



The Witches of Echo Park: An Echo Park Coven Novel

By Amber Benson

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First in a “spellbinding”* new series about a coven of witches living in L.A., from Amber Benson, author of the Calliope Reaper-Jones novels.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Dark, delicious, and devilishly intricate.”—*Sean McGuire, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Red-Rose Chain*

“Amber Benson’s got it. Get it for yourself.”—John Scalzi, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The End of All Things*

“Filled with magic, secrets, and shocking twists and turns!”—Kings River Life Magazine

“[An] urban fantasy series that deftly mixes magic and the modern world.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Multitalented Benson returns with a story of sisterhood, magic, and secrets...Captivating.”—*RT Book Reviews*

About the Author

Amber Benson cocreated, cowrote, and directed the animated supernatural Web series *Ghosts of Albion* with Christopher Golden, which they followed with a series of novels, including *Witchery* and *Accursed*, and the novella *Astray*. Benson and Golden also coauthored the novella *The Seven Whistlers*. As an actress, she has appeared in dozens of roles in feature films, TV movies, and television series, including the fan-favorite role of Tara Maclay on three seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Benson wrote, produced, and directed the feature films *Chance* and *Lovers, Liars and Lunatics*.

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Eleanora

“It’s in the blood.”

Hessika’s voice was low and gravelly as she spoke, her drawn-in Cupid’s-bow lips overenunciating each word.

There was a loud snap as the green pod in Eleanora’s hands split into two, three glistening peas falling into the half-filled orange ceramic bowl cradled in her lap. She sat in a weathered rattan rocking chair, her bare legs and arms sticky with the autumnal California heat, the dark blue chambray shirt and jean shorts she’d put on that morning plastered against her pale, freckled skin. She stopped rocking at those words—It’s in the blood—and turned to look at the woman who was twelve years her elder.

Hessika sat perched on a rocking chair the twin of Eleanora’s, but it looked small and fragile beneath her massive frame. In other, less forgiving times, she would’ve been drummed out of her home and marginalized to the fringes of society for the way she looked, but now she was just a curiosity, an object of intense fascination for the neighborhood children who liked to loiter at the bottom of her lawn and stare at the giantess as she worked in the garden that was her sanctuary.

Standing six feet, eight inches tall in her stocking feet, Hessika was a female oddity of extreme contradictions: She had the posture and grace of a prima ballerina, but one who thought nothing of squatting barefoot in the dirt to pull the hardest of weeds from her flower beds. Her garden was as close to a shrine or

temple as their kind believed in, and Hessika was its rough master, forcing her enormous hands, joints stiff and swollen from arthritis, to do her bidding there. She alleviated the worst of her pain with a homemade stinging nettle tonic she took twice daily—a recipe she swore by but had never written down. Something Eleanora and the others had only realized upon her death.

The first moment Eleanora had laid eyes on the master of the Echo Park coven, she'd known Hessika was a different creature from any other she'd encountered before.

It was an indefinable thing, this differentness, but Eleanora believed it was due to the impenetrable nature of Hessika's personality. No one would disagree that she was as immovable as a rock when attacked, utterly impervious to the whims or whines or worries of those she did not respect. A true force to be reckoned with, she could bend people to her will with the calming weight of her words and actions but did not manipulate her reality just for the sake of manipulation. As master of their coven, she was also adept at rooting her blood sisters to the earthly plane, reminding them of their obligations to the world they inhabited.

Upon her arrival in Southern California, it was Hessika who'd embraced her like an older sister, hugging Eleanora's thin frame to her massive bosom, so that, embarrassed, Eleanora had blushed scarlet. Then, her body and mind reeling from days of sitting up to sleep in coach on the train from Boston, she'd gone limp in the strange woman's arms and cried like a baby while the whole of Union Station watched.

Instead of chiding the younger woman for her weakness, Hessika had spirited Eleanora back to the bungalow on Curran Street overlooking Elysian Park, settling her down in the tiny, womblike second bedroom and petting the girl's long brown hair until her tears had dried up. Never once did she question Eleanora about the trip, or the heartbreak she'd left behind in Duxbury when she'd hitched a ride into Boston and never looked back—and, for her silent kindness, Eleanora had loved Hessika with a girlish awe that bordered on hero worship.

To that order, it seemed only apropos that Hessika would be the one to foretell her fate.

"The blood?" Eleanora asked, leaning forward in her seat so the rattan bit into the backs of her legs, the bowl suddenly becoming heavier against the tops of her thighs.

"I dreamed of blood," Hessika said, an almost imperceptible lisp giving her Southern-inflected sibilants a soft, misshapen sound.

Hessika continued to work as she spoke, the cracking and voiding of shells into her bowl a staccato counterpoint to the rhythmic rocking of her chair, its runners seesawing along the thick slats of the wooden porch like a ship pitching back and forth on uncertain seas.

Hessika was a Dream Keeper. It was a gift she traced back to the Old Testament stories of Joseph.

Raised in a Primitive Baptist household in Lower Alabama, where the Old Testament had been her parents' rod and staff from which they did not deviate, Hessika didn't subscribe to the tenets of Christianity—though she was not uninterested in its mythologies and practices. The Primitive Baptist predeterminism of her childhood was not unlike her own self-discovered belief that human fate was a tapestry woven long before a person was born: If we were lucky, we might catch a glimpse of the pattern, but we could never change it.

When Hessika spoke of her dreams or interpreted the dreams of others, it was with the authority of someone who was touched by something greater than human knowledge—and those who were targeted in her dream readings quickly learned to listen carefully to her interpolations or else face their futures blind.

It's in the blood.

Hessika's words nibbled at Eleanora's brain, making her heart beat faster as she waited for her friend to say more—but there was only the steady onslaught of peas dropping into a bowl and the creaking of Hessika's rocking chair biting into the old wooden porch.

Day had long faded into inky twilight, the gloaming having come and gone on tiptoe, so Eleanora only now realized the world was dipped in full-scale night. Like looking into the face of a loved one day after day and missing the imperceptible changes as age crept across their features—the slackening of jowls, the pulling at the labial folds around their mouth, the creping of skin beneath their eyes—Eleanora had missed the shifting of Time.

She blamed Hessika. Time was pliant on her friend's front porch, stretching out like warm taffy in the hot summer sun. Here, seconds hung like minutes, minutes like hours, hours like days until Time ceased to have any meaning at all. But Hessika's portent—It's in the blood—had acted as a catalyst, speeding things up and kicking Eleanora back into the present. She blinked, finding herself aware of her surroundings again, the shrill hum of the nighttime insects like a warm blanket enfolding everything around her.

Then, without warning, Hessika stopped rocking.

With the silence came the irrational fear that her life, barely in its prime, was about to be cut short. Eleanora had turned twenty-four the previous spring and she'd done almost nothing with herself. She'd only been with one man—someone she did not dare to ever think of again—the event traumatizing at best; she'd never traveled to Europe or learned to play the piano . . . and in this age of free love and drugs, she'd never even smoked marijuana. There was so much she wanted to do, so much she wanted to see and experience—she wasn't ready to shuffle off this mortal coil just yet.

"You understand that these things are not precise," Hessika said, snapping another green pod in two and releasing its contents into the bowl.

Eleanora understood better than she wanted to.

"I do."

Hessika nodded, the moonlight casting a shadow across her angular face, obscuring languid, almond-shaped green eyes wreathed in midnight-black false lashes. She set her bowl of peas aside, making room for it on the small rattan side table by relocating her glass of merlot, then she coaxed a cigarette from a soft pack of Lucky Strikes. She plucked a silver Zippo lighter from her skirt pocket—a gift from a bulldog-faced Marine she'd once bedded—and lit the cigarette.

Eleanora watched as moths dive-bombed the overhead porch light, the frosted-glass globe keeping them from self-immolating against the sixty-watt bulb. She felt like she'd been set adrift upon the ocean, the orange glow from the cigarette's tip and the pale yellow of the porch light the only illumination in what seemed like a sea of night.

Hessika's words came out muddled, the cigarette dangling against her lower lip, perverting the sounds into something Eleanora had to translate before she could pick out any meaning from them:

"I dreamt of a dark time. When our coven was the last to stand against something truly evil."

Hessika paused, the orange coal flaring like fire as she pulled on the cigarette, then removed it from her

mouth, cupping it limply in her hand. Around them, the insects wove their songs of longing and attraction like a fine netting, the cacophony of legs rubbing together in a sexual frisson so overpowering it made Eleanora's head ache.

"In that time I was a ghost—a Dream Walker—invisible to you, but you knew I was there, keeping watch. You were a crone then, ma belle, withered and wasted away—I could smell the blood beneath your skin, blood that was flecked with something black and rank."

Eleanora kept her mouth shut, choosing not to interrupt the flow of Hessika's words. Instead, she idly watched the cigarette burn to ash between Hessika's long fingers.

"There was a girl, she liked to wrap her arms around your shoulders, her hands were always covered in dirt"—she stopped to pull on the cigarette again and then release a long trail of smoke from her lips—"and you were preparing her. She was the next in line—and she would help protect something important. Be the last to stand when all the others had fallen."

Eleanora froze as Hessika turned to look at her, their eyes locking. Without breaking the connection, Hessika took another drag from the cigarette, the stink of ash and phosphorus making Eleanora's nostrils itch. There was a softness around Hessika's eyes—sad eyes, Eleanora had always thought—but the wreath of exhaled smoke around her face made them seem frightening and irisless in the dark.

"She will follow you and you, well . . . it looks as though you're gonna follow me."

Eleanora's throat tightened. She'd been so sure Hessika was about to tell her that she was going to die—it'd happened before, Hessika's words like a magic noose around some young person's throat, inching tighter and tighter until they'd choked the life out of what was once young and gay—but this, this was something else entirely.

"A dream of the future coupled with a dream of death, ma belle," Hessika added as she reached a long arm across the space separating them and grasped Eleanora's wrist.

Her touch was at once light and reassuring yet burned within the cold fire of empathy. It was an odd sensation, and not one Eleanora hoped to experience again.

"My dreams are never wrong, ma belle," Hessika continued. "Remember that. Maybe not precise, but never wrong."

Now all these years later Hessika's portent had finally come to pass. Eleanora's blood was black with cancer—and there was only one final task left to complete before Death could finally collect its due:

Prepare the girl. For she was next in line.

Lyse

The staccato cadence of the blond stewardess's Midwestern twang slammed into Lyse's head like a sledgehammer, every word a sharpened nail driven into the gray matter of her brain.

Because it was an oversold flight and she'd booked her ticket at the last minute, she hadn't been able to choose her seat—which meant the airline gave her what was available: a middle seat in between an older grandmotherly type on the aisle and a young Hispanic kid two sizes too big for his window seat. The kid had spent the entire preflight ramp-up arguing with the stewardess over the need for a seat belt extender, and at

one point Lyse had almost snapped at the stewardess to leave the poor kid alone. Not just because she agreed with the kid, but because she wanted the stewardess to stop talking.

But she knew she stunk like a distillery and was scared of getting kicked off the flight, so she kept her mouth shut, rejoicing internally when the kid finally relented and, grumbling to hide his embarrassment, took the seat belt extender from the triumphant stewardess, clipping it in place.

Lyse wished there were something she could say to make the kid feel better about being humiliated at the hands of a smug stewardess in a pastel blue uniform, but she decided her continued silence was probably a better balm than any fumbling attempts at commiseration.

As the plane took off, Lyse closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but once they were airborne and the Fasten Seat Belt sign was turned off, she spent most of the flight trekking back and forth to the toilet in order to dry-heave over the commode. She wasn't sure if the nausea was due to a burgeoning hangover or was just the first sign that she'd given herself a concussion earlier that morning when, in a daring feat of acrobatic prowess, she'd tripped over a barstool and slammed the back of her head into the kitchen countertop, the soft skin of her scalp connecting with the hard stone to elicit a sharp, teeth-grinding thwack.

To her surprise, she'd found herself relatively unscathed after what could've been a major trauma: There'd been no blood, no laceration . . . just the budding promise of a painful knot.

After the unexpected call from her great-aunt Eleanora, Lyse had comforted herself by downing most of a bottle of Tito's vodka and passing out with her face mashed up against the cold granite kitchen island. The alcohol, coupled with the horrible dreams she'd had while she slept—dreams that made sure she got no rest—contributed greatly to the accident.

Then, hours later, she'd been frightened awake by the feel of someone's eyes on her back. It was unmistakable, the ungodly sense that a stranger was secretly observing her in this vulnerable moment, and fear ran through her body like an electric current.

She'd crawled off the barstool that'd doubled as her bed, hearing the creak of her bones settling back into place after a long night of immobility. She crossed the hardwood floor on bare feet and got as close to the kitchen window as she dared. She'd never bothered with window treatments—the kitchen was in the rear of the house, and the surrounding shrubbery had seemed thick enough to discourage any prying eyes—but as she squinted out into the pitch-black abyss of her backyard, she found herself wishing for heavy damask drapes, or at the very least those ugly poly-fiber blackout curtains.

Of course, no one was out there. The yard was empty and she was alone, but she had a hard time shaking off the creepy feeling someone had been watching her while she slept. Still groggy, she'd turned away from the window, and that was when she'd tripped over the barstool and almost brained herself.

It was that goddamned phone call. It had thrown her whole life off-kilter.

"I should have called you sooner, but I wasn't sure what to say . . ."

The teasing cadence of Eleanora's dropped New England r's as they'd sounded coming through the phone line slipped inside Lyse's head, a siren's call to something she did not want to think about.

"They've done all the tests, so there's no reason to get a second opinion."

Her great-aunt's words were transient and elliptical, floating in Lyse's memory like gauzy white light

through layers of viscous liquid. She wanted to pummel the memory away, but it wouldn't go.

“... three months, maybe less than that. Cancer. Started in the blood but now it's everywhere.”

It was like listening to a song played through an aged and crackling phonograph, vowels and consonants blurring together until they lost their meaning.

“Just . . . stop talking for a minute. Let me process this,” Lyse had almost shouted into the phone as she leaned against the potting table. Though it'd been past six in the evening, the air in The Center of the Whorl, the plant nursery she co-owned with her best friend, Carole, felt thick and damp, still oppressive with the day's heat.

Silence. Then:

“Bear? Are you still there?” Eleanora had used the pet name Lyse had chosen for herself the summer she'd turned fourteen—during those three sweltering months she would answer to no other name: Lyse was dead, long live the Bear.

Without realizing it, her body had responded to the shock by seating her ass on the concrete floor, the metal leg of the potting table pressing into her back, holding her up like the stipe of a cross as she began to cry.

I'm not gonna deal with this right now, Lyse thought, pushing the memories away as she stared at the blank screen embedded in the airline seat in front of her. She had always taken shelter in denial, using sarcasm and disdain to distance herself from pain. Logic predicated that this was a perfectly normal reaction to receiving unexpected and tragic news, but she'd never really been one to go in for logic—emotion was what ruled her day to day.

Which was why she'd chosen the oblivion of alcohol to get her through the worst of her panic. The only person who loved her was dying, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. She was going to be alone in the world again. Like when she was thirteen and thought she was an orphan—before Child Services had found Eleanora, who wasn't really Lyse's great-aunt (though that was what she'd asked Lyse to call her) but a distant relative on her mother's side, and Lyse's whole life had changed for the better.

Lyse shut her eyes, the knot in her throat abating slowly—very slowly—as she tried not to think anymore, to make her mind a blank slate. Somewhere in the middle of this losing battle, she must have fallen asleep, because soon she began to dream. The visions in her head were raw and vivid, full of familiar smells and sounds, the colors bright and lurid. She might have believed she was fixed inside a strange alternate reality if some part of her hadn't remembered she was flying forty thousand feet above the surface of the Earth.

In the dream she was a teenager again, walking through her old Echo Park neighborhood. There she moved like a ghost through overgrown gardens and derelict houses, visited dusty bodegas selling Santeria charms alongside bottled Mexican soda and Aqua Net hair spray, and stood on concrete retaining walls where shiny spray-painted tags that resembled Celtic knots sprung up like weeds to mark out rival gang territory.

She could taste the past in her mouth, smell it in the air around her as she wandered the streets and stairways of Laveta Terrace, Baxter, Clinton, and Curran, each stairwell a link to the landlocked hill homes that were built, so oddly, without street access. Sweat-soaked limbs and squeaking sneakers were her only companions as she trudged up and down the roughly curving hill streets.

Instinctively, she knew that the universe, and everything in it, was held together by webbing as fragile and sheer as the translucent filament of a spider's home—that her past and present were inextricably linked and

had been since the day she'd come to live with Eleanora.

Echo Park was calling her name. It was time to go home.

She woke up when the captain announced the flight would be landing ten minutes early. She was snotty and bleary-eyed, and it felt as though she hadn't gotten an ounce of rest in days.

She made her way off the airplane without incident, stopping in the ladies' room to splash cold water on her face and stare at her reflection in the mirror. She looked like death warmed over: red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes framed by bruise-purple circles; pale cheeks; lips so chapped they were flaking.

As she left the bathroom and followed the influx of people heading toward the exit, she powered her cell phone on. It began to make frantic buzzing noises in her hand, and she stared down at the cracked screen, surprised to discover one new voice mail message and two text messages waiting for her. It was barely nine in the morning.

Both texts were from Carole: Where are you? I went by the house—we so NEED to talk about that FYI—but you're MIA, so we can't. And: What the hell, Lyse? Call me!

The voice mail was from Carole, too—in her emotional upheaval, Lyse had forgotten to call her best friend and business partner and tell her she wouldn't be showing up at the nursery that morning. She felt terrible, like she'd breached some kind of best-friend trust by not informing Carole she was leaving town, and why.

As she cruised past security and hit the escalator, she texted Carole back: Eleanora called. Long story, but I'm in LA.

She leaned her weight against the rubber handrail as she pressed send, exhausted by this simple task, and then closed her eyes, losing herself in the din of conversation around her.

Lyse felt her mind untethering like a shiny copper penny snaking its way toward the bottom of a detergent-blue swimming pool. The inevitable had happened, and it was as cold and punishing as a lungful of chlorinated water.

"Lyse?"

She opened her eyes and was shocked to find Eleanora waiting for her at the bottom of the curved escalator.

"Eleanora?" she said, and dropped her bag onto the dirty airport floor.

She ran to her great-aunt, flinging her arms around this now-frail creature who'd once been so robust and full of life. She pulled Eleanora in as close as she dared, not wanting to crush her. The two women clung to each other—one a crone at the end of her days, the other a maiden, hale and full of future—and the world around them ceased to exist.

"I've missed you," Eleanora whispered, the sandpaper scratch of her voice tickling Lyse's ear.

"Me, too," Lyse replied, meaning it.

Lost in the midst of this bittersweet moment was the realization that Lyse had not told Eleanora she was coming to Los Angeles.

* * *

“They’ve cut down two more trees, the bastards,” Eleanora noted, pointing out the pale brown stumps to Lyse as they rolled her raggedy metal cart down the uneven sidewalk, passing the last remnants of the majestic ficus trees that had once lined Echo Park Avenue. “Who cuts down living things, Lyse—creatures of the Earth that clean the air and give shade to weary travelers?”

The dark green foliage and elegant limbs Lyse had stood under, that had kept her dry from the rain and protected her from the scorching sun during the hottest of the summer months, were gone, replaced by empty dirt plots as barren as newly filled graves.

Lyse knew Eleanora hated backward behavior championed “in the name of progress.” A decade earlier, she would have led the protest, taking names and causing heads to roll, but these days, Lyse realized, her great-aunt was too tired to do any damage to the members of the city council.

“I’ll say a little prayer when I get home,” Eleanora said, patting Lyse’s arm as they walked. “Say a few words to send an ill wind their way, the unfeeling idiots.”

Lyse had to laugh. Even though she still felt that gnawing hollow in her middle, it was amazing how easily her fears could be dispelled by her great-aunt’s blunt New England sensibility.

“I wish all you had to do was ask God to kick their asses,” Lyse replied, running a hand through her chunky bangs so they stuck up like porcupine quills in the heat. Her thick, dark hair grew so fast her bangs were forever in need of a trim, and she was constantly having to shove them out of her eyes.

Southern California was dry—the antithesis of Athens, Georgia, where she lived now, which was humidity city. She wished she’d remembered this fact and brought some heavy-duty lotion with her. Her skin was already beginning to feel dry and cracked. Besides, she was exhausted, and the lack of sleep contributed to the icky “too tight in her own skin” feeling she was having.

“You look tired,” Eleanora said, as if she were privy to Lyse’s thoughts. “You didn’t need to walk down here with me.”

Lyse shrugged and said offhandedly, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead—”

She immediately realized what she’d just said and clapped a hand over her mouth.

Eleanora laughed.

“Don’t censor yourself on my account. I’ve made my peace with Death, Lyse—and that’s all anyone can hope to do in these situations.”

Lyse nodded, but inside she was still kicking herself for her slip of the tongue.

“But here we are,” Eleanora said, turning her cart into the doorway of the tiny neighborhood bodega.

“Hola, Eleanora,” the birdlike woman behind the cash register sang brightly as Lyse followed Eleanora inside.

Together, they made their way to the back of the store, where the refrigerator case sat humming, cold bottles of red-labeled organic milk stacked neatly inside it.

“Hola yourself, Juana,” Eleanora replied, raising a skeletal hand in the bird woman’s direction as she opened the refrigerator, seeming to pause as she caught sight of her reflection in the glass-fronted case.

Lyse wondered if her great-aunt saw what she saw: sunken cheeks and bruised skin stretched taut over orbital bones. A wraith. The walking dead.

“Is that all today, Eleanora?” Juana asked, the question cutting through Lyse’s thoughts like a freshly sharpened knife.

Eleanora had already moved to the checkout. Lyse joined her and was surprised to see an iPad on the Formica countertop instead of a more traditional cash register. It was a surreal hint of technology in an otherwise old-fashioned setting.

“That’s all,” Eleanora said, retrieving a five-dollar bill from her wallet as Juana tapped the price into the iPad screen. “And you remember Lyse, my grandniece?”

Juana smiled, her face taking on a beatific glow. “Of course. It’s been a long time. But yes.”

Juana was right. It had been a long time, Lyse realized. At least five years since she’d last been home to visit. For some reason, Eleanora had always made the biyearly trek to see Lyse in Georgia, but never the other way around.

Setting the brown paper-wrapped jar of milk inside the basket of her metal rolling cart, Eleanora headed for the door.

“See you in a few days,” she called back to Juana, the whoosh of the air curtain above the entrance ruffling her short gray hair as she stepped outside.

“Little one,” Juana said, just as Lyse turned to follow Eleanora out the door. “Wait a moment.”

Lyse nodded, uncertain as to what the birdlike woman wanted. She watched as Juana stepped away from the counter, then picked her way through to the back of the store, disappearing into the stockroom. Through the plate-glass window, Lyse kept one eye on Eleanora, who was standing on the sidewalk, adjusting her Windbreaker.

“Here. For you.”

Juana was back, thrusting a cylindrical brown-wrapped package into her hands.

“I don’t—” Lyse started to say, but Juana shook her head.

“It’s a gift. Burn it in the house.”

She smiled at Lyse, her tan skin surprisingly soft and wrinkled under the fluorescent lighting.

“Thank you,” Lyse said.

The package felt awkward in her hands as she left the bodega and stepped out into the heat of the day.

“What did she give you?” Eleanora asked, her sharp eyes glued to the package.

“Don’t know,” Lyse said, shaking her head. “She said to burn it.”

“Hmmp,” Eleanora replied as they continued up Echo Park Avenue, the cart rattling softly as it hit each crack in the sidewalk, the sound lulling in its consistency.

Lyse began to unwrap the package, peeling away the stiff brown paper to reveal the contents nestled inside.

“Interesting,” she said, as she pulled out the long, cylindrical saint’s candle, its smooth glass surface etched with the blue outline of a young woman in a headscarf. A small child sat upon the woman’s lap, its head bowed under the weight of a spiked crown.

“Mother of the Virgin Mary,” Eleanora said, glancing over at the candle.

“You mean Saint Anne?” Lyse murmured, reading the thick block lettering just below the image. “She was the mother of the Virgin Mary? I didn’t know that.”

“She’s also the patroness of unmarried women,” Eleanora snorted. “I think Juana’s trying to tell you something.”

Lyse groaned.

“Great.”

Eleanora smiled as she took Lyse’s arm, leaning on her as they walked.

“Watch out, or you’ll end up an old spinster like me.”

“You’re not that old,” Lyse said, then paused—because this made her think of other things . . . like the fact that Eleanora was too young to be dying.

“You’re sweet,” Eleanora said, patting Lyse’s hand.

They walked on in silence after that, the sun bright above them, Lyse enjoying the exotic smell of the Spanish jasmine that clung from the gates and fences of the houses on Echo Park Avenue.

“Well, should I burn it tonight, then?” Lyse asked suddenly, holding the candle up, surprised at how heavy it felt in her hand.

“Yes, burn it,” Eleanora said, her voice strangely earnest. “Burn it down until there’s nothing left.”

They reached the front entrance to the old bungalow on Curran, the house Lyse had called home the whole of her teenage years, and Eleanora pulled a set of keys from the pocket of her red Windbreaker—even in the heat, her great-aunt professed to being cold.

“I have some business to take care of,” Eleanora said, tucking the keys into Lyse’s hand, their warmth making her palm sweat. “Go inside and take a nap—you look beat.”

Lyse didn’t argue with her great-aunt. She suddenly felt so exhausted she could hardly keep her eyes open. Impulsively, she leaned over and kissed Eleanora’s powdery cheek.

“We need to talk when you get back,” Lyse said, as a yawn escaped her lips.

“Yes, we do,” her great-aunt agreed. “There’s so much to discuss—and so little time left to us.”

“Please, don’t say it like that. I can’t bear it,” Lyse said, pushing back a wave of panic at the thought of her great-aunt’s approaching death. “I just . . . We’ll talk when you get back, okay? About doctors and second opinions . . .”

Eleanora nodded as Lyse trailed off.

“Sleep as much as you can, Bear. I need you at your sharpest tonight.”

Lyse gave her great-aunt a funny look.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s nothing terrible,” Eleanora said, offering Lyse the handle of the metal rolling cart. “It’s good, actually. And I promise we’ll talk about it more when I get back.”

With a forced smile, Lyse took the cart, dragging it with her up the stairs. At the top, she turned back around, but Eleanora was already hurrying down the street, her Windbreaker flashing bloodred in the sparkling light.

From her perch high atop Eleanora’s patio stairs, Lyse was able to look out over Curran Street, at the bungalows and Craftsman homes, the foliage and greenery that peeked out from every garden. Being home after so long made her feel like a teenager again.

I’d forgotten how glorious this place is, she thought—then shivered when something wet landed on the tip of her nose.

Inexplicably, her first thought was blood, but when she looked up at the once-blue sky, she saw it was now a foreboding steel gray—and the splash of wetness was merely a drop of rain. She laughed at her own morbid imagination, then yawned as she rolled the cart toward the front door of Eleanora’s bungalow.

Sleep sounded like the greatest thing in the world.

Devandra

Devandra Montrose woke from an oddly restless slumber knowing that Eleanora was going to call on her. This meant she would definitely do her receiving in the kitchen, where it was more comfortable, and where she could enjoy the aroma of freshly baking candied gingerbread (for her younger daughter’s school bake sale) while she met with the master of the Echo Park coven—of which Dev was a member.

Usually when she was going to do a reading, she set up shop in the converted garage, aka The Mucho Man Cave, that her partner, Freddy, used to host their popular Echo Park Weekend Bar—and the occasional weeknight poker game for his crew of guy friends—but today was different. Today would be about coven business, and, with its cedar-lined walls and industrial-grade forest-green carpeting that stank of peanuts, cigar smoke, and stale beer, The Mucho Man Cave was not the most appropriate setting for that.

Besides, The Mucho Man Cave always seemed a little sad during the week when there were no neighbors crowding around its homemade tiki bar, sipping cold beer as they discussed neighborhood gossip and flirted with one another.

Of course, the old garage always perked up when Dev used it for one of her readings, her saints’ candles and burnished iron censer of smoky sandalwood incense giving the space a rich honey glow and transforming it from a part-time bar and den of poker-playing iniquity into a mysterious world of magical tarot. Though there was always a faint tinge of stale beer underneath the earthy sandalwood, if you knew to smell for it.

Well, if she’d guessed correctly, then The Mucho Man Cave was safe from her machinations today. Eleanora was already more than well acquainted with the spirit world and would have no need for the trappings of the trade, the things she normally employed to make her clientele feel as though they were magically slipping

beyond the veil.

But first there were two children to get to school, a client to consult with on strawberry icing, and a dog that needed a walk before Dev was finally free to get out her well-worn Rider-Waites—the slick yellow cards and their whimsical figures more appealing to her than some of the darker, edgier decks—and prepare herself mentally for the surprise reading.

Everyone knew face value was not what you got with tarot cards. Intuition was the name of the game when it came to fortune-telling—Dev's specialty—and either you were born with the chops or you weren't. Nothing analytical or logical about what she did; it was all in the old gut.

Though her children swore up and down that Dev possessed untold psychic abilities, she was not gifted with telepathy, clairvoyance, or any of the other psychic phenomena they ascribed to her. Not that she let them in on this secret. She needed all the help she could get raising two wily, intelligent little girls—and allowing them to believe their mother had eyes in the back of her head could only help her cause. Sadly, divination was her only gift—which meant she was forced to use good old-fashioned logic to make educated guesses about everything else. In point of fact, she expected her visitor was going to be Eleanora Eames, not because she'd had any portent-bearing dreams but because Eleanora had called Dev's number twice the day before, refusing to leave a message on either attempt. She assumed her friend was well aware of the caller ID feature and just didn't give a damn about leaving hang-ups on people's answering machines—which made Dev think a lecture on the finer points of twenty-first-century telephone etiquette might be in order.

While she waited for her visitor to arrive, Dev set a battered copper kettle on the front eye of the white porcelain O'Keefe and Merritt stove and turned the flame to high, spooning Russian tea into two of her favorite lapis-blue earthenware mugs. The day before, in an attempt to get herself into an autumnal mood, she'd made the first batch of the family favorite fall/winter tea, but now the little potbellied jar full of sugar, Tang, cinnamon, clove, and instant tea mixture sat on the butcher-block countertop looking lost and forlorn in its spot between the aluminum mixer and a vintage owl-shaped cookie jar.

Maybe she wasn't getting the spooky October vibe yet because the house still felt light and airy from its summer incarnation. Spying the row of beige seashells up on the windowsill above the kitchen sink, the ones the girls had collected during a family trip to Laguna Beach in June, Dev decided clearing out the summer bits and bobs would go a long way to getting her into a fall state of mind. Tonight when Freddy got home from work, she'd ask him to drag down the boxes of autumn-themed decorations from the attic, so she could get the house ready for Halloween. She knew her daughters, Marji and Ginny, would fall all over themselves to help her turn the house over—and Freddy was always down for getting into the spooky spirit, setting up a life-size replica of a human skeleton (bought at the yard sale of one of their neighbors, who was a retired biology professor) to sit at the tiki bar and scare the guests who frequented The Mucho Man Cave.

She would personally oversee the hanging of the Halloween pièce de résistance: her great-great-grandmother Lucretia's mourning wreath.

When placed above the mantelpiece of the sitting room fireplace, the horseshoe-shaped wreath—mounted to a disc of muted mother-of-pearl and set behind glass—was a real showstopper. Fashioned by Lucretia's daughters when she died in 1891, it was an eerie sight: one large six-petal flower and four smaller three-petal flowers intricately woven from the strands of Lucretia's own famous raven hair.

Over the years, the mourning wreath had been handed down through the Montrose family from eldest daughter to eldest daughter—with Dev being the latest in the line of succession. When Dev's older daughter, Marjoram, came of age at eighteen, the wreath would pass into her keeping and Dev would no longer be responsible for it. Though she'd be sad to see it go—handling the memento mori always gave her a visceral

thrill—she was proud of the keepsake’s lineage and pleased that her daughter would be part of the long line of women who’d looked after it.

Startled by the near-simultaneous yip of the teakettle and the ring of the doorbell, Dev turned off the gas and trundled over to the mudroom, gratified to see Eleanora’s silhouette shifting behind the café-curtained window. She’d been right about the identity of her visitor.

“I thought you might be dropping by,” Dev said, holding the back door open so her friend could enter.

There was a whoosh as the wind tried to follow Eleanora inside, but Dev closed the door firmly behind them, leaving the wind no recourse but to bang the storm door open and shut in protest.

“Wicked wind. Just started up out of the blue as I was walking over,” Eleanora said, shrugging off her scarlet Windbreaker and hanging it up on one of the wooden pegs that protruded from the beadboard wall.

Dev frowned as a sense of dread so palpable she could taste it washed over her. The short strawberry-blond hairs on the back of her neck prickled to life, and her legs felt unreliable beneath her as the room began to spin. She leaned against the wall, using it to hold herself up, her stomach lurching. She bit her lip hard, the abruptness of the pain taking the edge off her nausea, but even when she closed her eyes, the spinning sensation continued.

Get hold of yourself, she thought, tasting blood on her tongue. You control your body, not the other way around.

Mustering her strength, she pushed the bad feeling away and forced her eyes open. As she did, she found her gaze settling on Eleanora’s scarlet Windbreaker where it hung twisted on its peg in between the shiny primary yellow of Marji and Ginny’s raincoats.

“I see you already have the cards out,” she heard Eleanora saying as she strode past Dev into the kitchen.

As soon as Eleanora crossed the threshold separating the mudroom from the rest of the house, the hum of ambient noise dropped out, replaced by a weighty silence interrupted only by the rise and fall of Dev’s own shallow breathing. A halo of darkness encircled her peripheral vision, limiting her view until all she could see was the scarlet of Eleanora’s Windbreaker, so deep and red and pulsing with life it resembled the ragged flesh of a still-beating heart. Confused, she tried to tear her eyes away from the sight, but her gaze merely slid down to the jacket’s cuff. There she spied a single droplet of glistening liquid, suspended from the cuff’s edge like a translucent red jewel.

Dev watched as it grew in size, liquid from the sodden jacket sluicing down like dozens of small tributaries heading toward the ocean, feeding the droplet until it was so heavy that gravity couldn’t hold it anymore, and it plummeted to Earth.

Strange, Dev thought, her eyes free now to drift over to the window, I didn’t realize it was raining.

But it wasn’t raining—at least not yet. Outside, the sky had grown gray and swollen with the promise of rain, but this promise had not yet been kept.

It’s in the blood.

The phrase resonated in her brain, unbidden, and she shivered.

She returned her gaze to the nylon Windbreaker but was unsurprised to find it no longer nestled in between

the shiny yellow raincoats. In its place, a scarlet arc of arterial blood had been splashed across the mudroom wall, the viscous liquid dripping down the beadboard and onto the floor, where it pooled in a thick circle. Dev swallowed, her mouth dry as old bone, but she didn't panic, just lifted her eyes from the circle of dark liquid on the floor and once more saw the twisted folds of Eleanora's now-dry Windbreaker.

She blinked—sure her eyes were playing tricks on her . . . or were they? She shuddered, realizing the vision for what it was: an omen of very, very bad things to come.

“Are you all right?”

Eleanora's voice startled Dev, and she jumped.

“I just saw . . .” she said, her words trailing off as she turned around to face the older woman, who was standing in the doorway, leaning her gaunt body against the polished white doorframe.

“What did you see?” Eleanora asked, her bloodless lips compressed into a thin line.

“I . . .” Dev began, but faltered as her words failed her. She shrugged helplessly. “I don't know. It was . . . bad, whatever it was. Blood—”

“You saw blood?” Eleanora asked, and Dev nodded.

“Blood, on the wall, by the kids' raincoats. I felt it, too, inside me—and this phrase keeps repeating in my head: It's in the blood.”

Eleanora took a deep breath and visibly relaxed.

“What?” Dev asked. “What does it mean?”

“I've told Lyse that I'm dying, and she's come home. That's what you were seeing. The die is cast.”

“I'm glad you've done it,” Dev said. “Does she know anything about us yet, about the covenant—”

“Not a thing,” Eleanora said. “I've kept all of it from her for so long that it feels strange to finally tell her. I wanted to give her the freedom to go live her own life for as long as I could, but now I need her. The time has come for Lyse to learn who and what we are. I've already spoken to Arrabelle and we'll perform the induction ritual tonight. She's going to let the others know.”

Dev was surprised.

“Tonight?”

“We're running out of time, Devandra,” Eleanora sighed. “You read Marie-Faith's last letter. You know what it means. Why she sent Daniela to us. Things are speeding up and when I die, you will need the fifth. You'll need Lyse's help.”

“Yes, of course,” Dev said. “Freddy has a poker game tonight, but I'll see if he can feed the girls first . . .”

“It's not a question of if, Devandra,” Eleanora said, “but when. Those who betrayed Marie-Faith will come after us and anyone else who stands in their way. They want what we are protecting, and they will do anything to get it.”

As if this answered everything and left no need for further explanation, Eleanora turned on her heel and made her way back to the kitchen. Dev stood alone in the mudroom pondering her friend's last words. She knew Eleanora was right—even if she didn't want to believe it.

It's in the blood.

The phrase sang in her brain again, and Dev found herself repeating it under her breath as she returned to the kitchen, where she found Eleanora standing by the stove, looking expectantly at the teakettle.

"The kettle's hot. Shall I pour us a cup?"

"I'll do it," Dev said, taking the kettle and adding hot water to the mugs before transferring them to the table. "Hope Russian tea is all right?"

"Fine," Eleanora said, carefully settling herself into one of the yellow linen spindle-backed chairs and gently resting her bony elbows on the damask tablecloth.

Dev opened a cabinet and took down a tin of homemade sugar cookies, setting the tin along with two chipped blue plates onto the table. Then she took her seat opposite Eleanora.

She's lost more weight, Dev thought as she watched Eleanora retrieve a cookie—a heart-shaped one with white icing—and hold it in her palm, surveying it. She doubted her friend would eat it. These days Eleanora's appetite was small to the point of being nonexistent, but at least she made a show of trying to eat. It meant she was still fighting the good fight.

"Stop looking at me like that," Eleanora said, raising a silvery eyebrow. "I'm not one of those old cats you keep. I'm not gonna go disappearing under the house just because my appetite's a bit off."

"You're the most blunt person I've ever known," Dev replied. "And how would you know what I was thinking, anyway?"

"Oh, I know exactly what you're thinking. You're an open book as far as I'm concerned," Eleanora said, taking a tentative sip of her tea. "And I may be dying, but I'm not ready to be fitted for my coffin just yet. Lots of things to do before then."

"Well, I wouldn't dream of burying an old bitch before her time," Dev said, grinning at the tartness of her words. Eleanora always brought out her snarky side. One of the things she enjoyed best about their relationship.

"You may think you have a calling for the cards, Devandra, but this is where your true talent lies," Eleanora said, indicating the tea and iced sugar cookies.

Eleanora was right. Dev definitely wasn't your traditional fortune-teller—as evidenced by the fact that she didn't make her living sowing the seeds of fate but by running a small wedding cake business out of her backyard guesthouse/bakery.

"Don't tell Freddy and the kids," Dev said, laughing. "They think I'm Carrie come to life."

"Ha!" Eleanora cackled, setting her tea down. "I bet they do. I bet they do."

Eleanora was a fan of Dev's daughters, Marji and Ginny, and never acted put upon (like a few others Dev could name) when Dev told anecdotes about her family life. For their part, the girls loved their prickly old

Great-Auntie E dearly. They were forever asking to visit Great-Auntie E's magic house where "the big goldfish" lived. The koi pond and red-lacquered wooden footbridge that spanned it made up the vast majority of Eleanora's front yard, along with a well-tended garden filled with fruit and vegetables the whole year long. All these things together meant her house was a lightning rod for the neighborhood children, including Dev's girls.

"Speaking of the cards," Dev said, picking up the deck from the table, her touch instantly warming the cards.

"Let's not speak of them. Let's let them speak to us," Eleanora replied.

"Isn't that what we always do?" Dev said, and then, more circumspect: "And would you like a straight reading? See what the cards say of their own volition, or are we shaping things by asking a few questions?"

"Only one question," Eleanora said, and with a press of her thumb, she broke her cookie into pieces, shards of iced sugar and flour skidding across her plate.

"A simple five-card spread should be pretty elucidating," Dev said, and began to separate out the Major Arcana from the rest of the deck, shuffling only these cards before setting them on the table in front of Eleanora.

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