

REDFERNE WITCHES – BOOK ONE

# Brand of Magic



K M JACKWAYS

Hazel biked around the corner of her street. Leaning on his gate, was her neighbour Joel. He was holding a shovel and his red-checked sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. Next to him was a freshly dug-in sign. His eyes followed her as she coasted to a stop.

“Are you selling up, Joel?” she called.

He wiped his face with the back of his hand and nodded. “But hopefully no one wants her.”

‘She’ was a beautiful section sloping down towards the city, with mature fruit trees, lush native trees and the odd spiky cabbage tree. Hazel could see the roof of the tiny house he had built himself from the verandah of her cottage. On summer evenings with the chirp of the cicadas and a rich fruit scent on the air, she sometimes wondered what the view was like from his place.

“That’s such a shame,” Hazel said. “Because it’s a lovely property. What I can see of it from my place, I mean.”

*Idiot. Stop talking, she thought. It sounded as if she was out peering over the fence on a daily basis.*

He shrugged. “Come and have a look if you want.”

Joel dug the spade into the ground with a stamp of his work boot. Then he leaned over and unlatched the gate. She did have an odd curiosity to see what the property was like and if it was as beautiful inside as it appeared from her side of the fence.

“I have got a few minutes before I leave for work.” She dropped her bike at the front door of her cottage and took off her helmet. She was suddenly aware of her messy hair, still dripping from the pool.

Joel held the gate open for her. She sensed a certain melancholy from him as she passed by and looked up into his face, but he just smiled a little. That was all she got from most people these days.

The way she explained it to her cousin, was that she sensed thoughts like a song only half-heard. The lyrics weren’t clear and neither was the melody, but you could get the beat. And if you knew the person well enough, you could fill in the blanks.

On the right was an old garage covered in convolvulus and ivy, the wood warped from the weeds. Joel’s tiny house was a two-story box facing down the hill towards the city. They rounded the side of the house and she saw an old armchair and a shiny wooden box, in a nest of sawdust. Up close, she saw that the timberwork along the verandah had beautiful detailing. She remembered that he used to be a joiner but she never saw him leaving the house in the mornings.

*“What do you do for a job?” Hazel asked. He frowned and a lock of brown hair fell over his forehead. Rubbing the stubble beneath his lower lip, he looked at her like she was a puzzle.*

“I mean, it’s fine if you don’t,” she said. “Work.”

People often said she was a strange mixture of sensitive and direct. It probably stemmed from seeing the disconnect between people’s thoughts and what they said. In her late teens, she despaired of ever being able to trust anyone. It had thrown her into a dark place for a few years. But the pain of those feelings, and her ability, had faded a little as she grew older. Still, this seemed like a question he didn’t want to answer.

He sighed, but he looked like he was smothering a smile. “I have a wee business selling wood things, just at the markets.”

He indicated the box, and she realized it was a linen chest. She ran her fingers over the smooth wood, admiring the trefoil carved into the sides in exquisite detail.

“It’s pretty easy with a scroll saw,” Joel said. “Come on, I’ll show you the rest.”

He walked down the hill and disappeared behind a row of lemonwood trees. Hazel trotted to catch up, pulling her jacket around her. She pushed through the overgrown bushes and emerged into a fruit tree grove, the leaves golden and russet. She picked her way around the piles of rotting feijoas and apples.

Joel hadn’t stopped and she followed him down to the end of the orchard. The property must be twice the size of her garden. To their left, an old-fashioned well was nestled into the corner next to the fence. She could see a few late

white flowers of the old kanuka tree in her own garden over the top.

Beneath a flowering kowhai sat an old dinghy, oars resting on the grass. Inside, green cushions invited her to rest. The name, Explorer, was written in peeling paint on the side. Hazel touched the side of the boat and her breath caught. Through a gap in the trees, she saw the little boxes that were the city and beyond, the blue harbour curved around beneath the peninsula.

Now Joel was smiling and watching her to see her reaction.

“Is this where you bring all the girls?” she asked. His face fell and she realized that was the wrong thing to say. He rubbed the stubble on his chin with a rasping sound.

Just then, they heard someone calling from the street. Hazel sent a silent thank you to whoever it was for rescuing her right then.

Joel was already halfway up the slope with his longer stride and she hurried to catch up. A man was waiting by the verandah. He had dark hair sticking up in spikes, as if he had run his hand through it.

“How are ya?” Joel called. “Long time, Hills.”

“I was just driving past and saw the sign up.” The man leaned against the verandah post. “Where are you off to?”

“Not sure. Hoping it doesn’t sell so I can have some time to get back on track, to be honest.” Joel looked down at the ground and kicked the toe of his boot into the grass.

Hills nodded at her. “Who’s this?”

“My neighbour,” Joel said and turned to Hazel. “And this is my cousin, Scott Hills.”

As Hazel reached for Scott’s hand, a cool pain spread in the knuckles of her fingers, like a sudden arthritis. But his hand was firm and warm and she shook it. She covertly rubbed her hand with her other one and the warmth melted the pain away.

She couldn’t tell anything like good or evil. The world was not so simple as that - but she knew the chill of dark secrets when she felt it. Hazel tried probing further with her senses but was too out of practice.

“Have you got half an hour to chat?” Scott asked, and Joel inclined his head at her.

“I better go get ready for work,” she said. “Thanks for showing me around.” She pulled out her phone. *Shit! Fifteen minutes. Just time for coffee.*

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She flicked on the jug’s switch and waited, staring out the window. Her tiny verandah was weighed down by wisteria and miniature roses, all browning in the dry autumn. The rusting white metal table was loaded with plant pots and driftwood. An orange cat slunk beneath one of the chairs and curled itself down in a sunny spot, blinking at her balefully.

Cats were always hanging around. She blamed it on her ex, Hadley, a six-foot-two kitchen witch with a rat familiar. He was not fond of cats and therefore attracted every cat in Otago to brush up against his leg. The cats didn’t even mind her old dog, Bonnie, slumped at the moment in a corner of the couch. Bonnie, her familiar, was a ten-year-old husky with neck fur so soft, Hazel’s hand disappeared into it. If sarcasm was a sport, Bonnie would beat even her aunt Briar.

The jug boiled and Hazel poured hot water into the plunger. The rich smell of her favourite roast curled up around her.

She wiped the remnants of moisture from the inside of her kitchen windows and dusted under her pot plants with a sigh. Brown stems curled down over the sides. They were still alive, barely.

“Come on, come on.” She willed the coffee to percolate through the hot water, disappointed about not being able to read the man’s mind next door. She had not practised magic for almost three years. What had she been doing for all that time? Working? Avoiding the gardening?

A knocking came from directly above her. Her Grannie Em, may she some day rest in peace, was always a little

active at this time of day. Hazel remembered why she had not had a relationship recently. Working was a lot easier than explaining *all of that* to someone new.

She checked the time and saw a video call from her mum was coming through. There was no time now, so she hit the red button with a guilty twinge. She whacked the lid onto her reusable cup, grabbed her linen bag and set off down the hill to the council buildings where she worked.

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At work, Hazel found herself at the coffee machine more often than she should. She couldn't concentrate on the blog post she was writing that morning for their new branding. She sipped her coffee and thought of the garden next door. It was beautiful and made her feel bad about her mix of overgrown and under-watered plants.

Her friend, June, called her over to her desk to help decide where she should go on holiday. June ran her hand through her short, crimson hair, and a little silver regrowth shone through.

"I need somewhere lovely," she said. "It's all still pretty new for me and Brendon."

June radiated anxiety. Hazel wanted her to have a perfect holiday with her new partner. She deserved it. She looked at cribs in Arrowtown and Queenstown with June and nodded along, although she privately thought they didn't need a five-bedroom cottage, when only one room would be used.

On the way back, Christo, her boss's boss, bailed her up to talk about the work she had done on the 'People of the Octagon' campaign. He said she was "right on the money", telling personal stories of why people moved to Dunedin and asked her if she was free to do some work for him over the next few days.

Was she very busy? She had to completely re-design the website for the new branding over the next two weeks. But you didn't say no to Christo. Hazel wasn't sure she had ever said more than two words to him before. He did the odd talk or training session, but she would have sworn he had never even noticed her before today.

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Come and see me in my office tomorrow first thing," he said.

For the rest of the day, Hazel's mind raced. She couldn't concentrate. So she spread papers all over her desk and surfed the internet.

What was Joel's business all about? She searched his name and 'wooden furniture' and looked for a website. Hazel chewed on her bottom lip. The background was a maroon colour with white writing. She had to squint to read it, with run-on sentences describing the wooden chests as 'a nice, decorated box to put things in'. It didn't even have online shopping integrated. It was a disaster.

By the time she finished work that day, Hazel had changed her mind three times about whether she would get involved with Joel's problems. It was only when June sent the fifth holiday house through by email, that Hazel decided she would get Joel's online presence looking professional if it killed her. She thought it just might.

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Hazel let herself through the wooden gate in the chilly dusk.

"Joel?" She called out as she walked around the side of the house. A grey cat jumped off the armchair and walked away.

She knocked on the door. There were no windows at the front so she put her ear up to the door. She couldn't hear anything - or feel any thoughts inside.

She wasn't sure why but she tried the door knob. It turned and the door opened inwards. The light was on in the tiny kitchen but Joel was nowhere to be seen. Her eye fell on the table where a dark red business card sat at a haphazard angle. She stepped in and picked it up: 'Scott Hills, Hydra Developments'.

"Hello," a voice said from behind her. Joel's frame filled up the doorway. Damn, he must have snuck up like a cat. And here she was, caught in his house. Heat flowed up through Hazel's cheeks. He stared at her through narrowed eyes, his arms crossed.

"I came over to help but you didn't answer the door," she trailed off, lamely.

"I was out," he said, still squinting at her. "Help with what?"

"I know this looks really bad. But after we chatted this morning..." *I couldn't stop thinking about you and your work.* She took a deep breath and mentally slapped herself in the face.

"Well, it sounded to me like you really don't want to have to sell this place," she said. "Would that be right?"

He let out a long breath. After what seemed like a really long time, he bent his head under the door frame and stepped past the table. He flicked on the jug and offered her a hot drink.

"Yes, a drink would be great." She sat on one of the benches by the table, fiddling with the card.

"Do you always just go into other people's houses?"

"Only when they live next door," she said. "And they need my help."

"Herbal tea alright?" He asked. At her nod, he pulled out some surprisingly fancy teacups and saucers from a hidden cupboard. He dropped a tea bag into each and poured the hot water, sending delightful fragrant smells into the small room.

"Chamomile and ginger." He shrugged his shoulders a few times, as if to shake off a weight.

She wrapped her fingers around the cup. Chamomile and ginger were known to help with relaxation and getting to sleep - he was full of surprises.

"So I am guessing you are having money problems?"

"What gave you that idea?" he said and laughed bitterly. "I'll be fine. How long have you lived next door anyway?"

She took a sip and the soothing warmth slipped down her throat. He really didn't like talking about this. She decided to change tack.

"Ah, about four years, I think. It's my aunt's place." She picked up one of the coasters on the table, admiring the way the warm wood caught the light. It was carved in the shape of a kakapo, complete with a chipped-out beak and eyes.

"The wooden things you make are beautiful." She waved the kakapo around. "I can help you sell more by working on your online presence if you like." Hazel said. "*That is what I do for a job.*"

"Cheers for that, but I already have a site," Joel said. "Those I just made for fun."

"I can improve it a little for you."

He waved a hand. "It's all good. My customers know they can find me at the market anyway."

Hazel gripped onto the delicate cup handle and to her dismay, noticed the tea bubbling up from the bottom. Curls of steam spiraled off into the air. He was really quite frustrating and she wasn't keeping herself controlled.

She sipped the rest of her boiling hot tea in silence and excused herself to go and make dinner when she was finished. If he didn't want her help, fine.

That night, she lay in bed, trying not to move because she didn't want to disturb Bonnie. The dog was a warm lump in the middle of the bed.

Joel really annoyed her and she felt like it was her fault. She wasn't even sure what bugged her so much. Was it the fact that he didn't want her help? Or was it that he didn't believe she could help him?

*Stubborn fool, she thought. It didn't help that she couldn't tell what he was thinking.*

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