

HEX

The Apprentice

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For Tess and Ros

CHAPTER ONE



I stared at the toaster and the bread that was slowly scorching inside it as I waited for Gram to answer my question: *Are you a witch?*

My grandmother didn't say anything. She poured her coffee, then opened the refrigerator to get some cream. It might have seemed that she didn't want to answer, but I knew my gram. I knew she was thinking, turning over the possibilities in her mind. My dad used to do the same thing. I waited.

At last, Gram sat down at the table with her mug. Stir, stir, stir.

I buttered my toast and sat down opposite her.

"Witch. That's a word some folks use, folks who don't really understand," she said. "The correct term is hex master, or *hexenmeister*. With Madder business, I just help people through pictures."

I sipped my coffee, which was still way too hot. “I’m not a little kid any more, Gram. I deserve a straight answer. I want to know what Madder business is. And why Mom never talks about it.”

“She’s talked about Madder business,” Gram said with a rueful chuckle. “Just not in civil terms.” In fact, the only time I’d heard my mother use the term Madder business was when I was eight. Mrs. Dee was visiting with Gram on a summer Sunday afternoon, and I was lurking near the porch door, straining my ears to hear.

“Robin West, come away from that door,” Mom had ordered.

“Why don’t Mrs. Dee come in the parlor?”

Being an English teacher, she corrected, “Why *doesn’t* Mrs. Dee come *into* the parlor.” Then she frowned. “She’s got business with your gram. Madder business.” And that was all.

Although my mother clearly knew something about it, Madder business was still mostly a mystery to me. I knew that Gram disappeared into the shed in the apple orchard after every visitor, including Mrs. Dee. I knew that our local lumberyard brought her custom-made oak circles. And overall, I knew that people’s lives were better after they asked for my gram’s help. But details? I was light on them. Thus my question.

After a few minutes, Gram put her coffee cup down deliberately and said, “You’re right, Robin. It’s time you learned. It’s time to show you the shed.”

We finished breakfast—I ate so fast I got hiccups—and walked out through the orchard. She unlocked the shed door

and I realized I was holding my breath.

It wasn't what I was expecting, though what, exactly, I had imagined I don't really know. Inside, there were two long, simple wooden tables. One was covered with old copper mixing bowls; the other held several blank oak circles and a shape covered with a clean white cloth. A four-legged drafting stool was tucked under the table with the bowls. An old barn heater stood in one corner; an orange wooden crate nailed to one wall was stuffed with brown paper envelopes. The only windows were covered with yellowed newspaper.

I studied the bowls and the brushes lined up in a row next to them. The brushes were all quite old. I picked up a flat brush with beautiful dark bristles. "This is real sable," I exclaimed. I'd drooled over similar ones online but never imagined using one.

"Only the best," Gram said.

Despite the obvious age of everything in the room, the whole place was spotless. Gram chuckled at the look on my face. "I wasn't always such a neat freak," she said. "But once I started in Madder business, I changed."

Gram sat down on the drafting stool. "I want to teach you, Robin."

"Teach me what?" I looked away from the gorgeous brush.

Gram rubbed her hand along the table. "I'm getting on a bit, in case you hadn't noticed. I need to pass on what I know. I'd hoped I would be able to teach your father. I tried to convince him, but he wouldn't listen. And now it's too late."

Had it already been four years?

She cleared her throat and continued. “But you, you’re perfect for Madder business. You have an artist’s eye and a believer’s heart. You know that anything is possible, that the world is more than what we can see and hear.”

I put the brush down, suddenly feeling cautious. “What exactly do you do, Gram?”

“You know that people come to see me. They tell me what their trouble is. I devise a hex to help them.”

“A hex? You mean a spell?”

She shook her head. “A spell is something said aloud. A hex is a picture.”

“I thought hexes were, you know . . .” She looked at me expectantly. I squirmed a little at what I was going to say next. “Evil. Dark magic.” I stopped short of citing fantasy novels as my source.

She snorted. “Nonsense. One of my hexes is no more evil than a cloud in the sky.”

Gram leaned over and moved the white cloth. Below it lay a work in progress—a white, wooden disk about four inches across. On it was a design of a freaky-looking bird holding oak leaves and shamrocks in its claws. A bumpy border ringed the edge, and other light marks indicated images that I couldn’t identify.

Gram said, “That man who came by the other night? He’s from Bixby. He found me through Ellen Crostov, the cop. Two years ago, her husband, Dave Bean, got shot in the line of duty. While Dave was in the hospital, Ellen came to see me.”

“And?”

“Since then, how many shootings have there been in Franken?”

I racked my brain, but nothing came to mind.

Gram continued, “The man from Bixby is worried about his son, who is going to ship out with the army. I’m making him this hex. The main element is the eagle.”

“That’s an eagle? Really?”

“Hexes aren’t like the pictures you do in art class. A picture of an eagle is nice to look at, inspiring maybe, but it’s not going to help you. This, *this* is different. With the right symbols and colors, the hex will be strong. It will keep the son safe until he comes home.”

“I noticed you said ‘until he comes home.’ Not ‘if.’ ”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m good at what I do.”

I smiled at that. “So that’s where I get my humility.”

“Take pride in your gifts, Robin, but don’t get too vain about them,” Gram said as she covered the hex.

Quietly, we left the shed. Gram locked the door behind us.

“Mom’s not going to like this,” I said as we walked back to the house. It was still strange to think of her having lunch now, taking a break from the graduate seminars she was attending in London, while for us the day had barely started.

The air was filled with the scent of ripe apples. Soon the pickers would come, strip the trees, and give Gram a check for the harvest. Since Dad died, the farm hadn’t been a working farm in any real sense. Several people had approached Gram

about selling but so far she'd refused them all, although some took it better than others. I couldn't imagine houses taking the place of the old orchard or cutting down the tall willow tree that served as a landmark for miles around. And I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

"Your mom has never been comfortable with Madder business. She doesn't like having the makings of Madder business in the house."

"So that's why you work out here. And why we never talk about it."

She nodded.

I was silent for a moment, thinking about Mrs. Dee, Ellen Crostov, and all the other people who came to visit. Part of me was still skeptical. It sounded like clickbait: "Lose 40 Lb. Overnight!" "I Had an Alien's Baby!" "Use a Hex Sign to Save Your Life!"

As if she could read my mind, Gram said, "You're not sure. All right. I'll make you a deal. I'll introduce you to some folks who will tell you their stories."

"Okay. And what's my part?"

"You listen, and you let me start teaching you. Though I don't want to put you in a position of disobeying your mom."

"Well, Mom's never told me *not* to do Madder business," I said.

We came back into the kitchen, which suddenly seemed like a very different place from the one we'd left half an hour earlier.

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