

Ring of the Witch Bells

by Juliet Robinson

‘Hello.’

A woman’s voice—clear and warm.

The door slams, and the little witch bells tinkle. Kitty starts to bark, though only from the sofa; that old dog’s days of running at a knock on the door are done. Raven, though—she’s up and away. A scramble of paws on the scuffed wooden floor. The scuffling is half her work.

It’s less than a minute before I’m downstairs. Maybe thirty seconds. I’m already heading that way, empty cup in hand.

Raven’s at the door, all excitement. She loves people and thinks they love her. The door is shut. The hall is empty. The woman who called out the greeting is nowhere to be seen. Kitty still barks from the sofa, though there’s no warning in her voice.

Thinking it must be my sister, I head toward the kitchen. En route, I pass the window that looks out onto the overgrown drive. It’s empty. No car, no delivery van, no person heading back toward the road. So, yes, it’s likely my sister. She’ll be in the kitchen; the kettle will be filled and set to boil.

Only the kitchen is empty. No steam rises from the kettle. Raven trots into the room, her tail still wagging expectantly. I touch my hand to the kettle; it’s cold. I lift it, and the weight tells me there’s enough water in there for two cuppas. I click the kettle on, place my mug on the counter, and throw a teabag into it.

Raven trots to the back door, sniffs at it, then turns to me and whines.

‘Where is she, girl?’

Opening the cupboard, I pull out a cup for my sister, add the required rooibos teabag, and then turn my attention to the back door, where Raven waits. I press the handle and pull the door, but it doesn’t budge. Locked tight.

‘Well, she didn’t go out there.’

I return to the hall, Raven trotting at my heels, her snout bumping against my calf. It’s humid and musty here. It smells like sodden coats hung out to dry. A comforting scent of wet wool, worn waxed coats, and damp earth. It speaks of autumn dog walks. The smell is fresh and sharp. Recent.

Kitty stops her huffing from the sofa with a gravelly grunt.

I try the front door. Like the back door, it too is locked. I take the key from the hook, its worn metal familiar in my palm, and place it in the lock. Beside me, Raven’s tail knocks against the wall as she prepares to greet whoever is on the other side of the oak barrier.

A turn of the key. The smooth shifting of the mechanism, the soft clank of the bolt drawing back. I press the door handle down and pull.

The door swings inward. The witch bells chime. Wards against unwanted spirits and negative energies—and practical, too: little voices declaring that someone has crossed the threshold.

Raven bursts past me, keen to be the first member of our welcome party. The porch is empty. She spins in confused circles, turns to me, tilts her head expectantly, and lets out a puff of disappointment.

‘I heard her, too.’

The drive stretches before me, thick with weeds and narrowed by the grasping branches of overhanging trees. Everything is wet, soaked through by last night’s heavy rain. No damp footsteps mark the worn flagstones of the porch.

Behind me, in the stillness of the house, the electric kettle snaps off with a sharp, decisive click.

We return to the hall and close the door, causing the bells to ring again. I know I heard them less than five minutes ago. And a woman. Clear as day.

Back in the kitchen, I make tea for one, then head to the back garden. Evening is falling into night, the soft edges of dusk lengthening into deep shadow. The garden is another world, strange in its wildness yet familiar—an ancient memory held in its primeval abandon. There’s excitement in this untamed place, a thrumming energy that tickles the hairs on the nape of my neck. Not frightening; the obverse of that coin.

Raven starts to patrol the borders of the garden. Her dark coat shifts her into the shadows; I can’t see her, but I can hear her passage as she goes. The knock of her heavy tail as it strikes a branch sets a cascade of raindrops pattering onto the garden’s heavy foliage.

I settle on the stone bench and look back at the house, which sits square against the bruised sky. The kitchen window bleeds light, and through its pane, I can see the extra cup, still empty, still waiting.

Raven's rustling comes to an abrupt halt. She lets out a low chuff. Not a bark of alarm, but the soft greeting she makes when someone she knows enters a room.

The cold of the bench cuts through my clothes. I tighten my grip on the warm mug and watch the spot where the shadows meet the garden path. Out of the darkness drifts the faint, sharp scent of cold autumn rain and wet wool, clear and unmistakable.

'Hello.'

The voice is soft, warm against my ear, but still, I am alone on the bench.