, I let earth energy flow through my feet, up my spine, and into my arms. The ringing faded, as if the earth had absorbed it, and my shoulders relaxed.

I nudged the energy through one hand and into the stirrer. A memory rose before my eyes, a black cat with a nocked ear and bent whiskers.

I looked down. The cat floated in the coffee foam, knocked ear and all. My heart bubbled. It was stupid magic, silly magic. But it made people happy, and that made it worthwhile.

“Here you go, Mac.” I brought him the cup. “One mochaccino.”

He looked into the paper cup and gasped. “Crowley. I haven’t thought of him in years.” He squinted. “I can almost see his bent whiskers. Do you remember when we found him? Dripping wet on that fire escape?”

I laughed. “I remember he didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Amazing.” Still staring into the mug, he shook his head. Mac met my gaze. “Thank you for that memory.”

See? Totally worthwhile.

I glanced at the long line trailing down the counter.

“I’d better let you go,” he said. “I’m just going to do some reading in the corner for a bit.”

He moved off to an empty table.

“Doyle folklore?” Karin muttered. She rubbed her arms and looked around the café. “That can’t be good.”

I sucked in my cheeks. Mac was a good guy. He wouldn’t cause us or anyone else trouble.

“Maybe he’s the teacher we’ve been waiting for,” Lenore said in a low voice. “Mrs. Steinberg said their arrival would be unexpected.”

“I’m pretty sure she also said the teacher she had in mind was a woman,” I said. But if Mac had magical intel on Doyle that we didn’t...

The ringing increased in volume, and I swayed. If this didn’t stop soon, I was going to lose it.

“Still,” Lenore said, “he might be a good source of info. We haven’t had any fairy eruptions for a while, but who’s to say it won’t happen again? Jayce, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I gritted out.

“I’ll talk to him.” Karin drew her brows together. “I can ask for his contact info for future book research. Not that I’ve written anything in months,” she said mournfully. “I was barely able to get away from Mitch and Emmie today. Do you know how hard it is to find a sitter on short notice?”

“No,” I said. “And I’m in no hurry to find out.”

Karin tugged the hem of her blouse lower over her curvy hips and strolled to his table. They exchanged business cards.

“Mac was also going to raid your library,” I said to Lenore. “You could have got his contact info then. Or I could have.”

“But Karin obviously wanted to interrogate him, and she *has* been pretty tied down by the kids lately.”

I nodded. I loved my niece and nephew to pieces, but they were a handful. An adorable handful, but a handful.

Karin returned to the wooden counter. “His specialization is nature spirits,” she said flatly. “Fairies.”

My mouth went dry. I brushed a crumb off the counter. “That’s not so weird, is it? Doyle has a fairy spring and a fairy well. If Doyle was going to inspire him, it’s either that or Gold Rush ghost stories.”

Karin drummed her clipped fingernails on the counter. “I don’t know. We all were... called to Ground, and then a folklorist with a special interest in nature spirits just happens to show up? It seems a little too coincidental.”

Yeah. It did. But it was Mac, one of the nicest guys I’d ever met. I slipped my hands into my apron pockets. “Maybe something *is* up, but he’s a good person. And I don’t sense any magic on him, do you?”

My sisters stilled, their faces going blank. Then they drew deep breaths and shook their heads.

“No,” Lenore admitted. “Not a thing.”

“So he’s not in a Black Lodge,” Karin said quietly. “That *was* what we were worried about, right?”

Black Lodge? “Seriously?” I hissed. “You had to go straight to the worst-case scenario? A gang of evil magicians?”

Karin flushed. “I can’t stop thinking about them. The last time a black lodge rolled into town, they caused a lot of trouble.”

“Understatement much?” I arched a brow “They caused a magical riot. The town still hasn’t recovered.” Some of the businesses on Main Street hadn’t come back. Innocent and not-so-innocent people had died.

“The point,” Karin continued, “is that I don’t think we’re off their radar.”

I shook my head. “Okay, this is getting ridiculous. We’re freaking each other out over nothing.”

“Jayce is right,” Lenore said. “Panicking isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

“Who’s panicking?” Karin asked. “I’m not panicking, I’m wary. There’s a difference.”

Mac rose and set his mug in a bin at the end of the counter. “I’ll see you around, Jayce. Let’s meet up and get dinner or something. I want you to meet Oonagh. And bring your significant other.”

“Brayden and I would love that.”

“Great. I’d love to catch up.” He glanced around the café. “I noticed a lot of businesses have closed on Main Street. But you seem to be doing well.”

“I try.” And my morning good-vibes spell didn’t hurt.

He waved and ambled toward the door.

“See?” I said. “Normal. Just an old friend, dropping by. No dark magic. Nothing sinister.”

Thunder rumbled, and we looked toward the windows. Sunlight streamed through the glass.

“That wasn’t an omen,” I said quickly. “It’s only dry thunder. It’s not at all unusual in the mountains during the summer.”

“If everything’s totally normal,” Karin hissed, “why did we all show up here thinking something was wrong? Wait. Jayce, you never said what you felt.”

The air in the café compressed, squeezing my lungs, raising the hair on my arms, and we stiffened. *Magic*. An oily membrane of dark magic smothered the café, and dread clutched my heart.

The ringing grew piercing. I clenched my jaw to keep from crying out.

And then the ringing stopped. There was a tearing sound.

The bell above the door jingled.

Mac stood aside, pressing the door open with one hand, for a slim female tourist.

She nodded her thanks, walking past him, and said something to him too low for me to hear.

He smiled and stepped onto the wide sidewalk.

There was a loud crack. A woman outside shrieked. The woman with the shoulder bag crouched and whirled toward the door. Mac staggered backward and fell on his back, one arm flung outward.

The door closed slowly on Mac's limp hand, shuffling it sideways across my floor.

RIGA - CHAPTER TWO

When the Devil appeared to Riga, she laughed.

Not bravely. Not sardonically. Hysterically.

His skin had a parboiled look. He was naked, and looked like something out of an old horror film, his horns curving backward like a mountain goat's. She learned later that laughter is a normal reaction to the Devil. But at the time, she just figured things had gone very wrong.

Exactly *what* had gone wrong... Well, there were several options available.

Three days earlier, she'd received a letter from an elderly magician requesting her appearance in Doyle.

Riga had ignored the letter.

She was no longer a metaphysical detective and couldn't leave her children, only seventeen months old and already bursting with magic.

The next night, the magician, Mrs. Steinberg, called.

Riga had said *no* again. Bafflingly, a year ago her familiar had turned into a human. And you don't leave an ex-gargoyle running amuck in human form without supervision.

Last night, Mrs. Steinberg called again. Riga had again said... no. Thanks. Really. Still retired from detecting. And her husband was having some tricky dealings with the government. She couldn't possibly leave.

And then the Devil appeared.

In Tarot, the Devil means avoiding hard truths. Self-deception. Sticking to a comfortable path that leads to disaster. But this wasn't the Tarot's devil, holding two loosely chained victims, trapped by their own ignorance.

This was the Devil. Capital *D*. He didn't say anything when he manifested in her walk-in closet, just leered and vanished. And there was another reason why he might have come.

Her children. The twins.

Growing up with the kind of power they had could only rot their souls. It had to be that, or—

Her mind veered away from the idea. *No*. It had to be the children. They were the most at risk. And she had to help them.

But if she was going to save Jack and Emma, save everyone, then she was going to have to do something different, break the pattern. And her current pattern involved hiding out at home.

She studied Mrs. Steinberg's letter on the kitchen's marble counter. The sunrise outside the windows lightened. Gray melted into a golden shimmer, limning the mountain peaks, and reflecting off Lake Tahoe.

For good reason, Riga hadn't taken a job in a year. And now one was calling. It wasn't a detective job, it was training. It strayed into magical territory, but training should be safe.

Or she could stay home and keep watch over her twins. She shoved the envelope aside. If she was meant to go, there'd be more signs. The Devil was a little ambiguous.

Her niece suddenly became available for long-term babysitting. But Pen had quit her job last month. It wasn't that unusual that she'd be free. It wasn't a sign.

Her now ex-familiar blew up the granny house in their yard. After the smoke cleared, Brigitte, unscathed, insisted a trip was exactly what she needed to get new perspective on the process.

Riga gave in. Besides, she didn't want to look at the gaping crater where the guest house had been.

Driving through the Sierras, Riga and Brigitte were waved through the summer road construction that normally blocked the mountain passes. It felt like the universe was breaking a trail from her. That was worrying.

And as Riga'd hesitated outside Jayce Bonheim's café and thought she had no business teaching a trio of young witches how to defend themselves, this was a bad idea, turn around, go home, the red door popped open.

A young man stepped out and held it for her.

It had been impossible to pretend she hadn't seen his gallant gesture. Impossible to turn and speed walk back to her hotel. Impossible *not* to step into the coffeeshop.

Tasting something sour, Riga Hayworth smiled at the man (damn him) and edged past. The powers that be were practically shoving her into this job.

But it wasn't like she'd come to investigate. She wasn't breaking her vow. It was only training. And what choice did she have with the Devil in her closet, and—

Crack-buzz-thwack!

Riga's heart bulleted into her throat. She whirled, crouching.

The man who'd held the door staggered back, one palm to his chest. He tumbled to the sidewalk.

The café's red door swung slowly shut, shutting on his hand. Silence crashed.

She stared at that hand for a shocked moment. It was smooth and pale, a scholar's hand, an office worker's hand, a hand for keyboards and coffeeshops, and it bumped limply along the wood floor, pushed by the closing door.

The café exploded in the clatter of chairs, knocked to the ground, in shrieks and cries. Customers rushed toward the back of the coffeeshop and through long ikat curtains, striped blue and white. Metal pinged, curtain hooks wrenching from the pole.

Unthinking, Riga grabbed his hand, hooked the door wider with one foot, and leaned backward hard, pulling. His limp body moved less than a foot.

Dead weight. Her heart hurdled into her throat.

She met a customer's startled gaze, his mug frozen at his lips. He was the only person still seated at a table. "Help me," she shouted.

The man lurched from his chair. He grasped the victim's other arm. The two dragged him into the café, and the door swung shut, the bell above it jangling with sick finality.

Riga pulled her bag free and tugged off her tweed jacket, pressed it to the growing stain on the man's chest.

Had he been the target? Or had Riga? Nausea swam up her throat. She swallowed it down. She shouldn't have come. If she'd caused this...

Another place, another windowed room rose before her eyes. *And blood, so much blood, dripping down the glass, splattering the lottery tickets, the phone accessories and battery chargers, and—*

"What can I do?" the man who'd helped asked her.

She gasped, jerked from the vision. "Call 9-1-1." She glanced at her watch. It was three-seventeen.

“I already called.” Face white, a young woman with thick, wavy brown hair and the scent of pines and earth and magic crouched beside them. Her apron wrinkled against the thighs of her tight jeans. She grasped the man’s hand. “Mac,” she said brokenly. “Mac. It’s going to be okay.”

But Mac wasn’t going to be okay. Riga’s gut twisted.

She leaned back on her heels and sat on the laminate floor. Her hands were hot and sticky and red.

Mac was dead.

She was here and another man was dead.

“Mac?” the woman asked, blinking rapidly.

Riga looked away. *No*. His death wasn’t her fault. Couldn’t be her fault. She’d just *gotten* here.

Two more women, a blond and a woman with hair the color of Riga’s came to stand beside the first. They rested their hands on the brunette’s shoulders.

“Jayce,” the blonde murmured.

Jayce. Lenore. Karin. The witches she’d been sent to train. She choked back a sob. What a beginning.

The police didn’t take long to arrive—one of the benefits, Riga guessed, of small-town life. Statements were taken. Deputies sent onto rooftops.

Riga leaned against a metal sink in the café’s cramped kitchen and wiped her hands on a towel. The motion camouflaged their shaking. She’d scrubbed them mercilessly. They looked clean, but they still felt sticky.

“What else?” The diminutive sheriff’s blue eyes glinted with frustration.

If Riga hadn't been so heartsick, she might have laughed. The sheriff looked like a grown-up Shirley Temple. Though of course, the real Shirley Temple hadn't kept her blond ringlets as she'd aged.

"Nothing," Riga said.

"Nothing? You saw nothing?" the sheriff asked. "How is that possible?"

"My back was to the door when it happened."

"Why'd you drag him inside?"

"I didn't know if the shooting was over."

The sheriff's lips tightened, and she nodded. "All right. We have your contact info. If you think of anything, let me know." She strode through the torn blue-and-white curtains, dangling at an odd angle.

In the café, a tall deputy with curly black hair pulled Lenore into a brief hug. The curtain fell back into place, obscuring the scene.

Riga tossed the ruined towel into the sink. Then she thought better of it and washed the towel as best she could, the water running pink. She examined a tiny red moon in her palm, a thin crimson crescent the towel somehow missed.

A fresh bead of blood pushed through her skin, and she realized her own fingernail had made that mark. Riga washed it again.

She'd had no business taking this job. Teach witches to defend themselves? Riga couldn't even defend—

The brunette walked inside. "Are you—?"

"I'm Riga, Riga Hayworth." She shoved her fists into the pockets of her wide-legged navy slacks.

The woman's eyes, the color of holly leaves, widened slightly, and she frowned.

"I... know that name. You're a metaphysical detective."

"Retired." She could escape now. Just leave, and they wouldn't know why she'd come. Coming here had been a mistake. And there were those bloodied lottery tickets...

"I'm Jayce—"

She had to get a grip. "I know," Riga said, and her voice was steady. "The middle Bonheim sister. Mrs. Steinberg sent me."

Jayce froze. "Oh," she finally said.

"Mac. Was he a friend of yours?" She nodded toward the wrecked curtains, and the coffeeshop beyond.

Jayce swallowed and looked toward the heavy, metal door at the other end of the cramped kitchen. "An old friend."

"I'm sorry," she said. Was she expressing condolences or apologizing for getting the man killed? *No*. His murder *couldn't* be her fault. *Think*.

But *had* she gotten him killed? Had he been killed because of who he was, or because of who she was, or because of the young witch in front of her? Or was a black lodge here already? Were they responsible?

"We need to talk to Mrs. Steinberg," Riga said. "As soon as we can." That would give her time to get her head together. To think about something other than those damned tickets.

Jayce nodded, swallowed. "The sheriff closed Ground. We can leave whenever."

"I vote for now."

"Wait here." She vanished through the curtains.

Riga carefully draped the towel over the metal divider in the sink and thanked God for the instinct that had led her to leave Brigitte at the hotel. She didn't want that sharp-eyed sheriff anywhere near Brigitte.

The triplets brushed through the curtains.

"This is Karin." Jayce motioned toward the auburn-haired girl.

Woman, Riga corrected herself. They had to be in their thirties. Early thirties. But anyone under forty seemed young to her now.

"And Lenore," Jayce continued.

"Hi." The blonde ducked her head.

They shook hands. The sisters' grips were cool and firm and tingled with magic.

"It might be wise to stay off Main Street," Riga said.

"Why?" Jayce asked.

"She thinks it's the Black Lodge," Karin breathed.

"I don't think anything yet," Riga said quietly. "I don't know what happened, or why your friend was killed."

She wasn't a detective anymore. She didn't have to prove the man's death wasn't on her. But he'd been so young... "Did you tell anyone I was coming?" Riga asked.

"We didn't know who was coming or when you *were* coming." Jayce folded her arms. "And how do we know you are who you say you are?"

"Would it matter, since you didn't know who was coming?" Riga asked.

"She's right," Lenore said shakily. "We don't know who you are."

Riga turned to Jayce. "But you knew my name. You knew my old profession."

Jayce's skin turned a dusky rose hue. "I read about you online. I was researching— It was random."

“Was it?” Riga asked.

“Seriously, I didn’t think—”

A gnarled hand thrust the curtains aside, and a black-clad figure waddled into the room. Mrs. Steinberg.

The old woman thumped her cane on the floor. “Enough chitchat. Time to move. Riga, good to see you again.” She strode to the kitchen’s metal door and shot open the bolts.

Riga sprang to Mrs. Steinberg’s side. She hefted the heavy door open for the older woman and held it for her.

“Nice to know *some* people still have manners.” Mrs. Steinberg raised her Jackie-Kennedy style glasses and glared at the young witches. “Let’s go.”

They followed the elderly woman down narrow streets overgrown with trees. The sun baked the pavement, and Riga felt the soles of her boots heating, the top of her head warming. *As above, so below.* The old saw didn’t raise a smile.

They made their way to a sunshine-yellow Victorian, and Mrs. Steinberg let them inside.

Riga trailed her into a yellow dining room smelling faintly of mothballs. Potted plants on doilies filled every spare surface save the table, covered in a white cloth.

“Have a seat,” Mrs. Steinberg said.

Riga grabbed a chair on the other side of the table. She sat.

Two sisters took up chairs opposite her. Jayce sat at the foot of the table. Mrs. Steinberg lowered herself into a chair at its head.

Their hostess removed her sunglasses and met Riga’s gaze. “Black Lodge know you’re here?”

“I don’t see how one could.” Riga studied the younger women. Jayce seemed dazed, the others worried. None squirmed guiltily, but if they were good liars, that meant nothing.

“Then what happened?” Mrs. Steinberg demanded.

“It was Mac,” Jayce choked out. “Mac Davidge.” She told them about his surprise arrival. How they’d gone to college together. When she got to his folkloric studies, Mrs. Steinberg stiffened. The old lady shot another glance at Riga.

Jayce ran through the story to the end, then looked at Riga.

Riga spread her hands. “I first met your friend when he held the door for me.”

“You tried to save him,” Karin said.

Tried. Failed. “I didn’t sense magic on him.” Riga felt her hands pressed to his chest, the blood seeping through her linen jacket. The jacket she’d left in Ground’s kitchen trash.

A spray of blood, dripping off a jar of pickled eggs. Riga shook herself.

“Of course you didn’t sense magic,” Jayce burst out. “He was just a guy. A good guy. He’s got nothing to do with magic or the Black Lodge. He didn’t deserve this.”

“Four witches converged and a man was killed,” Mrs. Steinberg said. “We can’t assume magic isn’t involved.”

“He was *shot*,” Jayce said.

No one spoke.

Jayce flushed. She rubbed her palms on her jeans. “All right. I get it.”

“You said Mac was a folklorist,” Riga said. “Did he have a specialty in the field?”

“Nature spirits,” Karin said. “He said he was inspired by Doyle.”

Riga drummed her fingers on the table. That wasn’t good.

“Your young man say anything to you?” Mrs. Steinberg eyed Lenore.

“No,” the blonde said. “Connor couldn’t. It’s too early, and...” Lenore glanced at Riga. “Connor’s my boyfriend. He’s a deputy. I’m sure he’ll tell me what he can, but—”

“It’s okay,” Jayce said.

“You mentioned in your letter a fairy gate,” Riga said. “Why do you think you’re having such trouble closing it?”

“It’s the curse,” Mrs. Steinberg said.

“I thought the fairy queen’s curse on the Bonheim sisters was broken,” Riga said.

Mrs. Steinberg threw up her hands. “The whole town was cursed by that woman. Can’t you feel it? That’s what’s holding that gate open.”

“So that’s some good news,” Riga said. “Curses can be broken.”

“How?” Jayce asked. “The queen is back in fairy, and we still can’t close that gate.”

“The cure is always in the curse itself,” Riga said. “It’s just a matter of finding it. You mentioned a black lodge as well.” She looked to Mrs. Steinberg. “One’s caused problems here before?”

“Murder, arson, and a magical riot.” Mrs. Steinberg rummaged in a large black handbag and pulled out an e-cigarette. “The riot wasn’t hard to set off. The town was already on a knife’s edge, and not only because of the things getting through the gate. People have disappeared *into* it.”

The old lady took a raspberry-scented puff, then pointed the e-cigarette at the young witches around the table. “These three have done a good job keeping it out of this Black Lodge’s hands. But it’s a constant battle.”

Riga swallowed. “That’s... impressive.” The witches had to be powerful. That was good. And dangerous.

“They’re not trained,” Mrs. Steinberg said. “Oh, they got some basic training from their aunt, God rest her soul, but since then, they’ve been flying on instinct and luck. It’s frankly a miracle they’ve survived this long.”

“We’re not *totally* hopeless,” Jayce muttered.

“Tell me more about this black lodge,” Riga said.

Mrs. Steinberg reached into her handbag again and pulled out a business card with an odd symbol on it. She handed it to Riga. “They call themselves the Brotherhood. They’re based in San Francisco.”

“Of course they are.” Riga sighed and studied the sigil on the card longer than she needed to. A black lodge. A murder. The lodge was likely responsible for today’s shooting. But it wasn’t her business, and if she got involved...

Even beneath his blood she could see the filth on the linoleum. The stain spread outward. Glass shards—

Riga swallowed. “All right. Let’s talk about your magical training.”

Jayce jerked to her feet, knocking her chair backward. “Training? This isn’t the time. Mac was killed right in front of us.”

“Yes,” Riga said quietly. “A man researching Doyle’s fairy history was killed outside the shop of a witch in the crosshairs of a black lodge. Said black lodge is also interested in Doyle’s fairy connection. I was brought here to train you, to help you keep each other safe. I think we should stick with that plan.”

“But,” Mrs. Steinberg said, “you *are* a metaphysical detective—”

“Was. I’m retired.”

Jayce's eyes flashed emerald fire. "There was a murder—"

"Jayce," the blonde interrupted, warning.

"She's right." Karin unknotted the red silk scarf around her neck. "Riga's here, and we need help. We'd be foolish not to take advantage." She retied the scarf.

Jayce clamped her lips together and exhaled heavily through her nose. She righted her chair and sat. "Fine."

"I'm afraid the situation is more dire than you know," Mrs. Steinberg said.

Riga cocked her head. "What else?"

"The Black Lodge," Mrs. Steinberg said. "They're already here."

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