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A GRAND
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A GRAND MIDLIFE

A LIFE AFTER MAGIC MYSTERY

WITCHING AFTER FORTY

BOOK SEVENTEEN

L.A. BORUFF

LIA DAVIS



A Grand Midlife

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*This book is dedicated to Donna Antonio and Lillian Annette.
Congratulations to Donna and Lillian's mother Jimmi Rae for
naming Baby Butt! <3 Read ahead to see the wonderful names
they picked out.*

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AVA

SHOCKED BEYOND ALL REASON, I stopped mid-step, causing Olivia to slam into my back.

My bestie yelped, walking around me to stand at my side. “What in the ever-loving, fire-burning, *what-has-my-father-done-now* heck?”

We’d just gotten back from Rune Academy, tying up last-minute things and checking on how the summer program was going. The godmothers had just started up their classes. Zoey had gone with us, but she’d left about an hour ago after getting a message. Someone from her biological family, a cousin, had found her on social media and reached out. That was something Zoey and I hadn’t thought of. We’d have to deal with it soon.

I pointed to a new building in the once-empty yard between Luci’s house and Winston, my magical Victorian.

“There’s an extra freaking house in my backyard.” It was smaller than Winston and much smaller than Luci’s gothic mansion, but it was still a house that hadn’t been there this morning when we left for the academy.

Despite not being all that big, the house was lavish, with stone siding and big bay windows and a chimney puffing out wispy trails of smoke.

Completely and utterly over Luci’s crap, I stormed over to the monstrosity of a house just as Lucifer himself sauntered out of my backdoor, munching on a sandwich stacked with all the fixings. Was that from *my* fridge?

“Dude,” I called. “Your house is right there.” I jabbed my finger at his pristine gothic mansion, the one, for the record, he’d never asked permission to put in my expansive side yard.

He blinked innocently, then ignored my comment and gestured toward the new house. “Don’t you love it? It’s a pool house.”

I pursed my lips and glared at the devil, trying not to let my nostrils flare too much as Olivia snickered at my side. “We. Don’t. Have. A. Pool,”

Luci paused mid-chew and glanced around. “Oh, shoot. Yeah, I guess we don’t.”

The infuriating devil snapped his fingers and whoosh. There was a huge in-ground pool, rimmed with slate tile and tropical plants. Steam rose from the heated water into the air.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Times like this I wondered how was this my life. Not that I was complaining, exactly, because my life was pretty freaking wonderful, but this man-god-mischief maker was pretty dang annoying sometimes. “Luci, it’s cold most of the year here. A pool is useless.”

“Hmm.” Luci tapped a long finger against his chin in thought. With another snap, a retractable pool cover emerged, sleek and state-of-the-art. “There, now it’ll stay a balmy eighty-five degrees. You’re welcome.”

My eye twitched. Beside me, Olivia gave a low whistle before she giggled and said, “Dang, Dad. Those are crazy expensive. Like twenty grand at least.”

Lucifer waved her off. “Oh, I confiscated it from a drug lord in South America. He won’t miss it. It’s always hot there.”

Good grief. Before I could comment further, the pool house door creaked open, and a man shuffled out. He had kind of wild hair, mostly brown. It was wavy more than curly and desperately needed a cut. Not a trim. A big cut. He also had a wild beard, long and untamed. Wild Mountain Man was all that came to mind.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I grumbled to Lucifer. Then I smiled as sweetly as I could at the stranger and held out my hand. “Hi. I’m Ava. I own this property. Who are you?”

The man studied me for a moment, then glanced at Olivia before settling his attention on Luci, who then introduced our new neighbor. “This is the werewolf that the kids and I saved in Australia last month. Now he has a place to stay, or any of your guests.” He beamed. “I figure you’ll want a place for in-laws and whatnot.”

The *kids* Luci was referring to were Michelle, Wallie, Zoey, and Larry. They’d found the werewolf in the woods close to a cabin made of candy while they were on Wallie and Michelle’s babymoon—their last vacation before the baby arrives.

“He can’t remember his name,” Luci added.

Olivia nudged me as the werewolf approached. “Hey, maybe Sam can get a read on him, find out something about his past.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought Sam didn’t have control over his psychic powers yet.”

“Worth a shot, though, right? Plus, it’ll be good practice for him.” Olivia pulled her phone out and called Sam.

With his vampire speed, Olivia’s husband and my lifelong best friend, Sam, arrived within seconds.

Olivia asked, “Think you could do a reading on our new friend here? See if you get any hits on his identity?”

Sam frowned, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I dunno Liv. It’s not like I can just turn it on and off. This psychic stuff is still new to me.”

“Please?” Olivia clasped her hands together pleadingly and batted her lashes at him. “Just try.”

“Yeah, c’mon Dad, you got this,” Little Sammie popped up beside us eagerly.

I jumped and clutched my heart. Geez. I did not know where the kid came from. My guess was from my house, since he enjoyed hanging out with Zoey and Larry.

Sam sighed. “All right, all right, I’ll try.”

He turned to the werewolf, who’d watched the exchange curiously. Sam stepped forward, and the werewolf widened his

eyes, looking like he was ready to run. Sam held up his hands. “Easy. I have to touch you to get a good reading. This is still new to me, but I won’t hurt you.”

After another second, the werewolf nodded and stood still while Sam placed his palms on either side of the wolf’s head, closing his eyes in concentration.

We waited with bated breath. A little part of me was proud of Sam for embracing his new powers as easily as he had, although it didn’t surprise me all that much. We’d grown up together, and he’d always known about my witchy side.

After a long moment, Sam dropped his hands. “Sorry, nothing. It was just static.”

Little Sammie tilted his head. “That’s sad how you can’t remember your name.” Before we could stop him, Sammie grabbed the werewolf’s hand.

“Your name is Ross,” he stated confidently.

The werewolf blinked in surprise. Heck, we all blinked in surprise.

“Ross.” He breathed in and out a few times and blinked. “Actually, I think you might be right. That sounds familiar. It feels right.”

Olivia tousled Sammie’s hair. “Very good.”

I grinned at my little buddy. It made sense that Sammie’s powers were more potent than his father’s, given that Sammie was part psychic, part fae, and part whatever Lucifer was. God? Not *the* God, but a god.

Pointing to Winston, my old magical Victorian house, I said, “C’mon, let’s go talk with Zoey about her cousin and figure out what to do with that bombshell.”

Luci followed Ross into the pool house as Olivia and I entered my house through the conservatory. When we entered the kitchen, the wonderful savory aroma of spaghetti surrounded us. Michelle stood at the stove, stirring an enormous pot of sauce. Wallie hovered close by. “Come on, honey. Please sit down and let me finish dinner.”

Deciding to let my son learn on his own to not bother a pregnant woman who was clearly nesting, I focused on my two adopted kids, Zoey and Larry.

They sat at the kitchen table, waiting for us. Zoey's tiger ears and tail were out, and she'd taken off the contacts she wore in public that masked her yellow cat eyes. Her tail twitched from side to side. She was stressing over what to do about her extended family who, until earlier today, thought she was dead.

Zoey *was* dead, technically. I'd animated her as well as all the kids who'd died in the shifter fight ring that Olivia, Drew, Sam, and I had taken down a little over a year ago. I'd animated the kids to find out who their families were so I could give them some kind of closure. Many of their relatives hadn't known where their kids had gone.

Zoey had told us she didn't have any family, and that she'd wanted to stay with me. So here we were, over a year later. Gods, it was surreal that it'd been that long already.

"Hey, guys," Zoey said.

I poured four mugs of hot water and set them on the table after putting a chamomile tea bag in each.

Sliding into the seat across from Zoey, I met her gaze. "So, about your cousin reaching out," I began gently. "How are you feeling?"

Zoey bit her lip, looking down. "I don't know. Part of me wants to talk to her, find out what happened after I ran away. But another part..."

I reached across to squeeze her hand. "You're scared," I finished for her. "Scared they'll reject you, or that you'll find out something you don't want to know."

Zoey nodded, eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "What if they're the ones who killed my parents? Or they didn't even look for me?"

The pain in her voice broke my heart. I wished I could erase the trauma of her past. As powerful as I was, time travel wasn't something in my bag of tricks.

“I can’t promise it won’t hurt,” I whispered. “But don’t you think it’s better to know the truth?”

Zoey stared into her tea silently.

“You mentioned your parents were shot,” Olivia prompted gently. “Did you see who did it?”

Zoey shook her head, her tiger ears drooping. “No. It happened so fast. One minute we were having dinner, the next there were gunshots. I hid, but my parents didn’t get up. I shifted, and as a tiger somehow I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were dead. I ran out the back door and kept running. For days, weeks maybe. I was so scared.”

She took a shaky breath. “Eventually, some humans found me. I guess they thought I was just a regular tiger. They took me to this big cat rescue place. Honestly, it wasn’t so bad at first. I got to be around other tigers. But then...”

She trailed off again, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. What horrors had this poor girl endured?

Larry wrapped an arm around her, drawing her closer to him. The poor guy looked as helpless as I felt.

I moved to kneel beside her, enveloping Zoey in a fierce hug. Larry came with her until we were tangled in a three-person hug. “It’s okay. You’re safe now. Whatever happened, we’ll get through it together.”

Zoey clung to me, body shaking with sobs. I held her until the tears slowed, stroking her hair.

“Sweetie, I know this is hard,” I whispered. “But don’t you want to find out what really happened that night? Why your family thought you died too?”

Zoey lifted her head, yellow cat-eyes glistening. “I do, but it’s scary. What if whoever killed my parents is still out there?”

I took her hands in mine. “Then we’ll face them together. Me, Drew, Olivia, Sam, Michelle, Wallie, Larry—we’re all here for you. I even think Luci would do anything to keep you safe as well.”

Zoey managed a small smile. “You’re right. I should at least talk to my cousin, see what she knows.”

I squeezed her hands encouragingly. We both looked up as Michelle waddled to the table, one hand supporting her pregnant belly. “Ava’s right. And I’m sure Baby Butt will help to protect her Aunt Zoey.”

Zoey laughed softly. “I’m not sure I want my family to explode like that evil witch did.”

Yeah, that had been unexpected. Wallie and Michelle had gotten into a lot of trouble in Australia on their babymoon. Olivia and I got there just in time, but we ended up being unnecessary. Baby Butt had exploded the dark witch from the womb. My granddaughter was going to be a powerful witch one day. And more than likely a handful to raise. It was a good thing that Michelle and Wallie had an enormous family to help.

“I wanted to make dinner for everyone, but this one insisted on doing it,” Wallie said, kissing Michelle’s cheek. She swatted him playfully.

“I gotta keep busy, or I’ll go crazy waiting for this little one.” Michelle grinned, then added, “Dinner is ready. We’re doing buffet style tonight.”

After everyone had full plates, we sat down to eat. Someone was missing. “Hey, where’s Ian?”

“Oh, he said he wasn’t hungry,” Michelle replied through a mouthful of pasta. “More for us.”

I frowned. That was odd. Ian was usually the first one at the table.

The ringing of my phone interrupted my thoughts. “Oh, it’s Drew.” I answered it, putting it on speaker. “Hi, Honey. How’s the investigation going? You’re on speaker, by the way.”

Drew’s voice echoed through the kitchen, along with Lily’s enthusiastic hellos. “We must have just missed you at the Rune Academy,” Drew said. “We just left.”

“We did too, recently. We must’ve been there at the same time and didn’t realize it.” He and Lily had been called in to investigate a murder at the godmother training center in one wing of Rune Academy. My parents had told Olivia and me about it moments before we left. Of course, at the same time, Drew had texted me to let me know he wouldn’t be home for a few days. I didn’t know how I was going to survive without him.

On the flip side, I got my bed again.

After we chatted for a few minutes, Drew hung up. I looked at Olivia. “Where’s Phira? I haven’t seen her in a few days.”

“She’s having a blast in Faerie with Jess and Devan.” Olivia twirled pasta onto her fork. “Might even stay the whole summer.”

After dinner, I found Ian sitting alone on the back porch steps, staring up at the night sky. Slivers of moonlight illuminated his brooding face.

“Hey.” I leaned against the railing. “You okay? You’ve seemed a little off lately.”

He stood and looked at me. “Nothing.” Then he went inside without another word.

Nothing, my big toe. There was definitely something going on with him, but I wasn’t really close enough to force the issue. I’d have to remember to mention it to Drew the next time I talked to him.

OLIVIA

AS I LOADED the dishwasher the next night with Sammie's and my plates from dinner, Sam let out a heavy sigh. He'd been researching his family history with little luck.

"Still nothing?" I kept my tone light as I started the dishwasher.

Sam ran a hand through his hair. "Nope. I just wish I understood my powers better. It's like I have this unwieldy thing inside me that could burst out at any moment." He met my gaze.

I dried my hands and went over to rub his shoulders reassuringly. "I know. We'll figure this out." An idea struck me. "Why don't we go see Jeanne Maclay at the academy? She's the expert on psychic abilities. And classes are surely done for the day by now, so if we hurry, we can catch her before she goes home for the weekend."

Sam's eyes lit up with hope. "That's brilliant. Maybe she can give me some guidance on how to manage all this." He gestured wildly at his head.

I smiled. "Exactly. I'll call Zoey to watch Sammie while we're gone."

I picked up my phone. After two rings, the sweet dead tiger picked up. "Hey Zoey, sorry for the late notice, but could you come over and watch Sammie for a little bit? Sam and I need to make a quick trip to the academy."

"Sure, no problem," Zoey chirped, her voice bright and cheerful through the phone. "I'd love to spend some time with

my favorite little man. I'll head on over."

I smiled as I hung up, thankful for such a willing and eager babysitter on short notice. Zoey doted on Sammie as if he was her own little brother.

Soon after, the doorbell rang, announcing Zoey's arrival. Sam and I gave Sammie big hugs and kisses goodbye.

I ran through a quick list of instructions—bedtime, snacks, emergency numbers—which Zoey waved off. "We'll be fine. Now go," she said with a playful shooing motion.

With our son in excellent hands, Sam and I headed out into the deepening dusk, off to the academy to hopefully gain some clarity around his emerging psychic abilities. I slid my hand into Sam's, giving it a supportive squeeze as we set off.

As we stepped through the shimmering portal into the academy, I gave Sam's hand another reassuring squeeze. "We'll figure this out," I said gently.

We navigated the halls of the Rune Academy until we found Jeanne's classroom. She was busy setting up for next week's classes, arranging crystals on desks and scribbling notes on the chalkboard. Her short black hair framed her face, and she hummed cheerfully as she worked, occasionally moving items around the room with her mind.

"Hey, Jeanne," I called out, catching her attention. "We need your help."

"Olivia, Sam." She jumped slightly and chuckled. "What brings you here?" Jeanne asked, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

Sam explained his predicament, detailing his newfound psychic abilities that seemed to have unlocked when he turned into a vampire. I chimed in with examples of what Sam and Sammie had done so far, hoping it would shed some light on the situation. "Sammie has dream visions. He knew where our friend was when he went missing and no one else could find him. Ava even did several different locating spells, but Sammie had a dream and knew right where he was."

“Interesting,” Jeanne mused. “I think I have a few ideas on how to help. Let’s start by running some tests, and then I’ll teach you some basic exercises to gain better control.”

I glanced over at Sam, who nodded in agreement. “That’s not all,” he chimed in. “When we were placed into a dream world without magic by a witch, and I didn’t go fully under her spell. Somehow, my psychic powers seemed to protect me from the worst of it.”

“Very curious indeed,” Jeanne said, tapping her chin. “Are there other psychics in your family?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “While going through my mom’s ancestry research, I found out that my seven-times great grandmother, Cassandra Thompson, was a psychic.”

“Ah, Cassandra Thompson,” Jeanne exclaimed and leaned forward. “Her name is quite famous in psychic circles. She was a powerful woman who made significant contributions to our understanding of psychic abilities. How fascinating that you’re related to her. It is odd, though, that the power should surface in you, a male descendant. It’s only been known to pass down to the females.”

“Could it have anything to do with him being turned into a vampire?” I tried to make sense of the situation.

“Perhaps,” Jeanne replied thoughtfully. “The combination of supernatural forces at play could have caused an unexpected awakening of his latent psychic powers.”

“Can you help us?” Sam asked, his voice tinged with hope.

“Of course,” Jeanne said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll do everything in my power to help you both understand and control your abilities.”

“Thank you, Jeanne.” Relief washed over me.

“Could my transformation into a vampire and Olivia’s Fae heritage have something to do with our son’s psychic abilities?” Sam asked, looking at Jeanne for answers.

“Very likely,” she replied, her gaze flicking between the two of us. “Fae power could have unlocked the psychic power from

your side of the family, allowing it to manifest in Sammie. It could explain why his abilities are so powerful.”

“Is there a way I can learn to control and better understand these powers?” Sam inquired earnestly.

“Of course,” Jeanne smiled warmly. “I actually run a psychic powers for beginners’ class here at the academy—granted, it’s mostly children who attend, but I believe you’d still find it beneficial. The summer session is starting soon, which tends to have far fewer students than the fall semester. It would be an excellent opportunity for you to learn more about your abilities.”

“Thank you, Jeanne,” Sam said gratefully, his eyes shining with hope. “I’ll take you up on that offer.”

We chatted a bit more before it was time to leave. As we walked toward the portaling room, I glimpsed a fuzzy white tail disappearing around a corner. “What is that cat doing here?”

Sam chuckled. “Who knows what she is up to?”

Curiosity piqued, we followed her, but when we turned the corner, she was gone.

“Should we search for her?” Sam asked.

I shook my head. “No, let’s leave her be. If she gets stuck at the academy, that’s on her. She’s resourceful enough to find her way back.”

Sam agreed reluctantly. He hated leaving any loose ends, but sometimes, it was best to let things be. Lucy could handle herself just fine in the academy. If not, then she’d be sure to let us all know about it when she returned home.

With one last look down the empty hallway, we continued our way to the portaling room, hearts lighter with the newfound knowledge and hope Jeanne had given us.

“Since we’re on this side of the castle, let’s go check on the renovations,” I suggested to Sam. He nodded in agreement, and we made our way up a few floors to find where Beth,

John, and a couple of teachers were magically renovating a part of the castle.

As we approached, a wall crashed down right in front of us with no warning. The noise startled me, and out of shock, I froze the wall with my Fae powers. Pieces of the stone wall floated in midair, suspended by my magic.

“Whoa, Olivia, nice save,” John called, grinning as he surveyed my handiwork. He carefully stepped through the floating pieces and stopped. “Can you hold them there a few more seconds?” he asked. “There’s something embedded in one of the larger pieces of stone.” He plucked it from the rock—an amulet.

I let the stones float to the ground, but the moment John touched the amulet, Sam groaned and clutched his head. “Ugh, I just got this horrible feeling washing over me.” He pressed his hand against the wall as if to steady himself.

“Are you okay?” I asked, worried as I clutched his arm.

Sam blinked a few times, then straightened up. “Yeah, it’s gone now. Went as fast as it came. Must’ve been a psychic fluke,” he said dismissively.

Leaving John and Beth to the renovations, I opened a portal, and we walked through into our kitchen. I looked out the window and saw Luci and Ross stepping out of the pool house.

Leaning my head out the kitchen door, I waved to them.

“Hi, Olivia. Sam,” Luci said smoothly, a knowing glint in his eyes.

Sam and I crossed the yard to see what was going on. Ross looked twitchy, like his skin was too tight or he was just uncomfortable.

What the heck?

Oh, yeah. The full moon was coming tonight. “Feeling all right, Ross?” I tried not to sound too concerned.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he stammered a bit, trying to regain his composure. “Just, you know, the full moon.”

“Ah, right.” I nodded sympathetically. “How’s that going to go?” I glanced at my father with an eyebrow up.

Luci patted Ross on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll be taking him to Hell for the next few days. That way, he can avoid the worst of the transformation.”

“Thanks.” Ross looked relieved for a second, but then he started getting even more twitchy. Lucifer placed a hand on his shoulder and they vanished.

Sam glanced at me. “We thought vampires were bad.”

I chuckled in agreement. Werewolves were a whole new ballgame. Nobody knew much about them yet.

“Finally home.” I sighed, stretching my arms above my head as we walked through the door and into the living room.

“Mommy,” Sammie rushed toward us, his little face lit up with excitement. “Guess what happened while you were gone?”

“Let me guess.” I scooped him up into my arms. “You and Zoey had a dance party in the living room, complete with disco lights and cat backup singers?”

“Close,” he giggled. “Zoey let me bake cookies with magic,”

“Delicious and educational.” Sam raised an eyebrow. “I’m almost jealous we missed it.”

“Can we go see the cookies?” I set Sammie down and ruffled his hair. “I could use a sugar fix after today.”

“Race you there,” Sammie shouted, dashing toward the kitchen before I could even take a step.

“Slow down, kiddo,” Sam called teasingly. Sam was faster than any of us, but he always let Sammie win the race, of course.

“Never,” Sammie’s laughter echoed down the hall as Zoey and I followed at a decidedly more leisurely pace. When we stepped into the kitchen, Sam and Sammie were sitting at the table, munching on chocolate chip cookies that were shaped into cats and bats.

A few weeks ago, Phira had shown Sammie how to bake with magic and the little guy practiced every chance he got. It surprised me that the kitchen wasn't a floury, sugary mess.

"Save one for me," I warned them, grabbing a cookie for myself and taking a seat next to Sam. "So, what's the verdict? Are our baking skills in danger of being outshone by magic?"

"Absolutely," Sam declared, grinning at Sammie. "These are amazing, buddy."

Zoey laughed. "Watching him bake with magic was fun. I'm almost jealous that I'm not magical."

Sammie grinned at her. "You have magic. You shift into a tiger. That takes magic."

"I think you're right, little man." Zoey patted his head, then waved before heading to the back door. "See you guys tomorrow."

"Bye, and thanks for looking after Sammie." I walked her to the door. I wanted to ask her about her family and if she'd decided if or when she was meeting them. At the last second, I didn't ask. I'd get an update from Ava tomorrow. Zoey needed some time.

"Maybe you can teach your old mom some tricks someday," I suggested, giving Sammie a wink as I leaned over and kissed the top of his head. "For now, though, it's time for bed."

"Aw, but it's still early," Sammie protested, his enthusiasm tempered by the mention of bedtime.

"Nice try." I checked the clock on the wall. "It's way past your bedtime, mister. Time for teeth brushing and pajamas."

"Fine." He slid off of his chair and trudged toward the bathroom. "Night, Mommy. Night, Daddy."

"Goodnight, kiddo."

"Sometimes I wonder if living in this magical world is robbing him of a normal childhood," I mused, taking another bite of my cookie.

“Normal is overrated,” Sam replied, reaching over to squeeze my hand. “Besides, just look at us—we’re anything but ordinary, and we turned out all right.”

“Speak for yourself,” I teased, rolling my eyes. “I’m still not convinced you’re not an alien in disguise.”

“Touché,” he laughed, leaning in to give me a kiss. “Now, how about we enjoy the rest of our evening before it’s our turn for bedtime?”

“Sounds perfect.” I snuggled close to him as we continued eating our cookies, enjoying the quiet moments of our extraordinary life together.

AVA

“REALLY? IS IAN NOT EATING AGAIN?” I muttered under my breath as I glanced at the empty seat where my suspicious hunter brother-in-law should’ve been. I hadn’t had a chance to talk to Drew about his brother yet. I didn’t want to worry him while he was working on a case, but Ian had been super weird since Drew had been gone.

“Maybe he’s just not a morning person,” Beth suggested, buttering her toast. My mother always had a soft spot for giving people the benefit of the doubt.

“Or maybe he’s up to something nefarious,” John countered, sipping his coffee. He eyed the door, expecting Ian to burst in any minute now. “Anyway, the new wing of the academy is coming along nicely. We might be finished early.”

“Great news.” I tried to shift the focus away from Ian’s absence. I felt a twinge of worry about what he was up to, but I couldn’t let it consume me. I had enough to worry about at the moment.

As if on cue, my phone rang, displaying Alfred’s name on the screen. I answered, hoping for good news. “Hey, Alfred. What’s up?”

“Hello, Ava. I’m calling with an update on Winnie.” His voice held a mix of urgency and concern. “She’s not doing well. We’ve tried everything, but we’re still searching for a suitable body for her.”

While I’d been in the dream world, my aunt Winnie had found out she had an incurable form of witch cancer. When we’d

returned from Hell and the crazy dream, Alfred had taken her to find another new body to magick into. It had worked once. Why not again? We couldn't lose our Winnie. Worse came to worst, if she died, I'd animate her, but then we'd have Alfred alive, and Winnie animated. We'd only *just* gotten Alfred back to life. What a mess.

I frowned, stirring my coffee absentmindedly. "What are the requirements again?"

"We need a witch's body, young enough but not too young, healthy, and no family," Alfred recited. "It's proving to be rather difficult to find someone who fits the bill. We're heading to a new city today, so hopefully we'll have better luck there."

"Keep me posted." A wave of sympathy and grief for Winnie. Witch cancer was a cruel and unforgiving disease. "We're all rooting for her." Then a thought came to me. "If anything, you could tether her ghost to you until we find one. Or animation."

"Yeah, that's an option. Winnie says we'd do that as a last resort." He sighed, then said, "Talk to you soon." With that, he hung up.

After breakfast, my parents headed to the Academy to start their day. I used magic to clean the kitchen, then settled into my office for a few hours of writing.

About thirty minutes later, Zoey entered the office and sat on the love seat against the wall across from my desk. Her nervousness wafted off of her and hung in the air between us. "I think I'm ready to call my family now," she said softly, wringing her hands together.

"Okay, sure." I offered her a warm smile, trying to ease her nerves as I joined her on the love seat. "Just remember, it's important not to tell them what happened to you—that you're a ghoulish now. We don't want to cause any unnecessary panic or confusion."

"Right," Zoey nodded, her gaze fixed on the floor. "I just...I don't know what to say to them, you know? It's been so long, and I've changed so much. I was just a little kid."

“Take a deep breath and speak from your heart.” I placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “For now, we’ll play it by ear. Just be honest about how you feel, and they’ll understand.”

“Okay.” She took a shaky breath, her eyes meeting mine with newfound resolve. “Let’s do this.”

Together, we settled onto the living room couch and started a video call with Rowan. As her face appeared on the screen, I watched the surprise in the girl’s eyes, quickly replaced by joy.

“Zoey,” she whispered, her voice cracking slightly. “I can’t believe you’re alive. We all thought...well, it doesn’t matter now. You’re here.”

“Hi, Rowan,” Zoey replied, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“Where have you been?” Rowan asked. “Why didn’t you contact us sooner? The pride mourned you.”

Zoey hesitated, glancing at me for guidance. I gave her an encouraging nod, and she took another deep breath before answering. “I’ve been through a lot.” Her voice grew stronger with each word. “I didn’t know how to contact anyone or even where I was from.”

“How did you not know where you were from?” Rowan looked like she was about to cry. “I’m not trying to sound harsh, but I just don’t understand.”

“I didn’t know what state I was in,” Zoey said. “I just ran. And ran. And then I had no idea where to go.”

“Zoey,” Rowan said gently, reaching out as if trying to touch her through the screen. “You’ve always belonged with us. With your family, with the pride. We just want you to be safe and happy.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, wiping away a tear. “I’m not sure where I want to go from here.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Rowan assured her. “What matters is that you’re alive, and we can start making up for lost time.”

As they continued to talk, I was so proud of Zoey for facing her fears and reconnecting with her family. Despite the secrets

and consequences that still loomed over our heads, we'd figure this crap out.

"Speaking of family," Rowan said, her gaze shifting between Zoey and me. "We moved further south a few years ago. The pride is living near New Orleans now. In the bayou."

I raised an eyebrow. "The bayou? Really?" I'd vacationed down there before. It was a gorgeous place.

"Yep," she confirmed. "Mom and Dad wanted to be closer to nature, so we moved out here a few years ago. It's amazing—the air is fresh, the wildlife is abundant, and the shifts feel like nothing I can describe. There's magic in this place."

"Wow," Zoey breathed, her eyes wide with wonder. "That sounds incredible."

"Trust me, it is," Rowan replied, grinning. "You'll have to come down for a visit sometime. I think you'd love it."

"Maybe," Zoey murmured, glancing at me uncertainly.

"Absolutely," I chimed in, trying to keep the mood light. "Zoey definitely deserves a vacation."

Another face appeared on the screen, and my heart skipped a beat. A man stared back at us, a mixture of disbelief and raw emotion etched across his rugged features.

"Zoey?" he choked out, his voice thick with tears. "Is that really you?"

"Hi," she whispered, her own eyes filling with tears once more. "I think I know you, but my memory isn't great."

"It's okay. I'm Gerard, your uncle and Rowan's dad. Where are you, sweetheart?" he demanded, his tone desperate. "We thought you were dead. Please, tell us where you are. We need to see you, to hold you..."

"I'm in Maine," Zoey stammered, struggling to maintain her composure. "Ava found me, and she's been taking care of me."

I took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"Maine," Gerard repeated, as if tasting the word for the first time. "That's so far away." He shook his head. "It doesn't

matter. We'll come to you, Zoey. Just tell us when and where."

"Actually," I cut in gently, "I can make that part easy. I can have a portal created for you. Just call ahead, and we'll have it set up."

Gerard looked surprised. "A portal?"

"Ava is a witch," Zoey said. "My family, er, my Maine family is made up of a bit of a mix of supernatural people."

"That's amazing. I'm so glad you found a family to care for you. Thank you," Gerard breathed, his eyes shining with gratitude as his gaze shifted to my face. "We'll make plans as soon as possible. I can't wait to see my girl again."

"Me too," Zoey whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

As we disconnected the video call, the weight of it all pressed down on me. The secrets we would be keeping from Zoey's family, the potential consequences of our actions... It was all a lot. But it was better than telling them the truth, at least for now. My inner voice told me there was more to the story about her parents' death and Zoey's disappearance from the pride land.

"Are you sure about this?" Zoey asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Of course," I replied, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Family is important, Zoey. And if there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that love—and a little bit of magic—can heal even the deepest wounds. Plus, they may be able to help fill in the gaps of your memory of your parents and their deaths."

As she leaned into my embrace, lordy. I hoped that I was right. For all our sakes.

That evening, the conservatory was a haven of flickering candlelight and the sweet scent of herbs as I worked on my latest magical project. The air hummed with energy, and I felt alive—a powerful force of witchery and necromancy combined.

“Hey, Ava.” Olivia waved as she and Sam entered the room. Sammie ran in behind them and darted inside the house, yelling, “Hi Ava,” as he went to search for Zoey and Larry. Or maybe one of the cats.

Olivia hopped onto a stool beside mine and asked, “What are you working on?”

“Infusing some amethyst stones with magic for the ghouls’ Halloween costumes,” I replied, grinning. “I know. It’s months away, but I want time to make it right. Zoey, Larry, and the cats are going to look fabulous.”

Sam raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He had seen enough in his life to know better than to question my magical endeavors.

“Actually, I need your help, Sam,” I added, shifting my attention to him. “I want to do some research on Zoey’s family. You still have contacts at the police station, right?” I could easily have had Drew do it, but I didn’t want to wait until he got back from his hunt.

“Sure,” he answered, his voice betraying a hint of curiosity. “You think there’s something fishy about them?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I mused. “But with all the secrets we’re keeping, I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“Sure, makes sense.” Sam pulled out his phone. “I’ll call the station.”

As he stepped away to make the call, Olivia watched him with concern and pride. Her husband had come a long way since discovering his psychic abilities, but she worried about him constantly.

“Are you okay?” I asked her, my voice gentle.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” she murmured, her eyes never leaving Sam. “Sometimes I just can’t believe how different my life has become in the last year or so.”

“Yeah.” She was *not* wrong. “But would you trade it?”

She puckered up her lips and squinted her eyes. “Not for all the designer shoes in the world.” After cocking her head, she

added, “Maybe I’d change Carter’s attitude.”

Sam returned then, his expression serious. “Okay, so I talked to one of the officers on duty. Gerard and Rowan don’t have a record in the human world.”

“Hmm,” I chewed on my bottom lip, mulling over this new piece of information. “No news is good news, I suppose.”

“Agreed,” Sam said thoughtfully. “But it’s something. We can keep looking into it if you want.”

“Thank you, Sam.” I nodded. “Please do. It’s just a feeling I have. Something isn’t right.” I sighed. “Olivia, could you pass me my phone?” I asked, as I continued to infuse my magic into the amethyst stones. The Halloween costumes were coming along nicely. I’d test them out on the cats later to see if I needed to adjust the spells.

“Here you go,” Olivia replied, handing me my phone. “Who are you calling?”

“Blair.” I tapped her number on the screen. “She’s the new shifter-hunter liaison. Maybe she can help us with Zoey’s family.”

“Good idea.” Olivia turned her attention back to the stones. “May I?” She held her hand over them.

“Hey, Ava, nice to hear from you.” Blair’s cheerful voice rang through the speaker, and I grinned as I nodded at Olivia.

“Hi, Blair. How’s it going?”

“As good as expected, I guess.” She sounded genuinely pleased to hear from me.

“I was wondering if you could help me with something,” I asked.

“Of course. What do you need?”

“So, a long story short, I need you to do some checking on a shifter. My best friend, Sam, had his police friend run a check run for my adopted daughter Zoey’s family, but they don’t have any records in the human world.” A crash came from

inside the house. Sam rolled his eyes and headed in. “I thought maybe you could ask around the shifter world for us.”

“Sure thing, Ava.” Her voice was firm and full of resolve. “I’ll start asking around right away. Text me their info, give me a day or two, and I’ll get back to you.”

“Thanks so much, Blair.”

“Happy to help, Oh, hold on a sec.” There was a brief pause, and then another familiar voice came through the speaker.

“Hey there, beautiful.” My husband’s voice sparked a longing I’ve been feeling since he left a few days ago.

I grinned in surprise. “Hey, I miss you. What are you doing in Florida?”

“Miss you too,” he replied, his voice tinged with warmth. “We hit a dead end on the investigation and portaled back here to do some research. Just wanted to say hi to everyone and let you know I’m thinking of you all.”

I glanced at Olivia, who waved her hand in a hello gesture. “Olivia says hi as well.”

“Tell her I said hi back. And please keep me posted on the Zoey situation.”

“Will do,” I promised.

“Back to work.” I refocused on the amethyst stones. It was comforting to know we had friends willing to help us, even far away. Now, all we needed were some answers.

AVA

“CAN you believe Snoozer was once human?” I shook my head as I stared out the kitchen window. Olivia had come over early this morning and made coffee for me. For once, I was already up when she walked in.

I know. It shocked me too, but I just can't sleep that well without Drew here.

“Seriously.” Olivia chuckled. “I can't even imagine.”

“Neither can I,” Sam said, then yawned. It was past his bedtime. “I mean, who would've guessed?”

“Apparently, only Yaya knew all along.” I sighed. “Poor Snoozer. I wonder what he did to get cursed like that.”

“Must've been something big.” Olivia sipped her coffee. “It does make me look at him a little differently now.”

“Same here,” Sam agreed. “I keep trying to picture him as a person, but all I see is a very hairy man with pointy ears and a bushy tail.”

“Thanks for that mental image, Sam.” I wrinkled my nose. “I'll never be able to unsee it now.” I had no idea if the way Snoozer looked at the dream world was the way he had looked when human, but that was how I pictured him now.

“Anytime,” he replied with a grin. “That's what friends are for.”

“Speaking of friends.” Olivia nodded toward the door. “Look who decided to grace us with his presence.”

We turned to see Snoozer sauntering into the room, dragging a small hand mirror behind him. It looked heavy for a cat to carry, but he managed to drag it along with an air of perseverance. The mirror had Yaya's spirit imprinted on it, allowing her to communicate with us from beyond the grave. She'd done something before she died to make sure she'd be able to talk to us again. It wasn't *her*. Yaya was at peace and far away from our reach. It had her memories and knowledge up to the point she imbued the mirror, however, so when needed, we could put a bit of magic into the mirror and speak to Yaya.

"Hey there, Snoozer." I scratched him behind the ear. It was so weird, knowing that I was actually scratching a human man behind the ear.

I did *not* want to think about the times he'd been nearby while I changed or showered.

A few seconds later, Lucy came in and sat in the doorway of the kitchen. "He wants you to talk to Yaya," she said with an air of boredom. "You know, since he's apparently the hot topic of conversation."

"Is there anything else he'd like to share before we contact Yaya?" Olivia asked, her tone teasing but gentle.

"Like what, his favorite brand of catnip?" Lucy shot back, rolling her little kitty eyes. "I think he's shared enough for one lifetime, thank you very much."

"Fair enough," I conceded, chuckling at Lucy's typical snarky response.

Snoozer set the mirror on the floor by my chair before stalking off to find a private spot in the conservatory to take a nap.

"Seems like he's not too keen on discussing his past," Sam said.

"Can't say I blame him," I agreed. "It must be hard, knowing you were once human and now you're... well, a cat."

"True," Olivia nodded. "But he's still Snoozer, your cat."

“Absolutely,” I smiled with a renewed sense of appreciation for my feline-witch friend. “Now, let’s see if Yaya can shed some light on this mystery.”

I picked up the mirror, taking a deep breath before letting my magic flow into it and calling out Yaya’s name. The surface of the mirror shimmered like water, and my grandmother’s familiar face appeared. She looked as though she’d been interrupted from some important task, but her expression softened when she saw me. A surge of grief went through me, but the actual Yaya was at peace, so I couldn’t let that get to me.

“Hello, Ava, my dear.” She smiled at me in the loving way only my Yaya could. There was something about a grandmother’s love. “What can I do for you?”

“Yaya, we have a bit of a mystery on our hands,” I began, glancing over at Sam and Olivia for support. “It’s about Snoozer.”

“Ah, that old cat,” she said with a knowing smile. “What has he gotten himself into now?”

“Well, it turns out that he used to be human.” I watched her reaction closely.

She didn’t react so much as chuckle. “Ah, yes. I thought you might find out, eventually. I wasn’t sure if his curse would ever be revealed to you.”

“It has, and I was hoping you could fill us in on his background,” I said.

Yaya nodded and met my gaze. “You see, many years ago, I was approached by the goddess Ceridwen. She is the Welsh goddess of wisdom and mother of the famous bard Taliesin. She was surrounded by white cats who carried out her orders on Earth.” Yaya paused for a moment.

“Go on,” I urged.

“Snoozer, or rather the man he once was, is one of Ceridwen’s descendants—a witch,” Yaya continued. “He had committed some grave offense, and Ceridwen deemed it necessary for him to be punished.”

“What did he do?” Sam asked.

Yaya shrugged. “Ceridwen never told me. She sentenced him to a hundred years as a cat to learn humility. So, I’m guessing he wasn’t a very nice witch.”

The room fell silent as we processed this new information. A pang of sympathy for Snoozer and the life he’d left behind. Then again, he should have known that he’d be punished, eventually. What goes around, comes around and all that jazz.

“Yaya, why didn’t you ever tell us?” I asked quietly, slightly betrayed by her omission.

“I was forbidden by the goddess to tell anyone. It was a secret that I had to carry alone.”

“I understand,” I said softly, trying to push aside my hurt feelings. After all, Yaya had been bound by a divine command—who was I to question that?

“Thank you for telling us now,” Olivia chimed in, offering Yaya a reassuring smile.

“Of course,” Yaya replied, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Since I didn’t reveal it to you, it seems I can speak of it. My promise to Ceridwen even held in this echo because I tried to tell you the last time we spoke, but I couldn’t. I only wish I could have done more for him.”

“Well, he always has a home with us. He did say that he didn’t want the curse broken.” That I could understand. He had a family and a girlfriend. Plus, human servants to feed and clean up after him. “He’s contrite.”

We said our goodbyes, and I ended the call by cutting off my magic from the mirror.

Later that afternoon, I was in the middle of folding laundry when my phone rang. “Hello?”

“Hey Ava, it’s Rick.”

Rick was the ferret shifter whose sons had been taken by Penny and Bevan in their shifter fighting ring. The same one where I found Zoey. I’ve kept in touch with Rick and his wife, Dana.

“Hi, How’s the family?” I asked. When I called earlier, I’d talked with Dana about Zoey’s uncle and pride.

“Good, thanks. Dana and I just found out that she’s pregnant with twins. We are over the moon excited and so is Zane.” Rick’s voice was filled with excitement.

Zane had also been taken to the fight ring, but I was able to find him and several other shifter kids alive. Their younger son had not made it, unfortunately. It was a sight that still haunted me to this day and probably always would. “Congrats,”

“Thanks,” he said. “Listen, I’ve been looking into Gerard and Rowan, but I can’t find anything on them. Nothing good or bad.”

“Really?” I furrowed my brow, glancing over to see Ian hovering suspiciously near the doorway. He seemed to think he was being stealthy, but he stood out like a sore thumb. I ignored him, letting him think that he was being sneaky. “Thanks for trying, though.”

“No problem. If I find anything else, I’ll let you know,” he said before hanging up.

As soon as I ended the call with Rick, my phone rang again. This time, it was Blair. All the news was coming in.

“Hey Ava, I managed to dig up some info on tigers,” she started without preamble. “It’s all a bit vague, but from what I can gather, it seems they’re clean.”

“Clean?” I repeated, still worried.

“Yep. No laws broken. Gerald is the alpha of the pride and seems to be a good leader. Tigers don’t live in packs like wolves do. They have a pride, but it’s more like an extended family who lives kinda nearby but also kinda spread out. They get together now and then for a meal, but it’s not the commune kind of situation that many other shifters live in. They still answer to their alpha, and if there are any issues, the alpha steps in to help. But overall, it doesn’t seem like there’s anything to worry about.”

“Interesting. So, is it safe for Rowan and Gerard to visit?” I asked.

“Best I can tell, it should be fairly safe. “

“Thanks, Blair. I really appreciate your help.”

“Of course. Let me know if you need anything else.” She hung up.

It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. Maybe, just maybe, it would be safe for Zoey to get to know her uncle and cousin. Now, all I had to do was find her and share the news.

Leaving Ian to his weirdness, I found Zoey in the herb garden, her hands dusted with soil as she lovingly tended to the plants. The sun cast a soft glow on her face, emphasizing the peaceful expression she wore while working with the earth.

“Hey, kiddo,” I called out to her, my voice full of warmth. “I have some news.”

Zoey looked up from her gardening, curiosity lighting up her yellow cat's eyes. “What's up?”

“Blair managed to find some information about how tiger shifters live. Apparently, they don't form tight-knit communes like other shifters. They're more like an extended family, living separately but getting together occasionally.” I watched her closely, gauging her reaction.

“Really?” She paused, deep in thought. “You know, that does sound familiar. It's been so long since my parents were alive, but that feels right in my mind somehow.”

“Blair thinks it should be safe for Rowan and Gerard to visit us,” I added, hoping this would give her some peace of mind.

“Good,” she replied, wiping her hands on her jeans. She paused for a second, then nodded. “I'll call them and invite them here.”

We went inside, and Zoey wasted no time calling her newfound relatives. As she spoke to Rowan and Gerard, the conversation seemed to flow easily—a good sign.

“Are there any hotels nearby?” Gerard asked through the phone.

My protective instincts kicked in, but before I could stop myself, I blurted out, “You can stay with us.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Sure, it might’ve been perfectly safe for them to visit, but actually having them in our home was another matter entirely. I wasn’t sure how they’d take the news of me being a necromancer. I tried to hide my unease as Zoey continued the conversation, finalizing their visit.

“Looks like we’ll have company soon,” Zoey said with a smile once she hung up the phone. She seemed more hopeful and happier than she’d been since Rowan first emailed her.

“Yep.” I forced a smile of my own. “It’ll be... interesting.”

“Indeed,” chimed in Lucy from her perch on the back of the sofa, watching us with her usual feline indifference. “Never a dull moment around here, eh?”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered, wondering just how many surprises our new guests would bring with them. “Ugh, what was I thinking?” I groaned, rubbing my temples. “I mean, it’s great that they’re coming to visit, but why on earth did I invite them to stay with us?”

Zoey grinned at me, clearly amused by my frustration. “Well, at least all the ghouls look like actual people now. No worries about trying to hide Larry in skeleton form.”

I snickered at the mental image. “True, that would have been a disaster. It’s hard enough keeping track of Lucifer and his antics without having to worry about our guests discovering our supernatural secrets.”

As if on cue, Luci strolled out of the kitchen, munching on something that looked suspiciously like one of my freshly baked cookies. We hadn’t even known he was there, which just went to show how stealthy the ruler of Hell could be when he wanted to.

“Ah, Ava, Zoey,” he drawled, pausing mid-chew. “I heard you talking about your upcoming visitors. Rowan and Gerard, right?”

“Yep,” I confirmed, suddenly very self-conscious. Had he been eavesdropping on our conversation?

“Interesting,” Lucifer mused before his eyes narrowed, and he squinted at something in the distance. “Oh, hang on. Look outside.”

Zoey and I exchanged puzzled glances before we moved to the window. What could possibly be so interesting that it warranted Lucifer’s attention?

As we looked out into the backyard, I sighed in annoyance, and maybe a little teensy bit of relief. There, nestled among the few trees between the houses, stood a small home that matched our new pool house perfectly—a perfect little twinsy cottage. “For your soon-to-arrive guests,” Luci said and popped another bite of cookie into his mouth.

“Well, at least we can still get a little privacy and have them close by.”

“Consider it a favor,” he replied with a cheesy grin, crumbs tumbling from his lips. “I thought you might appreciate a little extra space.”

It would be nice not to have Rowan and Gerard underfoot the entire time they were here. “Thank you, Luci.” I said it mostly sincerely.

Mostly.

“Anytime, Ava,” he said with a wink before disappearing back into the kitchen, presumably to devour more of my cookies.

“Looks like we’ll have a bit of breathing room after all.” Zoey stared at the new addition to our backyard.

“Thank goodness for small miracles.”

AVA

I STOOD IN THE CONSERVATORY, my fingertips barely grazing the surface of the amulet we'd discovered in the RV where our Viking necromancer *friends* had been crashing. The dark magic emanating from it prickled against my skin, raising goosebumps on my arms despite the warmth of the sun streaming through the glass walls. Something powerful and sinister lay hidden within its depths, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why the Vikings had it or what they'd used it for.

As I continued to ponder the mysteries of the amulet, Lucy crept silently into the room through the cat door, her eyes wide with mischief. Unbeknownst to her, I'd caught sight of her reflection in the antique mirror hanging on the wall in front of my workstation.

That darn cat carried a small, fluffy, white kitten by the scruff of its neck, trying her hardest to be as inconspicuous as possible. But with a cat like Lucy, inconspicuous was a relative term.

"Lucy-Fur," I called out, trying to keep a straight face as she jumped at the sound of my voice.

The kitten mewled softly, its tiny paws flailing in the air as Lucy looked around, feigning innocence.

I put one hand on my hip. "And what do we have here?"

"Absolutely nothing that concerns you," Lucy replied, her words somewhat muffled by the white fluff dangling from her lips.

“Go put that kitten back wherever you found it,” I ordered, trying to sound stern.

“I don’t see what the big deal is.” She lowered the kitten to the ground with a surprising delicacy. “It’s not like it was doing anything important. You know, other than being abandoned by its mother and crying its tiny little heart out.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel bad?” I asked skeptically, unable to resist the urge to reach down and stroke the kitten’s soft fur. It purred contentedly at my touch, clearly none the wiser about Lucy’s intentions.

Okay, so her guilt trip worked a little. But I wasn’t going to let Lucy know that.

“Maybe just a little,” Lucy admitted. “I mean, come on. Look at that face. How could you send it back outside?”

“Okay, fine.” I sighed, knowing that arguing with Lucy was an exercise in futility. “But how are you going to feed it? You’re not exactly lactating, are you?”

“Rude.” She snorted, then looked down at the small kitten and licked the top of its head. “I hadn’t really thought that far ahead,” she admitted sheepishly.

“Obviously,” I snorted before grabbing my phone to call Olivia for backup.

“Hey,” Olivia answered on the first ring cheerfully. “What’s up?”

“Lucy found a kitten,” I explained. “It’s really young and needs bottle-feeding. Want to go to the store to pick up some supplies?”

“Of course,” Olivia replied without hesitation. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, Liv.” I ended the call. “She’s on her way.”

“Excellent,” Lucy purred, clearly satisfied with her victory. “Now we just need to come up with a name for our tiny new family member.”

“Let’s focus on getting it fed first.” Once Lucy started brainstorming names, there would be no stopping her.

Olivia arrived, and we drove to the local pet store. Once there, I couldn’t help but buy all the things a kitten would need. Like a new litter box. They say have as many litter boxes as you do cats. Snoozer and Lucy were outside during the summer more than inside, but I bought one more just in case.

I also picked up a bunch of new toys for the kitty. And maybe a heated bed.

And some treats.

And a cat tree.

That was all, though!

“Wait,” Olivia whispered as we stepped out of the store, gripping my arm tightly. “Isn’t that Ian?”

“Where?” I squinted, my gaze following hers to find Ian loitering near the corner of the street, looking lost and disoriented.

“Hey, Ian,” I called out, hoping to catch his attention. He didn’t respond, just continued to stare blankly in the opposite direction.

“Something’s not right,” Olivia murmured, and I agreed.

We put our purchases in the back of Olivia’s SUV. When I looked up again, Ian had started walking down the sidewalk away from us.

“Should we follow him?” Olivia asked.

“Yeah.” I closed the back door to the SUV, then started down the sidewalk, following Ian at a discreet distance.

We crossed the road and tried to catch up with him. “Hey,” I tried again, louder this time. “Ian.”

He turned down a side street that led toward the ocean. When Olivia and I rounded the corner, he was waiting for us. “Why are you following me?” He looked genuinely puzzled.

“We called your name, but you didn’t answer,” Olivia explained, her brow furrowed. “Are you okay?”

That was the question of the decade. Ian had been acting weird for the last few days. Maybe a week or so.

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing his temples as if trying to clear his thoughts. “I’m not myself today.”

“Clearly,” I muttered under my breath, still uneasy about his strange behavior. For now, we had a hungry kitten waiting for us back at home, and our hands were already full dealing with magical amulets and getting the house ready for Zoey’s uncle and cousin. One problem at a time.

Back at home, I fixed a bottle for the baby kitty, then I searched for Lucy. I found her in my office, curled up on the sofa with the kitten tucked into her side, sound asleep. Lucy wouldn’t let me wake the tiny fluff ball to feed her, so I grabbed my laptop and headed to the living room.

I plopped down on the sofa, my laptop perched on my knees and the amulet from the Vikings sitting on the coffee table. The screen’s soft glow filled the dimly lit room as I furiously typed away, scouring the internet for anything that might help me understand the mysterious object.

“Find anything interesting?” a familiar voice drawled, oozing sarcasm. I stifled a yelp of surprise as Lucifer materialized beside me, smiling mischievously, like he’d just won some sort of celestial bet.

“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath, clutching at my chest in an attempt to calm my racing heart.

“Wrong deity,” he quipped, giving me a pointed look before his gaze landed on the amulet. “Still trying to decipher this little trinket, I see.”

“Little trinket?” I raised an eyebrow, letting out a humorless chuckle. “This little trinket was connected to Viking necromancers, in case you forgot.”

“Ah, yes, how could I forget?” he mused theatrically, rolling his eyes. “You mortals, and your penchant for dabbling in things you don’t understand.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, irritation bubbling up inside of me. “Any chance you could enlighten me, or are you just here to make snarky comments?”

“Both,” he replied with a devilish grin, turning on the charm. “Since you asked so nicely, I suppose I could take a look.”

Lucifer reached for the amulet, turning it over in his hands with a thoughtful expression. The surrounding air crackled with energy as he studied it, and I held my breath, waiting for him to reveal its secrets.

“Interesting,” he murmured, looking up at me with a newfound seriousness. “This amulet holds the same dark magic that the witch in Australia was using.”

The witch he meant was the one in the candy cottage who had kidnapped Michelle and Wallie for the purpose of draining their powers. She especially wanted Baby Butt’s power, which was already pretty powerful even then.

“Wait,” I interjected. “You mean they were drawing from my powers?”

“Exactly.” He narrowed his eyes. “Unlike the witch, who merely wanted a boost of your kids’ abilities, those necromancers would have drained you dry, killing you in the process. In doing so, they would have prolonged their lives.”

“Fantastic.” I groaned, rubbing my temples as if I could somehow massage away the horrible implications of what he’d just told me.

“Cheer up.” He gave me a playful nudge. “At least you’ve got a cute new kitten to keep you company.”

How did he already know about that? “Just another complication I don’t need.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Lucifer said with another signature grin as he handed the amulet back to me, then vanished.

I set the amulet on the coffee table because holding it for long periods of time weirded me out. Since I now knew that the thing had been used to siphon my powers, there was only one thing to do with it. Destroy it.

Lucy walked into the living room, carrying the kitten with Snoozer trailing behind. They jumped up on the sofa and lay down with the kitten nuzzled between them. It was the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

Having a baby kitty in the house sure was adorable, at least.

OLIVIA

THE LATE AFTERNOON sun cast a warm, golden glow on Ava's house as Sammie and I walked over from next door. Sam was busy preparing Red Lipped Mary for its grand opening, the *official* grand opening. Sam and Wade had a few kinks to work out from our soft opening a few weeks ago.

"Hey, Ava," I called out as Sammie and I entered through the conservatory.

"Hi Olivia, hi Sammie," Ava greeted us with a smile.

Zoey rushed down the stairs. "Is it time?" Her voice came out in a squeaky growl.

"Yep. Are you ready?" I gave my adopted niece a side-hug.

"Yes. I'm ready."

"Relax, kiddo. They're family," I reminded her, giving her a reassuring hug. I pulled back, and she smiled at both of us, then reached up to pat the top of her head, feeling for her tiger ears. They weren't there. "Ears are gone." Zoey gave a nervous laugh, and she felt her backside. "Tail is gone. How are my eyes? The contacts feel weird."

Ava framed Zoey's face with her hands. "You look perfectly human. Eyes are clear. But if you do have a slip up, just tell your uncle and cousin that you were in an accident that makes it hard to control some of your tiger parts."

Zoey relaxed. "That's a great idea."

With a wave of my hand, I opened a portal to a spot we'd agreed on in the woods near Gerard's house.

“Gerard, Rowan, welcome, I’m Ava, and this is Olivia and Zoey,” she said, gesturing to each of us, in turn.

“Nice to meet you all,” Gerard said, shaking our hands as they stepped through the portal. “Rowan and I have been looking forward to getting to know you all better.”

“Same here.” Zoey offered a small smile.

“Come on in,” Ava said, stepping aside. “Let’s head out to the patio. Larry and Wallie have been manning the grill, and it smells amazing out there.”

“Sounds perfect.” Gerard glanced at Rowan, who nodded in agreement.

Gerard was a salt and pepper gentleman with a definite reddish tint to his beard, which made sense, given he was a tiger. He had a bit of a dad bod, fit, but a small belly. It wasn’t unattractive. Rowan looked remarkably like Zoey, though older, with long black hair.

“How close in age are you two?” I asked.

“I was a teenager when Zoey was born,” Rowan said. “Thirteen years apart, I think?” That would make Rowan close to her mid-thirties.

As Ava led the way, Zoey seemed so much more relaxed now that the initial introductions were out of the way. Maybe this family reunion wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Ava swung open the door to the back porch, and a blur of dark fur darted out from under the deck and into the house. A sleek gray cat ran past our legs, making a beeline for Lucy and the baby kitten snuggled up together in their makeshift bed in the living room.

“Hey,” Lucy yowled as the mama cat launched at Lucy, claws bared. “What the f—”

In a sudden flurry of movement, before any of us could react, the protective mama swiftly delivered a series of resounding whacks around Lucy’s ears while shrieking in that way only cats could. She then gently scooped up her tiny, mewling baby in her mouth and dashed out the door, disappearing into the

backyard. The scene unfolded in an instant, leaving us all standing in shock.

“Ouch.” I winced, looking down at a very disgruntled Lucy. “That looked like it hurt.”

“Tell me about it.” She licked one paw disdainfully.

Ava stared at Lucy, shaking her head in disbelief. “I *knew* you stole that baby.”

“Stole? She abandoned that baby.” Lucy hissed indignantly, her fur still bristling from the attack.

“How long did you wait?” Ava asked, crossing her arms.

Lucy didn’t answer, instead looking away with a sulky expression.

“Come on, let’s leave Lucy to wallow in her kitten-less misery,” I suggested, trying to lighten the mood. We made our way back out onto the porch where Larry and Wallie were introducing themselves to Gerard and Rowan. Michelle waved from the corner of the deck where it was shadiest. Wallie had set her up with a footstool and a fan.

“Sorry about that,” Ava apologized, brushing off her hands. “Our resident cat burglar had a bit of a run-in with an angry mama.”

“Family drama, huh?” Rowan giggled. “Sounds like we’ll fit right in.”

“Speaking of family,” Gerard sat at the big table after Ava gestured for him to. “I’m so sorry my wife couldn’t make it. She owns a business back in New Orleans, and she just couldn’t take the time off.”

“Must be tough to manage a business and family life. What kind of business is it?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“An art gallery,” Rowan said proudly. “Mom’s really passionate about it. She’s always been into supporting local artists and showcasing their work.”

“That sounds amazing.” Ava’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “I’ve always loved art, but I can barely draw a stick figure. We

have a friend in Philadelphia who used to own a gallery. We'll have to introduce them."

"Maybe when things settle down, we can all go visit and have a proper family reunion," I suggested, imagining a fun-filled road trip with everyone.

"Sounds like a plan," Gerard nodded.

"Come on." Ava waved for Gerard and Rowan to follow her. "Let's show you guys where you'll be staying during your visit."

We led them through the beautifully landscaped backyard toward the new guest house situated next to the also new pool house. The warm afternoon sun cast a golden hue over everything, making the scene look like something out of a fairytale. Of course, I'd used a little fae magic to help Ava upgrade the landscaping and decor in the guesthouse. It looked so amazing, if I didn't say so myself.

"Your accommodations," Ava announced with a flourish as we reached the charming little cottage. She pointed next door. "That's the pool house where our friend Ross is staying. He's away for a few days, but he's a really great guy. You'll meet him soon."

I caught myself biting my lip, worrying about how tiger shifters might react to having a werewolf neighbor. But hey, they didn't need to know that...yet.

"Oh, this place is amazing." Rowan looked at the front of the cottage, her eyes wide with admiration. "You guys really went all out."

"Only the best for our family," Ava said, beaming with pride.

Sam strolled into the backyard from our place, wiping his hands on a towel. His face lit up when he saw us. Yes, it's Luci's house, but we've been staying there so long it's beginning to feel like home.

"Hey, everyone," he called, walking over to join our little gathering. "Sorry I'm late."

“Sam, meet Gerard and Rowan,” I introduced, gesturing toward our guests. “This is my husband, Sam.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Sam said warmly, shaking their hands.

“Thanks, it’s great to be here,” Gerard said with a smile, but his body language said he was guarded. He eyed Sam carefully, like he was trying to figure out what Sam was. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to volunteer the info, so I didn’t.

We showed Rowan and Gerard the interior of the cottage, which was simple but tasteful. Again, I helped. Then after they stowed their bags, we headed back toward the porch.

Sam hung back and walked behind us. A few seconds later, my phone pinged.

Something’s off with them. I can’t put my finger on it, but one of them is different.

My mind instantly jumped to Gerard, considering he’d been tense since he arrived. However, I didn’t want to jump to conclusions just yet. Sam’s whole psychic thing was patchy at best.

We’ll just have to keep an eye on them.

I tried not to let my suspicions show on my face.

Secrets have a way of revealing themselves sooner or later.

That went also for the secrets we were keeping about Zoey being a ghoul. I agreed with Ava that we should wait to feel out Zoey’s family before spilling the details, but the truth would likely come out soon enough.

Sam caught up and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

Back on the porch, we settled into the comfortable chairs and sipped our drinks, enjoying the late afternoon sun as it dipped toward the horizon.

“Tell us more about your lives back home.” Ava filled up our drinks.

As they chatted, my thoughts drifted to what Sam had texted. My gut told me something was definitely amiss, but for now, all I could do was observe and hope that everything would become clearer in time.

I swirled my iced tea, trying not to focus on the nagging feeling that something was off when Gerard cleared his throat.

“Hey, Zoey,” he began, his eyes darting around nervously. “I just wanted to let you know that my wife, while busy at the shop, the main reason she didn’t come with us because she and your mom, well, they didn’t exactly get along.”

Zoey raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised by this revelation. “What do you mean?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Gerard scratched at his beard and shifted in his seat. “It’s just, uh, they had their differences, you know? We thought you’d remember, and I wanted to let you know off the bat that she held back to avoid any awkwardness with you. She wanted you to feel totally at ease.”

A mixture of emotions flickered across Zoey’s face as she tried to recall any memories of her mother and aunt. “I don’t really remember much, to be honest,” she admitted.

Larry put his hand on her back and that helped relax her a bit.

“Well, Heather wanted me to make sure and tell you she loves you, and no drama that she and your mother had will ever cause her to stop loving you.”

Zoey smiled, and the tension in the air seemed to ease a bit. Before anyone could say anything else, Ian burst onto the porch wearing a full-on luxury tuxedo. His entrance caught everyone off guard, and we all stared at him in stunned silence.

“Uh, Ian,” Ava said, trying not to laugh. “Looking sharp, but why are you all dressed up?”

Ian looked at his outfit, then at all of us. “I thought this was a special occasion,” he said ever-so-slightly defensively.

“Special, yes, but not black-tie formal.” Sam grinned from ear to ear. “Nice tux, man.”

“Come on, guys, cut him some slack.” I tried to defuse the situation. Despite my best efforts, everyone continued to tease him.

Wallie snorted, and that sent pretty much everyone on the deck, including me, into giggles.

Ian’s face turned a deep shade of red, and he mumbled something about changing before disappearing back into the house.

Ava and I exchanged a glance. What in the world was going on with Ian?

Later that evening, after Gerard, Rowan, Zoey, and Larry went to the guest house and Sam took Sammie home to get him ready for bed, Ava and I sat alone in her living room.

The Viking amulet sat on the coffee table, its eerie glow casting an ominous shadow across the room. We had to destroy it, but how?

“All right,” Ava said, rubbing her hands together. “Let’s brainstorm some ideas. What’s the best way to destroy an ancient, cursed artifact?”

“Throw it into Mount Doom?” I smirked.

“Har-har, very funny.” She rolled her eyes. “Come on, let’s get serious.”

“Fine, what about fire?” It seemed like a logical choice. Fire was known for its purifying properties.

“Okay, let’s give it a try.” Ava grabbed the amulet and went to the fireplace. After lighting a fire, she threw the amulet into the flames. Several minutes ticked by before the metal began to heat up, turning red before releasing a plume of thick, black smoke that filled the room.

The windows and doors opened, and Winston groaned unhappily.

“Sorry, Winston,” Ava apologized, sheepishly. “We’ll go outside.”

I grabbed the still-smoking amulet with a pair of oven mitts, then followed Ava out the back door. We heard the front door slam shut. It was another sign from Winston that he wasn’t happy about all the smoke. “So, fire didn’t work.”

“Nope,” Ava mumbled, coming to a stop a few yards from the cliff. “At least not this fire. Maybe it wasn’t hot enough. Any ideas?”

“How about we try to blow it up?”

“Couldn’t hurt.” She conjured some gunpowder, fuses, and matches.

We dug a shallow hole and poured some gunpowder in, then smashed the amulet into the powder. After setting the fuse, we stood back.

“Here goes nothing.” I warned, lighting the fuse and retreating to a safe distance with Ava. The fuse burned down, and with a deafening BOOM, the gunpowder exploded, sending bits of dirt and grass flying into the air.

“Did it work?” Ava asked as the dust settled.

We walked over to the charred hole in the ground, and my heart sank. “Nope. Still there, just a bit dirtier.” It was like it didn’t even try to die.

“Urgh.” Ava groaned in frustration. “What does it take to destroy this thing?”

“We’ll need to get creative,” I mused. “Acid? It works in the movies.”

“Let’s give it a shot.” Ava locked gazes with me. “I don’t have any acid.”

“We could search through Luci’s garage.” I smiled. “There is *no* telling what all is in there.”

We raced across the yard to my house and searched the garage. Luci's garage was a technicolor wonderland of auto-related oddities. I loved coming in here. The moment we stepped inside, it was as if we had entered a magical, mechanical circus. Detached car doors of various colors and makes lined one wall, some sporting vibrant decals of flaming dragons or ethereal fairies. A collection of fuzzy dice hung from the ceiling, swaying slightly in a breeze created by a creaky old fan.

"This one's got a mind of its own." Ava tapped a pair of purple dice with a long feather. The dice spun around wildly before abruptly stopping, almost as if offended by Ava's action.

Then there was the shelf dedicated to novelty horns, ranging from a model that made a meowing sound to another one which, when pressed, blared out Christmas music.

"Try that one." I pointed at a horn shaped like a rubber chicken. Ava gave it a squeeze, and we both doubled over in laughter as it let out a comically high-pitched squawk.

Rows upon rows of hubcaps filled another corner, each more ridiculous than the last. One featured a neon pink unicorn, another that looked like a spinning disco ball, and one that had a holographic image of Luci's face.

"Imagine driving around with these." Ava held up the last one. "It's like Luci's watching you drive, judging every turn you make."

In one corner, we found a cabinet full of what seemed to be magical car waxes, one of which promised to turn the car invisible, while another claimed it could transform a rusty old bucket into a shiny new hot rod.

"Think we should try this?" I pointed at a jar labeled, 'Acidic Car Wax: Guaranteed to Strip Even the Toughest Paint!'

Ava considered for a moment, then shrugged. "At this point, I'm willing to try anything."

We went back to the hole in the yard and carefully wiped the acid over the amulet.

“Come on, come on...” I watched as the cream bubbled and hissed.

Instead of dissolving the amulet, the acid just rolled off it, leaving the stupid freaking amulet unscathed.

“Are you kidding me?” Ava threw her hands up in frustration.

“Let’s call it a night.” I sighed, defeated. “We’ll regroup tomorrow and figure something else out.”

“Fine.” She grumbled and conjured a pair of tongs to pick up the amulet. “But we’re not giving up. We’re going to destroy this freaking thing, no matter what it takes.”

“Agreed.” I clapped her on the back. “Now let’s clean up this mess before Winston sees it and has an aneurysm.”

If a house could have an aneurysm, Winston would.

AVA

I WOKE up with the warmth of Drew's arms wrapped around me, his steady breathing a comforting lullaby. It seemed like it'd been forever since I slept next to my husband instead of a few days. Drew had portaled over last night to stay with me, taking a break from the murder case he'd been working on at Rune Academy with his sister.

"Morning, handsome." I snuggled deeper into his embrace.

"Morning, beautiful." He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. The sounds of everyone getting up and milling around the house drifted through the walls, but we stayed cocooned in our little love bubble for just a bit longer.

"Gerard and Rowan are here." A smile tugged at my lips as I thought about the two new houses Luci had created. "Did you see our new pool house and guest house?"

Drew chuckled, his chest vibrating against my back. "Well, you know how Luci is. He never does anything halfway. Plus, I think he secretly enjoys showing off."

"Secretly?" I scoffed. "He's about as subtle as a sledgehammer."

"Can't argue with that." Drew laughed softly. "But hey, at least Gerard and Rowan have a nice place to stay now."

"Yeah, they do."

With a deep breath, I reluctantly rolled out of bed, the hardwood floor cool against my bare feet. Drew stretched and yawned before doing the same, ruffling his messy hair as he

stood up. I admired his sculpted torso, soaking in his masculine beauty.

He caught me staring and gave me a smug smile.

We dressed with the familiar sounds of the house coming alive in the morning, providing a comforting background noise.

“Ready to face the day?” Drew asked, a teasing smile on his lips as he opened the bedroom door for me.

“Never,” I said with mock seriousness, “but let’s do it anyway.” Hand in hand, we made our way downstairs, the scent of freshly brewed coffee drawing us toward the kitchen like moths to a flame.

As we entered the kitchen, Gerard was leaning against the counter, talking animatedly on his phone. At the sight of us, he hung up abruptly, a guarded look in his eyes. “Morning, Ava,” he greeted me, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

“Good morning, Gerard.” I raised an eyebrow at his sudden change in demeanor. “This is my husband, Drew.”

Gerard eyed him warily. “Ah, so you’re the famous Drew.” He hesitated for a moment before reaching out to shake Drew’s hand, clearly sensing that he was a hunter. “Heard a lot about you.”

I bet he had. The Walker family was like royalty among the hunters. There were all kinds of rumors and stories about each Walker family member, both from the hunters and the paranormal communities.

“Hopefully all good things,” Drew said with a warm smile, gripping Gerard’s hand firmly.

“Of course.” Gerard’s voice lacked any real warmth. “Ava mentioned that your family is trying to change how hunters operate?”

“Indeed,” I interjected, hoping to ease the tension between the two men. “Drew’s family has been working hard to create a more collaborative environment between hunters and supernatural beings.”

“Really?” Gerard looked skeptical, his gaze flickering between Drew and me. “How exactly are they planning to do that?”

Drew kept his tone calm and steady. “By focusing on understanding and communication. We’re trying to break down the barriers between hunters and supernaturals, working together when necessary.”

“Sounds like a noble cause,” Gerard said noncommittally, though with the faintest hint of respect in his eyes.

“Change is never easy.” I hoped to reassure him that our intentions were genuine. “But we believe it’s worth fighting for.”

The sound of laughter and footsteps echoed through the hallway, drawing my attention away from Gerard and Drew’s conversation. Zoey and Rowan appeared at the top of the stairs, followed by a grinning Larry. They were all dressed for a swim and made their way down to join us.

“Morning, Drew.” Zoey grinned as she approached us. “Didn’t realize you were home.”

“Hey, kiddo,” Drew responded, his eyes crinkling in the corners as he smiled. He pulled her into a hug, kissing her temple. “Just here for a sleepover.”

“Ah, TMI!” Zoey shook her head playfully before leaning up to peck a quick kiss on his cheek, then stepped out of the hug. She then turned to me and said, “We’re going swimming. Wanna come?”

“Maybe later, sweetheart,” I said, a little envious of their carefree plans. “I’ve got some things to take care of first.”

“Kay.” Zoey grabbed Rowan’s and Larry’s hands. “Catch you guys later, then.” With that, the trio strolled out the back door, their laughter carrying on the breeze as they headed toward the water.

As the door closed behind them, I glanced over at Gerard, acutely aware of how his posture had relaxed slightly. The father-daughter affection between Zoey and Drew seemed to have put him more at ease, and I was grateful for the small moment of levity.

“Your family seems close. I appreciate how you’ve taken Zoey in and treated her like she’s yours,” Gerard commented, his voice softer than it had been earlier.

Because she’s mine. Instead of saying that out loud, I said, “Zoey and Larry mean the world to me. I’ve become protective of them.”

“Must be nice,” he said quietly, almost wistfully. What kind of family life must he have had growing up? Was it filled with love and laughter, or had it been overshadowed by the darkness that he now carried with him?

“Everyone deserves to have people who care about them.” I hoped to offer some comfort. “Family doesn’t have to be blood.”

Gerard looked at me for a long moment, his eyes searching mine as if trying to gauge the sincerity of my words. Finally, he nodded and offered me a small, tentative smile. “Maybe you’re right.”

I thanked the gods when Olivia walked in, Sammie in tow. He was dressed head to toe in swim gear, complete with neon green shorts and a matching pair of goggles perched atop his head. His arms were filled with towels, toys, and what looked suspiciously like an inflatable duck.

“Zoey and the others just left for the beach,” I told him, and Sammie’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Yay!” He squealed and raced out the door, yelling Zoey’s name at the top of his lungs.

“Kids,” Olivia chuckled, shaking her head fondly as she watched her son disappear into the backyard. “You’d think he’d never seen water before.”

Drew handed me a cup of coffee, made just like I liked it. I’d been so focused on Gerard that I hadn’t noticed Drew move to the coffeepot. “Thank you.”

Drew kissed me. “I’m meeting Lily for breakfast, but I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait. I will create you a portal.” Olivia raised her hands, fingers dancing in intricate patterns as she wove the magic necessary to open a shimmering portal before us.

“Thanks,” Drew said, leaning down to press a lingering kiss to my lips. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Be careful,” I whispered against his mouth, hating the thought of being separated from him again but knowing it couldn’t be helped. There was work to be done.

“Always.” He offered me one last smile before disappearing through the portal. It snapped shut behind him.

I took a deep breath and conjured the Viking amulet into my hand. Its cold, metallic surface was heavy, as if it carried the weight of all its dark history. “Let’s go see if we can destroy this thing.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Olivia’s gaze fixed on the amulet with a steely glare.

“Gerard.” I turned to face him. “Would you like to join us? We’re going to check out the chasm on the beach.”

“Chasm?” He raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

“You’ll have to see it to believe it,” I said with a smile. “We hope it might be able to help us with our little amulet problem.”

“Sure, why not?” He shrugged, clearly intrigued. “I could use some fresh air.”

“Great.” I led the way as we made our way down to the beach together.

As we approached the shore, a sense of peace washed over me. The sun was shining brightly, casting a warm glow on the sand and water. The gentle sound of waves crashing against the shore filled the air, accompanied by the distant laughter of Sammie, Zoey, Larry, and Rowan playing.

“Beautiful day.” Olivia smiled as she removed her sandals and dug her toes into the soft sand.

“Definitely,” I said with a surge of gratitude for this little slice of paradise that I was lucky enough to call home.

“Hey, look.” Gerard pointed at the water. Rowan and Zoey were splashing around in their tiger forms, their powerful bodies gliding through the water with ease. Larry stayed close to Sammie, keeping a watchful eye on him as they played in the shallows.

“Seems like everyone is having a good time.” I waved at the kids as we passed by. Sammie waved back excitedly, his face lit up with joy.

We continued further down the beach until we reached a small cave hidden behind a cluster of rocks, with a hum of energy coming from within. We were close to the chasm.

“Here we are,” I announced, gesturing toward the entrance. “This is where the magical chasm is.”

“Wow.” Gerard’s eyes went wide with wonder as he gazed into the cave. “It’s beautiful in here.”

“Isn’t it?” I led them inside. As we ventured deeper, the walls shimmered and sparkled, illuminated by the glow of a large quartz crystal—the chasm. The crystal pulsed gently, like the steady beat of a heart, its power radiating outwards.

“Is this what powers Winston?” Gerard looked completely flummoxed.

“Yep,” Olivia said. “Winston, the house, draws its energy from this very chasm. It’s a pretty remarkable system if you think about it.”

Gerard nodded thoughtfully, clearly impressed by the ingenuity of it all.

I steeled myself for the task at hand. “Let’s see if this thing can help us get rid of the amulet once and for all.” I took a deep breath, clutching the cursed object tightly in my hand before hurling it into the chasm.

“Come on, come on,” I muttered under my breath, crossing my fingers, and hoping for the best.

For a moment, it looked like the amulet had disappeared, swallowed up by the powerful energies swirling around the crystal. But then, to our collective shock, the chasm spat the amulet back out, sending it flying through the air and landing at our feet with a soft thud.

“Seriously?” I sighed. “Well, that was anticlimactic.”

“Looks like it’s not going to be that easy,” Olivia said, her brow furrowed in thought as she stared down at the amulet. “We’ll have to figure out another way to destroy it.”

AVA

A FEW DAYS had passed since that mama cat showed up to reclaim her baby, and the house had a somber feel to it. Lucy, my rude, sarcastic talking cat, was depressed.

Lucy hadn't cussed or yelled at anyone in *days*. She hadn't even told me how much she hated the scent of my new flavored coffee. Instead, she'd spent her days curled up on Zoey's bed, sleeping away the hours. Her sadness hung heavy in the air like a fog. The reason for her melancholy? She wanted babies, an impossible feat for a ghoul cat.

I'd tried everything to cheer her up: bringing her favorite snacks, letting her sleep on my pillow, even giving her full control over the TV remote. Nothing worked. It was time to have a heart-to-heart with my feline friend.

"Hey, Lucy." I stood in the doorway of Zoey's room.

Lucy lay curled up on the center of the bed, her eyes half-opened, staring blankly at the wall.

"Go away," she muttered without looking at me.

"Lucy, we need to talk about... well, you know." I walked into the room and sat down next to her on the bed. "We're all worried about you."

"TALK ABOUT WHAT? There's nothing to say. I want babies, but I can't have them because I'm a freak. End of story." She turned fully away so I couldn't see her face.

“Lucy, you’re not a freak. You’re just unique,” I tried to reassure her, gently stroking her fur.

“Unique?” she echoed bitterly. “That’s just a fancy word for weird, Ava.”

“Fine, you’re weird, but we love you because of it, not in spite of it. And I think there might be a way to help you feel better.”

“I doubt it.” She stood, stretched, then curled back into a ball, this time with her fluffy white tail covering her face.

I trudged downstairs, the weight of Lucy’s sadness still clinging to me like a heavy cloak. As I entered the kitchen, I found Olivia and Michelle sipping tea and chatting about something in hushed tones. The house was filled with the sounds of life going on around us. Wallie attended classes online, Larry and Zoey laughing with Rowan and Gerard in the living room.

“Hey.” My voice sounded a bit hollow, even to my own ears. “Have you noticed anything off with Lucy lately?”

OLIVIA RAISED AN EYEBROW, her concern evident in her eyes. “Yeah, she’s been awfully quiet these past few days. It’s not like her to be so subdued.”

“Subdued? Try comatose.” I ran a hand through my tangled hair. “She wants babies. She can’t have them because she’s a ghoul, but that doesn’t stop her from wanting them.”

“Aw, poor thing.” Michelle’s face softened. “It must be hard for her.”

“Tell me about it.” I sighed. “Any ideas on what we can do to help her?”

Michelle chewed her lip thoughtfully before a slow smile spread across her face. “What about a kitten? We could get her one from the pound or something. What’s one more cat in the house, right?”

“Sure,” Olivia said, nodding her agreement. “I mean, it’s not exactly having a baby, but maybe having something small and

helpless to care for will make her feel better. Plus, Snoozer could use a playmate to keep him company.”

“True.” I loved the idea. “And it’s not like we don’t have enough space for another fur ball. But what if Lucy doesn’t bond with it? What if it just makes her feel worse?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Michelle said firmly, her eyes shining with determination. “Besides, Lucy was desperate enough to steal another cat’s baby.”

“True.” A small smile tugged at my lips. “Let’s do it. Let’s get Lucy a kitten.”

Operation Kitty Rescue was officially underway as Michelle, Olivia, and I piled into Drew’s SUV.

The local animal shelter was buzzing when we arrived. Families milled about, peering into cages, and cooing over their potential new pets. As we approached the front desk, a pang of sympathy filled me for all the animals waiting for their forever homes.

“Can I help you?” asked the woman behind the counter, her eyes flicking between the three of us.

“Actually, yes.” I put on my most charming smile. “We heard that you just got some kittens in and we’re hoping one of them might be the perfect fit for our...uh, friend.”

“Your friend?” the woman raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical.

“Lucy,” Olivia clarified, giving me a nudge. “She’s been really down lately, and we think a kitten might be just the thing to cheer her up.”

“Ah, I see.” the woman nodded, her eyes softening. “Well, we have some orphaned four-week-old kittens, but they aren’t available for adoption for a few more weeks.”

Olivia smiled sugar sweet and touched the woman’s hand, forcing her to make eye contact. “Can you let us in to see the babies? How many are there?”

The woman stilled and focused on Olivia. “There are six. Two girls. Four boys.”

Olivia looped her arm with the woman's in a way I'd seen Luci do when he wanted something. The two of them moved down the hall to a room where the kittens were being held.

Michelle and I exchanged a glance and followed quickly behind.

Olivia then turned to the woman, not letting her go. She looked deep into her eyes and said, "You only have five kittens. One girl and four boys. There is a typo in the files that you should fix right away."

When Olivia released her hold on the woman, she left us alone.

"What was that new superpower?" I asked Olivia.

She grinned. "I've been practicing my demonic charm, AKA compulsion."

As we entered the kitten room, my heart swelled at the sight of the tiny fur balls tumbling around and batting at each other. It was impossible not to smile, even as I worried about how Lucy would react. One kitten in particular caught my eye: a little tortie with a tremendous amount of sass, who seemed to be instigating the surrounding chaos. She was mostly black, but her face had a line down the center. Half of her face was black and the other half blotchy brown. Oh, my goodness, how sweet.

"Olivia," I whispered, leaning in close. "That one. She's perfect. Look at her bossing everyone else around, just like our Lucy."

"Agreed." Olivia looked like she was ready to gush.

I went over to the kitten and scooped her up. "Let's get this little lady home to her new mom."

"Welcome to the family," I whispered to the kitten. I could hardly wait to show her to Lucy.

The moment we stepped through the front door, the anticipation was palpable. The tiny fur ball in my arms seemed to sense it too, her eyes wide and curious as she took in her

new surroundings. I called out, “Lucy, Snoozer. We’ve got a surprise for you.”

There was no response at first, just the quiet creaking of the old house settling around us. Then, the kitten let out a meow that echoed through the hallway, and suddenly it sounded like a herd of tiny elephants above our heads. Lucy came thundering down the stairs with Snoozer right behind her.

“Dear Satan’s whiskers, what was that glorious sound?” She skidded to a halt on the living room rug.

“Meet your new baby.” I introduced the kitten to Lucy and Snoozer. “You two are now parents.”

Lucy and Snoozer sniffed their new family member. It was heartwarming, really, seeing how quickly they took to her. And as Lucy began to boss everyone around again, a familiar sense of normalcy returned. “Her name is Lenore,” Lucy declared.

Okay, then. Lenore it was.

Later that night, I walked into the kitchen and found Ian standing by the counter, speaking in a strange language I’d never heard before. He appeared deep in conversation, despite the fact that there was no one else in the room. I checked both of his ears and saw no earbuds or any sign of a phone nearby.

“Um, Ian?” I asked cautiously. “Who are you talking to?”

He jumped, clearly startled, and quickly switched to English. “Oh, uh, just practicing my, um, language skills. You never know when they might come in handy, right?”

“Sure.” I tried not to sound as suspicious as I felt. “Well, don’t let me interrupt your...language practice.”

Backing out of the kitchen, I headed back upstairs. If Ian didn’t get his crap together, I was going to have to call Drew.

OLIVIA

I WAS JUST ABOUT to sit down with a cup of tea when my phone rang. Ava's name and number flashed on the screen. "Hey, Ava. What's up?"

"I have the most fantastic idea," she said. "You know how Wallie's room has been sitting empty since he and Michelle moved into their apartment a while ago? Well, what if we turned it into a portal room?"

I widened my eyes. That woman really was clever. "Ava, you're a genius. Let me grab Sam and Luci, and we'll head over."

"Great, see you soon." She hung up, leaving me grinning at my phone.

"Sam, Luci," I called, standing up from my cozy armchair. "We're going to Ava's. She's got a brilliant idea for Wallie's room." Sam emerged from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel, while Luci strolled down the stairs.

As we made our way to Ava's house, I considered the possibilities a portal room would bring. It was perfect. We could have dedicated places to go wherever we needed to go.

Entering Ava's house through the back door, we found her in the living room with Michelle and Wallie. They were sitting on the couch, their heads bent together as they discussed something animatedly.

"Hey, guys," Ava said when she saw us. "I was just telling Michelle and Wallie about my idea for the portal room."

“Okay, so how many portals are we talking about?” I got down to business. “And where do you want them to go?”

Ava thought about it for a moment. “One to the school, another to Michelle’s parents’ house, one more to Wallie and Michelle’s apartment, and maybe even one to Wade’s house in Philly.”

“Sounds doable.” Lucifer nodded his approval.

“Before we jump into creating the portal to Wade’s house in Philly, I should probably call Jax,” Ava said, pulling out her phone as we made our way upstairs. “You know, just to make sure the house is empty and all.”

“Good idea,” I said.

Ava dialed Jax’s number and put the phone on speaker so we could all hear. Jax answered on the first ring. “Hello, Ava.”

“Hey, Jax. You’re on speaker,” Ava said. “We’re working on a bit of a project here, and we were hoping to create a portal to Wade’s house. We just wanted to check if it’s empty right now.”

“Yes, it’s currently vacant. Did you need one of my vampires to head over there to test the new portal out?” Soft whispers filtered through the phone. Then Jax added, “Hailey said she could run over there.” Hailey was Jax’s mate, Ava’s friend, and the owner of Ava’s old house in Philly.

“That would be nice. Thanks,” Ava said, and then hung up.

When we reached Wallie’s old room, Winston opened the door for us.

“Winston, we’ll need your help with this. First, let’s clear out the room and set it up for some powerful magic.” I stepped forward but hit an invisible barrier.

I glanced at Ava for a little help because Winston still liked to mess with me. Not as much as he had a year or so ago. Now it was more like a game. He liked to tease me.

Before Ava could intervene, the house shook and the floor to Wallie’s bedroom lifted, ceiling and all, dust flying everywhere, and slammed into the upper floor. Banging and

creaking sounds came from the attic. Then everything fell silent again. A second later, it lowered, clicking back into place to reveal an empty room as though nothing had happened. Even the freaking dust disappeared. Tentatively, I reached out with my hand to see if the magical wall was still there. It wasn't, so I walked into the room.

"Thanks, Winston," I said.

Winston's reply was a warm, humming feeling under my feet. It was the closest thing to a hug that a house could give someone. I almost asked him if that meant he liked me, but I wouldn't push my luck with the magical house.

Next, Winston started changing the room. The window morphed into a doorway. Then several other doorways appeared around the room. It was more than we needed, but that meant we had room to add more portals later on. They looked as though if we walked through them, we'd step right out to the front lawn. We were a story too high for that to be safe.

Luci stepped up next to me. "Which portal is first?"

"The school since I know exactly where to go." Rune Academy had its own portal room that I'd helped create.

I stepped up and focused my magic into the doorway where the window used to be. My energy was a cool, silvery blue, and I watched the portal to the school take shape before my eyes.

"One down," Luci said as he turned to Michelle. "Since I haven't been to your parents' house, can I pull the image from your mind?"

Michelle eyed him for a moment, then nodded. "What do I need to do?"

"Just visualize where they want the portal in their house. Then we hold hands, and I see where to place the portal." Luci held out his hand.

"Okay." Michelle closed her eyes. "Mom said the hall closet would be the best place."

Michelle placed her hand in Luci's, making him shiver. "Baby Butt is growing so strong. Her power is unlike anything I've felt in a very long time."

I glanced at Ava, who winked at me. We all knew the Baby Butt was going to be a force. It was a good thing that the baby had a village to help raise her and teach her about her powers.

Luci faced the door to the left of the Academy portal. His magic was a vibrant red that crackled like electricity, and he made quick work of creating the portal to Michelle's parents.

Her mom poked her head in when it was complete and waved at everyone. Her little corgi, Roxie, came through the portal and danced around Michelle's feet.

"Come on through," Michelle said. Her parents stepped cautiously through the portal. Kathy and Mark looked around in amazement, their eyes widening as they took in their new surroundings.

"Wow." Mark shook his head. "You guys weren't kidding. This is incredible."

"Amazing." Kathy stepped forward to envelop Ava in a hug. "Thank you so much, dear. This will make visiting so much easier, and we can have the birth here now."

"Anything for family," Ava said, grinning.

Ava bent down and picked up the cutie so Michelle could give her smooches. Michelle was in her last month of pregnancy, so bending down was not as easy for her as it was a few months ago.

Michelle took Roxie from Ava and followed her parents back through the portal.

Wallie and Michelle's apartment was next. That one was easier since there was already a portal in the closet. "Winston, could you just move that portal out?"

He groaned and the closet door disappeared. The portal inside scooted forward to match the others, though on the left wall.

Once it was settled, Ava walked through and back again. "It checks out perfectly."

I moved on to the final portal. Wade's house in Philly. "Where are we putting this one?"

Ava thought about it. "Let's put it in the mudroom off the garage."

"Perfect." When I finished with the portal, Hailey stepped through.

"Hi guys!" Behind her, a tiny dragon flew into the room and did a few circles around us all before landing on Hailey's shoulder. "Meet Flint, my uh, new friend. Kendra calls him my familiar, but I'm not a witch, so I'm not sure that's correct."

Hailey laughed, and Ava stepped closer to her, holding out her hand to the little guy. "Hello, Flint."

"We found him in Australia when we rescued Ransom," Hailey explained.

When Hailey and her tiny dragon left, the sound of the front door opened. We heard it upstairs because Winston made the sound echo so that Ava always knew when someone was there.

"Hello?" a familiar voice called out.

"That's Alfred," Ava said and darted out of the room.

The rest of us followed. We reached the living room just as Ava pulled Alfred into a hug.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of Winnie, who looked pale and exhausted. She'd lost a good fifteen pounds since the last time I'd seen her, just a few weeks ago.

"Is everything okay?" I asked softly, my gaze flicking between the couple.

"Aw, don't worry about me," she said with a feeble wave of her hand. "Just a little under the weather, that's all."

"No, you're not." Ava wrapped an arm around Winnie's shoulders. Concern was etched on Ava's face. "You look really sick, Winnie. Let's get you upstairs. Wallie, can you make her some soup and bring a couple bottles of water up?"

"Really, it's nothing," Winnie insisted, but her eyes betrayed her.

Luci took that moment to excuse himself. "I'll see what I can find out about this cancer," he murmured for me only to hear. Then he dematerialized.

When we reached Winnie's bedroom, Ava pulled out her phone. "Mom, Dad, Winnie's home, and she doesn't look well at all. I thought you should know."

I watched as Ava listened to her parents on the other end. Her brow furrowed with worry, and she promised to keep them updated.

"Thanks. I'll call you later." She hung up and looked over at Winnie, who was tucked in bed, shivering despite the warmth of the room.

"Let me try something," Ava said, approaching Winnie with resolve. She sat beside her and hovered her hands above Winnie's body. A soft glow emanated from her fingertips, but it seemed to have no effect on Winnie.

"Dang it," Ava said under her breath, clearly frustrated. "Why isn't it working?"

"Maybe you need more power?" I suggested hesitantly.

"Or maybe this isn't something my healing powers can fix," Ava said. There was a crack in her voice that made my chest tighten.

"I could go to Faery and ask my uncle if they have any healers?" I watched helplessly, not coming up with any other ideas.

"That would be great. Thank you." She squeezed my hand and gave me an appreciative look.

With a deep breath, I wasted no time creating a portal to Faery, the Fae realm. The swirling vortex shimmered with ethereal light, and my heart thudded wildly as I stepped through, feeling the familiar tug of magic on my body.

The moment I stepped into Faery, my senses were immediately overwhelmed with the sheer vibrancy of the realm. It was like stepping into a painting come to life, every color more vivid than anything I'd ever seen in the human

world. The air hummed with the unmistakable thrum of magic, and it tingled on my skin.

Jess's voice rang out, pulling me from my reverie. "Mom!" She and Devan appeared at the edge of the clearing, their smiles wide as they ran toward me. They looked absolutely ethereal in fae clothing. Jess wore a flowing gown that shimmered like the morning sun, while Devan's tunic and breeches were the deep green of the forest. The fabric seemed to be crafted from some magical material that made them both look as if they were part of this enchanted land.

They actually were, since they were part fae. Their powers had woken up at the same time mine did.

"Jess, Devan." I hugged them tightly. "You both look amazing."

"Thanks, Mom." Jess glowed with happiness. "We love it here."

"Breena," Phira called out, joining us. Her smile was warm and welcoming, though her eyes held a trace of concern.

My bio-mom called me Breena a lot because that was the name she and Luci had picked out for me, before Phira had been banished to the Inbetween and I was taken from her and placed in the care of my human parents.

"You needed our help?" Phira asked with her brows knitted together.

"Yes," I said, my voice cracking slightly as the weight of the situation settled on me once more. "Winnie is really sick, and we're running out of options."

"Let's go speak to King Mitah." Phira placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "He might be able to help."

As we made our way through the lush gardens toward the palace, I marveled at the beauty of Faery. Delicate winged creatures flitted among the flowers, and the air smelled like warm honey and fresh rain. The magic was in every breath I took, and for a moment, I allowed myself to believe that everything would be all right.

“Olivia,” King Mitah greeted me with a warm smile as we entered his throne room a while later. “It is good to see you. What troubles you?”

“Ava’s aunt Winnie is very sick with witch cancer. Do you think the fae healers could help?” I asked hopefully.

My uncle-king’s somber expression told me what kind of answer he had for me. “Unfortunately, there is no known cure for her illness.” He tapped a finger on his chin and looked thoughtful. “However, there might still be something we can do.”

“Anything,” I whispered, desperation edging my voice.

King Mitah squeezed my hand gently. “I already knew of this plight, and I knew of the witch Winnie’s search for a body. If you had not come to me now, I would have sent for you tomorrow. There is a fae woman who had a potion go very wrong. Her spirit has moved on, but her body remains. She had no family and died very recently. We haven’t performed the ceremony to let her body pass on to the earth yet.”

“Are you suggesting...?” I trailed off, not wanting to voice the possibility forming in my mind.

“Yes,” he said softly. “I can petition the court to see if they will allow Winnie to use the fae’s body instead of letting it pass on. However, the next court session isn’t for a few weeks.”

“Please, do whatever you can. I don’t know if Winnie has that long.”

He cupped my cheek. “I’ll do everything within my power to expedite the court proceedings. I can’t make any promises because the Elders are set in their traditions.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” I whispered, tears filling my eyes.

“Olivia,” he said gently, reaching out to touch my hand. “Remember that we are all connected in this world, and the bonds of friendship and family are our greatest strength. No matter what happens, never forget that.”

“I won’t,” I promised, squeezing his hand in return.

I returned from the Fae realm with strong emotions churning inside me. Hope, fear, and a sense of urgency tightened my chest as I thought about Winnie's fate hanging in the balance. As soon as my feet touched the living room floor, Ava stared at me expectantly, her eyes filled with concern.

"What did King Mitah say?" she asked.

"Okay, so good news and bad news." I tried to keep my tone light. "Good news is, there might be a solution." I told her about the fae woman who died. "The bad news is it could take a few weeks until we know anything for sure. Mitah will need to ask the court for permission to give the body to Winnie. Also, there's no known cure that the fae have."

Ava turned to the stairs. "Let's go fill Winnie and Alfred in. At least Alfred has the ability to tether Winnie's spirit to himself. That's an option if we need to use it. Or we could animate her."

I nodded. "It's a good plan."

Our only plan, because we needed to keep Winnie's ghost on earth until we got a body for her.

AVA

I SAT in a chair beside Winnie's bed, watching her sleep. Even in her sleep, I could sense her pain.

Alfred and I exchanged a worried glance before discussing our options in hushed tones. We had already considered tethering Winnie's spirit to Alfred using his necromancer powers, but we both knew that would only be a temporary solution. Having a ghost tethered to him for a lifetime would be draining to his powers and miserable for Winnie.

My healing powers were useless and bringing her back as a ghoul may or may not work in this body, since the healing didn't. We didn't know what the cancer would leave the body like. This was such a rare thing. We also had no idea if the original inhabitant of the body had done a spell to prevent animation. Many witches did.

"Isn't there *anything* else we can try?" I asked quietly, racking my brain for any magical loophole or ancient spell that might help.

"Unfortunately, we're running out of options," Alfred admitted. "But we'll keep searching. Maybe there's something we've overlooked. There's got to be something."

The sound of the front door opening and closing pulled me from my thoughts, and Rowan's and Zoey's voices echoed throughout the house. I glanced one last time at Winnie, who was dozing peacefully, and then made my way downstairs to greet them.

“Hey, you two,” I said as I entered the living room, stopping short when I saw a massive house plant that now dominated our coffee table. “Wow. That’s a lot of green.”

“Isn’t it great?” Zoey beamed and stroked one leaf. “We found it at this cool little nursery on the edge of town. We thought it’d be a pleasant addition to the place, you know, brighten it up a bit.”

“Yeah. We just need to pick a good place for it,” I said. It was nice, but geez, it was enormous. “How’s your dad?” I asked Rowan.

“He’s fine. One of the pride member’s houses caught fire. They figured it out to some old wiring, but Dad’s leading the repairs.”

He’d gotten a phone call and had to get back to Louisiana pronto. Olivia had portaled him home yesterday.

The front door flew open, and Ian stormed in, looking surly, like he’d just gone ten rounds with an angry bear. He stopped abruptly when he saw us, his eyes flicking between the houseplant and the three of us.

“Uh, hey there, Ian,” I said, taken aback by his expression. “Everything okay?”

He didn’t respond, simply stared at the plant for a long moment before wordlessly heading upstairs, leaving us all exchanging puzzled glances.

“Okay, what was that about?” Zoey raised an eyebrow.

“Who knows?” I shrugged, still a little uneasy. “Maybe he’s just having a rough day.”

“Maybe he’s allergic to plants,” Rowan suggested with a mischievous grin.

“Ha, yeah.” I chuckled halfheartedly, though I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to Ian’s behavior than met the eye.

No sooner had Ian disappeared from sight than the plant decided it was high time for a little dance. Its vines extended

in all directions, the leaves rustling like an agitated octopus on steroids.

Winston clearly wasn't amused by the plant's impromptu performance. He rattled his floorboards and opened and shut doors and cabinets in protest.

"Rowan, what the hell kind of—" Before I could finish my sentence, one of the plant's vines wrapped itself around Rowan, hoisting her into the air like some twisted version of a marionette. Her eyes bulged as the vine tightened around her throat, cutting off a scream.

"Rowan!" Zoey yelled, scrambling to help her cousin as I raced toward them.

"Get that thing off of her!" I clawed at the vine with my bare hands. It was like trying to untangle a garden hose made of steel. My powers wouldn't be of any use against a demented houseplant. I could maybe strike it with lightning, but that would almost definitely hurt all of us. Where the heck was Olivia when we needed her?

"Guys? What's going on?" Olivia asked, entering through the kitchen as if I'd summoned her to appear.

"Olivia, do something," I cried out, my nails digging into the vine as Rowan's face turned an alarming shade of purple.

"Right, got it," Olivia said, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the vines. She said a few words under her breath, and a shimmering wave of fae magic erupted from her fingertips, enveloping the plant. The vines shuddered and began to retract, releasing their death grip on Rowan.

"Got you," Zoey gasped, catching her cousin as she slumped to the floor, unconscious. I fell to my knees beside them, immediately channeling my healing energy into Rowan's bruised throat.

"Is she okay?" Olivia asked, concern etched on her face.

"Give me a moment." I flowed as much magic as I could into the poor tiger.

Finally, Rowan's breathing eased, and her eyelids fluttered open. "What happened?" she croaked, still dazed.

"Your new houseplant tried to strangle you." I tried not to sound as exasperated as I felt. "Next time, maybe we stick to something less, erm, murderous."

"Thanks." Rowan rubbed her throat as Zoey helped her to her feet.

"Seriously, though," Zoey said, eyeing the now-dormant plant warily. "Where did that come from? We just bought it at a regular nursery. I've gotten a ton of plants from there."

Olivia studied the plant. She touched its leaves with her fingers. "It's normal now. I mean, I don't feel *any* magic in it."

"Let's just hope this is the last surprise guest for a while." I cast one last wary glance at the innocent-looking houseplant before turning my attention back to Rowan.

"Rowan, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." She coughed and croaked a bit, still touching her throat gingerly. "Just a little shaken, mostly."

"Let's get you back to the guest house." Zoey looped an arm around Rowan for support. "You could use some rest."

"Sounds like a plan," Rowan said weakly, and the girls headed toward the back door.

Once they were safely out of sight, I turned to Olivia with a raised eyebrow. "What the crap was that all about?"

"Spelled." She rubbed her temples as if trying to massage away a headache. "I felt a strong demonic energy when I stopped those vines."

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. "Just what we need, a demonic plant."

"Tell me about it," Olivia said with a sigh. "But when I reached out with my powers again, the energy was gone. It's almost as if someone, or something, was controlling it remotely."

“Remote control, demonic plant. Check that off our supernatural bingo.” I shook my head, struggling to suppress a snort of laughter. “What’s next? Possessed vacuum cleaners?”

“Let’s not tempt fate.” Olivia shivered. “We have enough on our plate already.”

“True,” I said. “Let’s check on Winnie and figure out our next move.”

“Right behind you,” Olivia said.

Just as I was about to take the first step toward the stairs, a small corgi came trotting down, her ears perked up and tongue hanging out. “Roxie?” She belonged to Michelle’s parents, which meant she slipped through the portal for a little visit.

“Looks like we have a visitor.” I bent to pet the enthusiastic pup. “Hey there, little girl.”

“Aw, she’s adorable,” Olivia cooed, joining me on the floor. “Isn’t that Michelle’s parents’ dog?”

“Yep, that’s their Roxie all right,” I confirmed, scratching the dog behind her ears. With a happy wiggle of her butt, the corgi nuzzled into my hand, clearly enjoying the attention.

The corgi spotted Lucy and Lenore curled up together in the cat bed by the fireplace. Her eyes lit up, and she raced toward them, her stubby legs moving comically fast.

“Uh-oh,” Olivia said, sharing a worried glance with me. “Lucy might not appreciate having her nap interrupted.”

“Understatement of the century,” I mumbled, watching with bated breath as the corgi skidded to a halt in front of the cat bed, her backside wagging furiously.

Lucy sucked in a deep breath, then screeched from her cat bed, eyes wide in terror as the corgi approached. “She’s come to eat my baby!”

“Eat your baby?” I glanced at the tiny kitten nestled beside her, then back to the corgi, who seemed more interested in sniffing their fur than devouring anyone. “Lucy, I think you might be overreacting just a tad.” I tried not to roll my eyes.

“Overreacting? This is no laughing matter, Ava. She’s a ruthless predator, a heartless monster, a—”

“Did someone say monster?” Michelle appeared on the staircase, breathless and looking mildly concerned. When she spotted the corgi, her expression changed to one of surprise. “Oh, There you are, Roxie. You’re a long way from home.” She cocked her head. “And yet somehow very near.

“Michelle, this *beast* is trying to eat my baby,” Lucy cried with all the dramatics, still clutching Lenore protectively.

“Beast?” Michelle echoed flatly, eyebrow raised.

I scooped up the corgi, who wiggled her body happily at the attention, then I handed her to Michelle.

Michelle cradled the dog like a baby and booped her nose. “She must’ve slipped into their portal closet when I wasn’t looking. Sneaky little thing.”

“Indeed.” Olivia watched the exchange with amusement. “Fear not, Lucy. Your baby will be safe from the dreaded corgi menace.”

“Menace is an understatement,” Lucy said, still glaring daggers at the dog.

“Right, well, I’ll just take him back to my parents’ house then,” Michelle said, turning to retreat upstairs.

“Good riddance,” Lucy grumbled as the corgi disappeared from view. She nuzzled her kitten gently, whispering, “That mean old dog is gone, sweetheart. Mama won’t let her hurt you.”

The baby hadn’t even woken up. “Crisis averted.” I shook my head in disbelief at the absurdity of it all.

OLIVIA

THE MORNING SUN WAS A WARM, comforting hug as I walked over to the guest house to pick up Zoey and Rowan. It was like the universe telling me that everything would be okay. How thoughtful of the universe to give me a pep talk before my first attempt at teaching kitchen witchery.

I was substitute teaching at the academy today, and to say I was a bundle of nerves didn't quite cover it.

"Zoey, Rowan?" I poked my head through the door.

They were waiting for me. "Let's get this tour started," Zoey said with Rowan at her side.

Zoey had been accepted for fall classes at Rune Academy, and she couldn't wait to show her cousin around the academy.

"Okay, everyone," I said as we went up to the portal room. "I'll be subbing a kitchen witchery class today, so you're welcome to join me and learn something new." I paused for a moment, then added, "Or watch me fail spectacularly. Either way, it should be entertaining."

As we entered the classroom, nerves bubbled up inside me. Kitchen witchery was more Ava's thing, not mine. But Ava had turned down the offer to teach. She'd told me it wasn't much different from fae magic. Now, I was expected to teach these eager kids how to infuse magic into their baking. No pressure, right?

"Hi, hello." I did my best to sound confident in front of a room full of teenagers. "I'm Ms. Olivia, and I'm your sub. Today,

we're going to bake muffins. But not just any muffins—magical muffins.”

The students' eyes lit up with excitement, and I swallowed hard, hoping I wouldn't let them down.

“First, you'll need to choose a spell or intention you'd like to infuse into your muffins. It could be something simple, like bringing happiness or luck to the person who eats it, or something more complex, depending on your skill level.” I glanced over at Zoey and Rowan, who exchanged excited whispers. As tigers, they couldn't infuse, but they could bake.

“Once you have your spell in mind, we'll start baking. As you add in the ingredients, focus on the magic you want to incorporate and visualize it swirling within the batter.”

I walked around the room, giving guidance and answering questions while trying not to let my inexperience show. The kids seemed to be enjoying themselves, and I couldn't help a little pride when their faces lit up as they worked their magic into the muffins.

I clapped my hands together to get their attention. “Now that everyone's muffins are in the oven, we'll just have to wait and see how they turn out. Remember, practice makes perfect, so if your first attempt doesn't quite go as planned, don't get discouraged. You can try again.”

As the smell of freshly baked muffins filled the air, I quizzed the kids on stuff from their last chapter in the Kitchen Witchery book, flipping pages and pulling stuff out at random.

When the timer went off, I stood. “It's taste-testing time. Let's see how your magical muffins turned out.”

The students eagerly presented their creations, eyes widening as the spells hidden within took effect.

“Ms. Olivia, try mine first,” said a girl with pigtails who proudly held up her blueberry muffin. I obliged, taking a bite and immediately experienced an explosion of flavor. It was like every single taste bud on my tongue had suddenly become extra sensitive. Wow, maybe magic really did make everything better.

“Whoa.” I blinked, trying to regain my composure. “This is delicious. It’s like the flavors burst inside my mouth, intensifying every ingredient. Great job, sweetie.” The girl beamed at my praise, and I moved on, still savoring the lingering taste of the blueberries.

“Here, Ms. Olivia,” said a boy who looked like he’d spent more time eating the batter than actually baking his muffin. I hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. Why not? Taking a bite, I braced myself for whatever spell awaited me.

Laughter bubbled up inside me, completely uncontrollable. I doubled over, tears streaming down my face as I tried to catch my breath. The classroom erupted into a chorus of giggles, the kids reveling in the pure joy of their magical mischief.

“Okay, okay,” I managed between gasps of laughter. “That’s definitely an A+ for execution.” The boy grinned, clearly proud of himself.

My laughter finally subsided, and I wiped away the tears, mentally preparing myself for the next unpredictable concoction.

I approached the next student, a girl with wide eyes and a tight braid. She looked at me, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief. “You might not want to eat this one,” she warned, clearly trying to stifle a giggle.

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by her caution. “Why is that?”

“Because it’ll turn you into a chicken,” she whispered conspiratorially, as if sharing a secret.

“Ah, I see.” I pretended to stroke my chin thoughtfully, then leaned in closer and whispered back, “Well, in that case, I think I’ll take this one home for my husband, Mr. Sam. He could use a good clucking.” The classroom erupted in laughter, and even the girl couldn’t help but join in. I winked at her and moved on to the next teen, who blushed under my scrutiny.

“What do we have here?” I tried to maintain some semblance of authority, despite the lingering traces of laughter in my

voice. The boy hesitated before shyly offering me his muffin. It was a lovely shade of lilac, adorned with delicate frosting swirls.

“Give it a try,” he urged, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Here goes nothing.” I took a bite and braced myself for whatever magical effect was about to hit me. I chewed, swallowed, and waited. Nothing happened. At least, nothing I could immediately detect.

“Did I do something wrong?” the boy asked, disappointment clouding his face. And then, just like that, I had no idea who or where I was. Panic surged through me, and I glanced around the room, searching for clues.

“Uh, Miss Olivia?” the boy called out hesitantly, and my memory snapped back into place. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” I clutched at his station, still reeling from the brief moment of disorientation. “That was impressive.” And completely terrifying. I swallowed hard and forced a smile. Then I told the class what happened. “His spell made me forget who I was for a few seconds. Very well done.”

I’d have to look up what spell he used and file it away for a rainy day.

“Really?” He beamed, clearly relieved by my approval.

“Absolutely.” I tried to shake off the lingering unease.

As I made my way around the room, tasting each magical muffin, I encountered a wide array of spells, from one that made my hair temporarily change color to another that caused me to speak in rhyme for a full minute. The students eagerly watched, thrilled with the chaos they’d created.

“All right, my little kitchen witches,” I said with a grin as I surveyed the classroom. “I must say that I’m thoroughly impressed. You’ve all managed to not only create delicious muffins but also effectively weave magic into them. Bravo. You guys should give yourselves a pat on the back. I mean, who knew that magic-infused baking could be so... uh, transformative?” I chuckled, recalling the rollercoaster of

sensations and emotions I'd experienced while tasting their creations.

A chorus of giggles echoed through the room, and the students exchanged amused glances.

"Does this mean we all get As?" one eager young witch piped up, her eyes hopeful.

"Indeed, it does." I nodded my head. "Each and every one of you has demonstrated exceptional creativity and skill today. So yes, congratulations, you've all earned yourselves an A for this class."

The room erupted into cheers and high-fives as the students celebrated their success. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

"Okay, okay." I raised my hands to quiet them down. "Let's not get too carried away. Remember, there's still plenty of learning to do in your next classes, so don't let this success go to your heads. It's time for us to clean up." I helped the kids pack up their muffins and clean their stations.

"Thank you, Ms. Olivia," they murmured as they began tidying up their workstations and gathering their belongings.

"Hey, don't thank me," I said with a wink. "You guys are the ones who put in all the hard work and made this class a memorable experience. Keep exploring your talents, and who knows what amazing things you'll accomplish?"

As the students filed out of the classroom, Zoey and Rowan going with them, chattering excitedly about their magical culinary adventures, a warm sense of accomplishment settled in my stomach. Sure, my taste buds may have gone on an unexpected journey today, but it was well worth it to witness the creativity, passion, and growth taking place right before my eyes.

AVA

“It’s time for a friendly game of Clue.” I organized the board game as Zoey, Rowan, Larry, Michelle, and Wallie gathered around the table. My gaze darted to the clock on the wall, waiting for Olivia to arrive so we could head to the coven meeting together.

“Ah, yes, because nothing says friendly like accusing each other of murder,” Lucy said from her usual spot on the windowsill.

“Rowan did it in the library with the candlestick.” Wallie laughed and pointed at Rowan before we even started the game.

“Nice try, Wallie. But first, we have to shuffle the cards.” I chuckled at his eagerness.

As we dove into the game, Ian sat off to the side, watching us intently. The way he stared at Rowan made me uncomfortable, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.

“Colonel Mustard in the conservatory with the revolver.” Rowan’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts as she made her guess.

“Wrong,” Zoey responded playfully. “You’ll never figure it out.”

“Oh, yes I will, just you wait,” Rowan said, her competitive streak showing.

“Hey Ian, why don’t you join us?” I hoped to distract him from his creepy staring contest with Rowan.

“Uh, no thanks. I’m just enjoying watching the game.” He twitched and forced a smile.

“Suit yourself.” I narrowed my eyes at him. It was time for an intervention.

“Excuse me, everyone. I need to step outside for some fresh air.” Staring at my brother-in-law, I flared my nostrils. “Ian, how’s about you join me outside? Now.” I grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the living room before he could protest.

“What’s going on, Ava?” Ian looked offended once I got him on the back deck, the warm evening breeze lifting my hair.

“Cut the crap, Ian. I saw you staring at Rowan, and it’s creeping me out. What’s your deal?” I folded my arms across my chest. If he answered the wrong way, I was zapping him with a little lightning. He was a hunter. He could handle it.

He waved his hands in mock-supplication. “Staring? No, no, I was just watching the game.”

“Really? Because it looked like you were trying to bore holes into her skull with your eyes.” I glared and waited for him to explain that.

“Okay, fine, maybe I was staring a little.” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “It’s not what you think.”

“Enlighten me, please.” I didn’t bother hiding how furious I was.

“Look, Ava, I’m sorry if it seemed creepy. I promise I won’t do it again.” He avoided my gaze. “Can we just go back inside?”

“Fine.” It didn’t appear I’d be getting any answers out of him. “But remember, I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Understood.” Ian nodded once, walked back into the house.

I turned to follow just as Olivia materialized in my kitchen. “Hey.”

She grinned. “Hi. You ready to go?”

“Almost.” I glanced back at the board game in progress, then turned to Ian. “Ian, you should probably head out. Now.”

“Right,” he mumbled, stuffing his hands in his pockets and heading for the front door without another word.

I pulled my phone from my back pocket and texted Wade.

You working tonight?

No, it's my night off. I'll be right up.

“Everything okay?” Olivia asked, concern furrowing her brow as we watched Ian leave.

Wade emerged from the basement. “Hang on,” I murmured. I waited for him to join Olivia and me before explaining about Ian and his weirdness. “Wade, can you sit with the kids? Ian was watching Rowan like he wanted to strangle her, and it was creeping me out. I told Ian to leave, but I'd feel better if you were up here keeping an eye on things.”

“Sure.” Wade moved to the fridge where he had his own special stash of bagged blood. It was convenient for him to have some up here, as well as his apartment in the basement.

I grabbed the amulet from my office, then my car keys. “Guys, Olivia and I are heading to that coven meeting. We'll be back later.”

“Have fun,” Zoey called out, grinning mischievously as she moved her game piece.

We pulled up to Melody's house fifteen minutes later. The coven members were already gathered in Melody's cozy living room, murmuring amongst themselves. As we entered, the conversation died down and all eyes turned to us—or rather, the amulet I held in my hand.

“Thank you for coming, everyone,” Melody said. “Ava has brought something for us to examine tonight.”

I stepped forward, holding the amulet out for everyone to see. “I've been trying to destroy this thing, but so far, no luck.”

Melody stepped closer, her gaze locked on the amulet. She reached out a hand, then hesitated, as if feeling an invisible barrier. “Ava, this amulet is tethered to you. It’s giving off some seriously bad vibes. You need to find a way to get rid of it.”

“Trust me, Melody, we tried. But nothing seems to work. We thought we’d ask the coven to see if anyone knew anything else.” I’d hoped someone would tell me how to destroy it. The news about it being tethered to me was unnerving. “What do you mean, it’s tethered to me?”

“I mean, it’s drawing on your magic.” She squinted. “I can’t tell well enough to see if it’s hurting you, but it can’t be helping. It’s too evil.”

Olivia touched my arm. “I can’t sense it at all.”

“Nor can I.” I stared at the amulet and tried to use my inner magic to visualize the tether, but it wouldn’t come to me. “This thing is too stinking powerful.”

I handed it off to the twins, Ben and Brandon. They examined it before passing it on to the next coven member. “I haven’t seen anything like it,” Ben said.

Brandon shook his head. “It feels old.”

“The Viking necromancers had it.” I told the coven all about the Vikings and how I’d killed them with my powers, which had not been my intention at the time. My lightning powers were harder to control when my emotions were high or my life or the life of a loved one was threatened.

When the last member, Leena, looked the amulet over, she handed it back to me. “Sorry, I’ve never seen it either.”

“Thank you for looking into it.” I carefully placed the amulet back into the small velvet pouch I’d brought it in.

“Of course, Ava,” Melody said. “Just be careful until you can get rid of it, all right?”

“Believe me, I will,” I promised.

She looked at the gathered coven. “Please, check your grimoires, family histories, and the like. If you think of any

ideas, even remote ones, call Ava.”

They murmured their agreement, then we stayed and enjoyed some food with the group, catching up. It was nice to have an evening away, have a glass of wine, and talk to my friends.

By the time we returned home, the kids had cleaned up the game and were nowhere in sight. Lucy and Snoozer were snuggled into one cat bed, with Lenore between them.

“Did you find a way to destroy that amulet?” Lucy asked without opening her eyes. Seriously, what was it with cats and their sixth sense?

“Unfortunately not.” I sighed and put the amulet on the mantel. “No one had any ideas we haven’t already tried.”

“Maybe we should ask Luci for help,” Olivia suggested.

“He’s already looked at it, but we could ask him to take another look.” I closed my eyes and summoned him. “Lucifer. I could use your help.”

Lucifer appeared before us in his normal silent and kinda creepy way. “What’s up, ladies?” he asked, his devilish grin as smug as ever.

“I’d like you to take another look at this amulet.” I handed it to him.

When it touched his hand, he frowned. “When I looked at it before, it wasn’t tethered to you. Have you been handling it?”

“Well, yeah. Liv and I have been trying to destroy it, but it just won’t die.”

“Can you try to destroy it?” Olivia asked.

“Let’s see.” Lucifer held the amulet in his palm. With a flash of hellfire, he attempted to incinerate the cursed thing. Surprise, surprise, the amulet remained unscathed.

“Interesting,” Lucifer mused, his eyes narrowing. “This amulet is quite resilient.”

“Tell us something we don’t know,” I said under my breath.

“I can’t destroy it,” Lucifer admitted, a hint of frustration in his voice. “But I can keep it in my collection until you find a way to get rid of it for good.”

Lucifer took a deep breath, his eyes glowing with power. He raised a hand over the amulet, muttering an incantation under his breath. A sharp pain shot through my chest as the tether between the amulet and me broke.

“Ouch. That was intense.” I rubbed my chest over my heart.

“Sorry about that.” Lucifer didn’t sound particularly apologetic. “The tether is broken now, but you mustn’t touch the amulet again. It might reattach itself to you.”

“Thanks for the warning.” I was grateful for his help, despite his smug attitude. “And thank you for getting it off of me.”

“Take care, ladies,” Lucifer said, disappearing in another puff of smoke with the amulet safely tucked away.

OLIVIA

I HAD JUST WALKED into my kitchen when I spotted Lucy, her paw expertly prying open one of the upper cabinets.

It hadn't been the first time Lucy-Fur had come over. For whatever reason, she liked to visit on occasion. I really hadn't paid that much attention to why.

"No," I yelled. That was where I'd stashed the magic-laced muffin I'd brought home the other day. You know, the one that turned people into chickens. Of course, cats weren't known for their impeccable listening skills, so naturally, Lucy completely ignored me.

In a flash, Lucy thrust her head into the cabinet and emerged with the tainted muffin clenched in her little feline jaws. She tore off a huge chunk and swallowed it whole before I could even take a step toward her.

"Lucy, you furry little idiot!"



Before the words fully left my mouth, Lucy transformed right before my very eyes—from a fluffy white cat to a plump, squawking chicken. She let out an indignant cluck and bolted back through the still-open kitchen door. So much for a quiet morning at home.

“Great.” I sighed. “Just what I needed today.”

With no choice but to chase after the newly minted poultry version of Lucy, I sprinted out the door and followed the squawking chicken across the lawn, past the two new houses, around the pool, up the deck and into Ava’s kitchen.

As I entered Ava’s house, I found the place teeming with people. The kids were gathered around the kitchen table getting ready to eat, oblivious of the panicked chicken-cat hybrid frantically darting through the room. “Excuse me, pardon me.” I wove around them in pursuit of Lucy.

“Olivia?” Ava called out in surprise. “What on earth are you doing here?” She stared at Lucy-etta in shock.

“Long story, but that chicken is Lucy.” I puffed, pointing at the panicked bird. “She ate a prank muffin.”

Ava’s eyes widened in disbelief, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing. “Eggcellent.” Together, laughing our butts off, we tried to corner Lucy without breaking any furniture.

“Olivia, remind me later to have a serious conversation about magic-laced baked goods and their proper storage,” Ava said.

“DEAL.” I grunted, barely suppressing a laugh about the absurdity of the situation. “First, let’s catch ourselves a chicken.”

“Lucy ate a magic-laced muffin and turned into a chicken,” Ava yelled out as we followed a screeching Lucy past Larry, Zoey, Rowan, Wallie, and Michelle. “We need to catch her.”

“Wait, what?” Larry said, his eyebrows raised in confusion.

“Long story.” I rolled my eyes. “Can you just help us catch Lucy?”

“Sure thing.” Zoey joined our ragtag chase team, along with Larry, Wallie, and Rowan.

“I’m too large to run after a chicken, so I’ll stay here and keep an eye on breakfast.” Michelle settled back in the chair and forked up a big scoop of eggs. “Erm, sorry, Lucy!”

It was hard to chase a chicken when laughing this hard.

“Okay, everyone spread out,” Ava said. “We have to corner her before she gets too far.”

“Or before she lays an egg.” The visual that statement brought to my mind made me stop and clutch the wall as I laughed.

The group collectively groaned at my bad joke. “Everyone’s a comedi-hen,” Wallie said, and then of course everyone laughed. The buttfaces.

“Come on, back to it,” Ava yelled.

We chased Lucy through the house and eventually outside, where she darted around the yard like a feathered rocket.

“Got her,” Larry cried triumphantly, finally scooping up the feathery, shrieking Lucy.

Just as I breathed a sigh of relief, Ava gasped and pointed toward the beach. “Uh, guys?” she said, her voice a mix of amusement and disbelief. “You might want to take a look at this.”

Our gazes followed her finger, and we found ourselves staring down at Ian, who was dancing naked on the beach like a madman.

“Wow,” Rowan said, shaking her head. “I knew Ian was a little off, but I didn’t think he’d go full-on nudist dance party.”

“Uh, should we do something?” Wallie asked, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. “That’s just weird.”

“Maybe someone should go down there and give him a towel or something.” Zoey bit her lip, trying to suppress her laughter.

“More like a straitjacket,” I said. “What is happening with this day? Clucking cats and nudist brothers-in-law?” He wasn’t my brother-in-law, but we were all so close it kind of felt like it.

Ava closed her eyes and shook her head before turning away from the sight of Ian's wriggling member. "I'm never going to be able to burn that image from my memory, but Ian's not our problem right now," Ava said firmly. "Our focus is on getting Lucy back to normal."

"Agreed." My gaze flicked between Ian's naked gyrations and the chicken in Larry's arms. "But honestly, can this day get any stranger?"

"Olivia." Ava smirked, patting me on the shoulder. "In our world, there's always room for more weirdness."

She wasn't wrong.

Once inside, I plopped down on the couch. Ava and the rest stood around me, waiting for an explanation.

"Okay, so..." I tried to find the right words to explain the bizarre series of events. "I brought home a muffin laced with magic from the kitchen witchery class I taught. The plan was to let Sam eat it as a prank, but I forgot about it. Lucy managed to get her paws on it, and now we have a chicken instead of a cat." I looked at the poultry and realized she was glaring little chickeny daggers at me. "From the other muffins, the effects shouldn't have lasted this long, though."

"Wait, so the muffin turned her into a chicken?" Rowan asked, scratching her head.

I nodded. "And now we need to figure out how to turn her back."

"Any ideas?" Ava asked.

"Unfortunately, no." I sighed. "But we've dealt with weirder things before. We'll figure this out."

"Maybe there's something in one of my spell books." Ava headed toward her bookshelf.

As Ava searched through her collection of magical tomes, I recalled the days when our lives were simpler. No talking cats or magical mishaps. Even with all the chaos, I wouldn't trade our supernatural adventures for anything.

“Found it.” Ava held up a dusty old book. “There’s a spell in here to reverse animal transformations.”

“Perfect,” I said.

Ava read aloud from the book, her voice steady and confident as she chanted the words. A shimmering light enveloped Clucy-Fur, and within moments, our sassy feline friend was back to her normal self.

“Lucy,” I cried out, scooping her up in my arms. She hissed at me, clearly not pleased with the whole ordeal.

“Unhand me, you fool.” Lucy squirmed out of my grasp. “I need to find Lenore and recover from this traumatic experience.”

“I really am sorry, Lucy,” I said sheepishly, watching her strut away with her usual air of feline superiority. I exchanged a glance with Ava, who simply shrugged.

“Never a dull moment around here, huh?” I remarked, putting an arm around her shoulder.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Ava smiled, leaning into me as we watched Lucy disappear down the hallway, her tail held high.

Later that afternoon, Sam came over, looking a little more frazzled than usual. He must’ve had another one of his psychic visions.

“Hey, honey,” I greeted him as he walked through the door. “You okay?”

“You won’t believe the vision I just had,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “I saw Ava holding a swaddled baby, but I couldn’t see the baby clearly.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow, trying to suppress a grin.

Ava snorted. “Well, it’s probably Baby Butt.”

“Actually...” Sam hesitated. “I’m pretty sure it was Ava’s baby. I don’t know why, but I just had the strongest feeling.”

Ava threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, really? You calling me fat, Sam? You saying I look pregnant?” She stood

and turned sideways, rubbing her belly for emphasis, making us all chuckle.

“Uh, no, of course not.” Sam held up both hands, his face turning an impressive shade of red. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just...I don’t know what it could mean.”

“Relax, Sam.” Ava patted his arm. “I’m not offended. But seriously, me with a baby?” She shook her head, still grinning. “No way.”

As we continued to laugh off Sam’s vision, my mind started racing. What if there was more to it? Maybe it wasn’t literal, but something symbolic. Ava was half-necromancer, half-witch, and all-around magical badass. Could this vision be hinting at something else?

AVA

I JOLTED AWAKE, heart pounding as the sound of a scream tore through the night. Even Snoozer and Lucy were wide-eyed at the end of my bed, their fur standing on end. I said a few choice words under my breath because who doesn't love to be woken up in the middle of the night by a scream that could raise the dead? Then again, being half-necromancer, I could do just that on my own.

"Someone's screaming like they've seen a ghost," Lucy said, her snarky tone mirroring my thoughts. "Or worse."

"Great observation, Sher-cat." I scrambled out of bed.

The rest of the house was awake as well. Doors slammed and footsteps thundered down the stairs. Flinging the covers off me, I joined the frenzy, hoping there wasn't another paranormal catastrophe waiting for me downstairs.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I found Larry and Zoey at the backdoor. I joined them. Rowan and Ian were in the backyard fighting. Rowan looked weak, barely able to fight Ian off, while Ian screamed at the top of his lungs, "Why won't you die already?"

Terror coursed through me. What was Ian doing? How could he?

"Hey," I shouted as I stepped outside. "What's going on here?"

"Stay out of this, Ava," Rowan hissed, struggling to push Ian away.

"I will not stay out of it. This is my house!"

Ian's eyes were filled with a rage I'd never seen before.

"Seriously, Ian?" I said. Even as the words left my mouth, I sensed it.

This was not Ian. Not the Ian from a few weeks ago. Not the Ian I'd known for a while now.

As I stared at Rowan and Ian, it became clear that something deeper was going on here.

"Enough!" I shouted, my voice echoing through the night. My hand shot up, and with a flick of my wrist, a wave of magical energy erupted from my palm, separating Rowan and Ian like two magnets repelled by an invisible force as lightning cracked across the sky.

Sam and Olivia emerged from their house, their expressions a mixture of concern and annoyance. With his vampire strength, Sam flashed across the yard and easily subdued Ian.

Olivia caught up a minute later and dropped beside Rowan and Zoey. Zoey was checking Rowan over.

"Olivia, will you call Pearl?" I rubbed my temples. I didn't want to bother Drew, and Pearl needed to figure out what the heck was going on with her grandson. "We're going to need her help unraveling this mess."

She pulled out her phone and dialed the number. "Sure thing."

As I led Ian into my living room, followed by a sullen Rowan, the weight of the situation settled on my shoulders. The tension between them was almost suffocating, and I was going to get to the bottom of whatever their issues were.

"Listen." I folded my arms and leveled a stern gaze at the pair. "You two are going to start talking, and you're not leaving this room until we've figured this out. You've clearly got something against one another, and I want to know what it is."

"Good luck with that," Lucy said.

I looked down at her. "You're not helping. Go see if your kitten is okay."

The mention of her kitten had her scurrying from the room. She was a surprisingly devoted mama.

“Ian. Talk.” Olivia glared at my brother-in-law as she pocketed her phone. “Why were you trying to kill Rowan?”

He just growled and glared at Rowan. “This is all her fault.”

“Excuse me?” Rowan’s eyes flashing with indignation. “You’re the one who attacked me.”

Before anyone could say anything else, a bright flash illuminated the room as Pearl Walker appeared via portal. She took one look at Ian and gasped. “*You*. How are you back?” Her eyes were wide with shock and disbelief.

“Uh, what?” I glanced around the room, trying to follow her gaze. “Who are you talking about?”

“Never mind that,” Pearl snapped, her brows furrowing in worry. “Someone call Lucifer immediately.”

Great, because this night wasn’t confusing enough already.

Calling the ruler of Hell seemed to be a bit of an overreaction, but I summoned him just the same. “Luci?”

Pearl eyed me. “Does he not have a phone?”

I grinned. “He does. Summoning him annoys him.”

Olivia shrugged. “It really doesn’t bother him as much as he lets you think.”

“Happy witching hour,” Luci’s smooth voice filled the room as he materialized beside me. “Ah Ferdinand, what are you doing here?”

“Who’s Ferdinand?” Rowan asked, confusion etched on her face.

My face mirrored hers and everyone else’s in the room.

“Wait, what?” I echoed, just as bewildered. Luci was looking right at Ian, but seemed to be addressing someone else entirely.

“HELLO, LUCIFER,” Ian’s voice rang out, but it wasn’t Ian speaking. The tone, the inflection—it was completely different, as though another person had taken up residence in his body. Pearl’s earlier panic made sense. Ian was possessed by someone named Ferdinand, and for some reason, he was back.

“Spill it.” Luci had his King of Hell voice out. He meant business.

Ferdinand—or rather, Ian’s body being controlled by Ferdinand—sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “You see, it all began when I was summoned to kill a tiger family. Because I was bound to the summoner, I couldn’t refuse. I was instructed to eliminate ‘the family,’ but the summoner didn’t specify *which* members of the family exactly.” Ferdinand shrugged. “I took advantage of that ambiguity. I killed Zoey’s parents, yes, but I couldn’t bring myself to kill a child.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Zoey wrapped her arms around her middle.

Ferdinand bowed his Ian-head and clasped his hands together. “You are most welcome. Instead,” Ferdinand went on, “I found a dead tiger cub in India and left it beside Zoey’s parents, hoping that would be enough to satisfy the summoner. By the time I realized Zoey had run off, she was long gone and impossible to find.” He smiled wanly. “Impossible, irritable, whatever, I didn’t look.”

“But possessing Ian?” I pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

“He was the closest hunter,” Ferdinand-Ian said. “Stationed near the tigers in north Louisiana. This time when I was summoned, I was much stronger. I didn’t have to abide by her wishes, so I’ve been trying to discreetly kill her.”

I gasped. “The plant.”

“Yeah, among other things that failed spectacularly.” Ferdinand-Ian crossed his arms. “I’m rusty. I poisoned her dinner, but then she barely ate. I put a venomous snake in her bed.” He shrugged. “I have no idea what happened with that.”

Rowan scoffed. “I live in Louisiana. You think I don’t know to check my bed for snakes?”

Luci crossed his arms. “Who summoned you? Who’s responsible for all this?”

Ferdinand hesitated for just a moment before pointing a steady Ian-finger at Rowan. The room collectively gasped, and shockwaves rolled through us all.

“Rowan?” Zoey choked out, her voice trembling with disbelief and hurt. “You’re the reason my parents are dead? Why?”

Rowan just glared at us all.

“Zoey deserves answers,” I insisted, my gaze locked on Rowan. “She deserves to know why her entire life was turned upside down.”

Rowan glared at me, then Zoey. This wasn’t at all the sweet young woman who’d arrived days ago wanting to reconnect with her long-lost cousin. “My father was meant to lead our pride. He was strong, wise, and fair. But he was cheated out of his rightful place, and your birth only served to solidify the usurper’s hold on power.”

“So, you thought killing my parents would...what? Magically make everything in your life better?” Zoey’s voice cracked and tears welled up in her eyes. “Did you even care about the collateral damage you caused? Did you ever stop to think about how this would affect me?”

“Of course I did,” Rowan shot back, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears. “You were supposed to die as well. Sacrifices have to be made for the greater good.”

“Your version of the greater good is seriously warped” As much as I wanted to rip into Rowan some more, I forced myself to focus on the task at hand.

“Olivia, can you open a portal and bring Gerard here?” I hoped that Zoey’s uncle could help us make sense of this mess. “We need to tell him what’s happened.”

“Of course.” Olivia nodded, her eyes clouded with concern. She raised her hands, and a shimmering portal appeared in the middle of the room. A moment later, Gerard stepped through in his pajamas, looking disoriented.

“Wha—Ava? What’s going on?” He took in the tense atmosphere. His eyes widened as they landed on Rowan cowering on the couch, and his expression grew dark. “What did she do?”

“Rowan summoned a demon to kill Zoey’s parents,” I explained, my voice heavy with disappointment. “She wanted you to be the alpha and believed sacrificing Zoey and her family would achieve that goal.”

Gerard’s face paled, and he looked at Rowan with disbelief and heartbreak. “Is this true?”

With a shrug, Rowan nodded. “And I would do it again.”

Gerard put one hand on the back of the high-back chair. He was steadying himself, but probably didn’t want to be too obvious about it. “You betrayed not only Zoey and me but the whole pride.” His voice trembled with barely contained rage. “The punishment for killing an alpha without an official challenge is death.”

“Father, you have to understand,” Rowan pleaded, desperation etching her features. “It was for the greater good. Your rightful place was stolen from you.”

“Greater good?” Gerard shook his head, tears glistening in his eyes. “There’s nothing good in murdering innocent people and tearing families apart.”

“Please, Father, I did it for us, for our family.” Rowan sobbed, reaching out for him, but he moved away from her grasp.

“Enough,” Gerard snapped, his voice choked with emotion. “As much as it pains me, I am duty-bound by pride law. I cannot make exceptions, even for my own daughter.” He looked at me, anguish clear in his gaze. “Ava, I’m so sorry. I never imagined she’d do something like this.”

“Neither did I.” My heart ached for Gerard, who was losing his daughter, and for Zoey, whose world had been torn apart by someone she’d trusted.

“Is there anything we can do to help her at this point?” Olivia asked quietly, her voice barely audible over Rowan’s sobs.

“Unfortunately, no,” Gerard said with pain in his voice. “The law is clear, and we must abide by it.”

“Zoey.” Gerard turned toward my adopted daughter. “You’re the rightful alpha. You should take your place.”

“Me? An alpha?” Zoey shook her head. “No. Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’m more of a ‘tend to my plants and avoid responsibility’ kind of gal.”

“It is who you were born to be,” Gerard insisted.

“Look, even if I wanted to, which I don’t, I can’t be an alpha.” Zoey’s gaze darted nervously toward me. She took a deep breath before continuing. “I can’t form a bond to the pride because, well, I’m not alive.”

Gerard studied Zoey. “What do you mean, you’re not alive? Are you saying you’re dead?”

Zoey looked sheepish, so I said, “More like undead.” Then I looked at Rowan. “For someone who claims they’re innocent, you sure do squirm a lot.” With a flick of my wrist, I conjured magical handcuffs to hold her in place. The silver cuffs shimmered as they locked around her wrists.

“Is this really necessary, Ava?” Rowan asked, wincing as the cuffs tightened slightly.

“Let’s call it an insurance policy.” I gave her a mock grin. “Now, Zoey, why don’t you and Gerard have your heart-to-heart?”

Zoey shot me a grateful glance before turning her attention back to her uncle. They started talking about her life after her parents died, how she’d actually died herself before I found her and brought her back to life—animated her. It wasn’t easy listening to the pain in their voices, but she needed to get it out.

“Look, I didn’t ask to be brought back, but I’m grateful Ava found me.” Zoey had tears in her eyes. “She gave me a second chance at life and a family.” Larry scooted closer, glaring at Gerard. He’d been pretty quiet through all this, but anger simmered under the surface.

“Family is everything, kiddo.” Gerard placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Pearl stepped next to me. “When Lucifer gets the demon out of Ian, I’ll need Drew and Ian to go with Gerard to witness Rowan’s punishment and confession.”

I nodded with no idea what to say.

Pearl stepped down the hallway to call Drew to fill him in. She clearly didn’t have the same problem bothering him during his investigation at the academy.

“Ferdinand, Ferdinand.” Luci shook his head as he paced back and forth. “You should’ve known better than to let yourself be summoned and forced to kill someone. You should’ve contacted me immediately afterward, but instead, he took matters into his own hands. And you got summoned *again*.”

Luci snapped his fingers, and a man appeared next to Ian, who slumped into the chair. The man, Ferdinand, I assumed, looked human, but at the same time didn’t look human. The more I stared at him, the more I noticed. His eyes were a little too big. His nose flared out at the tip more than a human’s would. His ears were pointed slightly and his lips super thin.

Ferdinand didn’t make eye contact as he said, “Rowan summoned me again right before she arrived here. I had the strength to resist the summoning this time, but I chose not to. I wanted revenge for forcing me to kill an innocent family.”

“And that’s where I come in,” Luci said. “To punish him.”

I exchanged a glance with Olivia. This wasn’t going to end well for Ferdinand, that much was clear.

Luci snapped his fingers, and just like that, Ferdinand transformed into a tiny black kitten.

“Seriously, Lucifer?” I stared at the little kitty. Ferdinand made an absolutely adorable feline. “You turned him into a cat.”

Lucifer shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, he needs to be punished, doesn’t he? I’ll find a good family for him to live with for a hundred years or so.”

“Of all the punishments in Hell, you chose this?” I gestured at the tiny black kitten cowering on the floor.

“Hey, don’t underestimate the transformative power of being a helpless feline.” A wicked grin spread across his face. “Besides, why are you all so surprised? It’s the same thing we did with Lucy.”

“Wait, what?” Olivia and I said at the same time while turning our gaze toward Lucy, who was perched on the windowsill, looking thoroughly unimpressed by the revelation. My mind raced, trying to piece together the implications of what Luci had just said.

Lucifer chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Maybe I forgot to fill you in on the backstory of that. Sorry.”

“Could you be any more casual about dropping bombshells like that?” I made a mental note to have a long chat with Luci later. Meanwhile, the kitten huddled on the floor, looking utterly lost and terrified. A pang of sympathy for it tugged at my heart, even though it was once a demon who’d killed Zoey’s parents.

I stared at Lucy, trying to wrap my head around the fact that she had once been a demon before her feline transformation. It explained *so* much.

Lucy, however, seemed completely unfazed by the bombshell Lucifer had just dropped on us. In fact, she appeared utterly bored with the whole situation as she sat there, licking her paw nonchalantly.

“Worry about yourselves, “she drawled as she hopped down. She looked at the kitten and sniffed. “I’m keeping him, but I don’t like Ferdinand. His name is Poe.” She snatched up the newly transformed black kitten by its scruff and sauntered out of the room, Lenore trotting along behind her like a loyal little minion.

“Did...did she just—” Olivia stammered, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Apparently so.” Looked like we had another kitten in the house. I just hoped Ferdinand, er, Poe, didn’t talk like Lucy.

Snoozer, who'd been watching the entire scene unfold with his usual air of indifference, let out a heavy sigh, almost as if he were saying, "Here we go again."

With one last glance at us, he followed Lucy and the kittens out of the room.

AVA

“NOTHING LIKE A BIRTHDAY nap to make an old lady feel young again.” I stretched and rolled out of bed. After fluffing my hair and washing my mouth out, I made my way down the stairs. Snoozer, Lucy, and their kittens trailed behind me.

“Old? You’re practically a spring chicken compared to some of the witches we know.” Lucy leaped off of the stairs, then growled. “Maybe not a chicken.”

It took everything in me not to laugh. Lucy was still incredibly sensitive about her time as poultry. “Thanks, I guess.” As I entered the living room, Zoey sat engaged in a conversation with Drew and Ian. Their faces were serious, and the tension hung thick in the air. So much for my relaxing birthday vibe.

“Hey, guys. What’s going on?” Trying to sound casual. The last thing anyone needed right now was more drama. As soon as I really looked at Zoey’s face, I knew the answer.

The guys had told her Rowan was gone.

“Oh, sweetie.” I wanted to cry for her.

Zoey’s eyes brimmed with tears, and the dam was about to burst. She choked out a sob, and my heart clenched at the raw emotion in her voice. “I feel so betrayed,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “And I feel stupid for trusting her.”

“Hey, no.” I rushed over and pulled Zoey into my arms. Her body shook with sobs, and it took every ounce of self-control not to cry along with her. I stroked her hair gently, trying to find the right words to comfort her. “You can’t blame yourself for this. Nobody could have predicted what Rowan did.”

Zoey curled into me, drawing what little strength she could from my embrace. The room was silent, save for her muffled crying. Drew and Ian exchanged a somber look before quietly excusing themselves, leaving us to talk.

“Sometimes people let us down, Zoey.” I tried to sound soothing. “But that doesn’t mean you’re stupid for caring about them. It just means they didn’t deserve your love and trust.”

We stayed like that for a while, Zoey’s tears gradually subsiding as she allowed herself to be comforted. Zoey had been there for me, and I’d always promised to do the same for her.

My phone rang, and I awkwardly fished it out of my pocket while still holding Zoey. I met Larry’s gaze for the first time since coming downstairs. He sat in the armchair next to the window, watching like he wasn’t sure what to do. There really wasn’t anything he could do. What Zoey was going through called for a mother daughter-moment. I was glad to be here for her.

“Hello,” I said, answering the phone.

“Happy birthday!” Olivia laughed, then started singing to me.

Badly.

I put it on speaker, and it had the desired effect: it made Zoey chuckle. She sat up and wiped her eyes, then she held out her hand to Larry, who got up and moved to sit next to her.

“Thanks, Liv,” I said.

“I was wondering if you could come over. I need your help with something.”

“Sure. I’ll be right over.” I stood and headed out the back door to walk over to Olivia’s house.

Olivia’s kitchen had been transformed into a magical wonderland of baked goods and party balloons.

“Happy birthday.” Sammie stood proudly next to a plate of cookies on the table. “I made these for you using magic.”

“Wow, Sammie, these look amazing.” I was unable to hide my delight. I just hoped those magical cookies didn’t turn anyone into a chicken. Lucy still refused to talk about her adventure.

Zoey even managed a small smile at the display, and her spirits lifted ever so slightly.

“Go on, try one.” Sammie bounced on his feet.

“Which one?” I feigned indecision even though I’d already picked out the scrumptious-looking cookie shaped like a witch’s hat. As I took a bite, the rich chocolate flavor exploded in my mouth — it was easily the best cookie I’d ever tasted. “This is incredible, Sammie.”

“Thanks.” He beamed up at me.

Olivia picked up a cookie and waved it at Sammie. “Don’t fill up on cookies. We’re still going to Ava’s for an early dinner.”

“My house?” I asked. “I just got here.”

Olivia grinned at me. Ah-hah. She’d just called me out of the house to set up something for my birthday. I’d have to pretend to be surprised.

An hour later, we headed back to Winston. When we stepped through the back door, the sight that greeted us was nothing short of astonishing. My living room was *packed* with family and friends, all wearing huge smiles as they yelled in unison, “*Surprise!*”

I clasped my hands together in front of my face as happy tears sprang to my eyes. “Awe, you guys, this isn’t necessary.”

A split-second later, Michelle gasped. We turned to see her standing in a rapidly growing puddle of water, her eyes wide with shock.

“Um, surprise?” She squeaked, her voice more than a little sheepish. “My water broke.”

Olivia’s jaw dropped. “You’re having Baby Butt right *now*?”

“Looks like it,” Michelle said with a nervous laugh that turned into a moan as she clutched at her stomach. “Ohhhokay, that hurts!”

Wow, okay. This was definitely a first for my birthday. What a wonderful birthday gift if she even had it today. First-time babies often took forever to make their entrances. I waved my hands as I tried to figure out what we should do next. “We need to get you to your parents, pronto.”

Olivia sprang into action. “Right. Birthing room. Got it. Zoey, can you grab some towels from the bathroom? Everyone else, let’s clear a path for Michelle.”

“Come on, Michelle.” I wrapped an arm around her for support. “We’re going to get you through this.”

“Thanks, Ava.” Her voice wavered, but she was determined. “And, uh, happy birthday?”

“Best birthday gift ever.” The chaos of the moment only adds to the surreal beauty of the day.

“Everyone,” I announced. “This party is officially canceled. Baby Butt has decided that today is the day.”

Joy filled the room as everyone began to rush around cleaning up so I could deal with Michelle and Wallie.

We gathered our things and prepared to head over to Michelle’s parents’ house via the portal. She was doing a home birth because her aunt was a witch midwife. Baby Butt was too magical to be delivered in a normal hospital. I was planning to be there because I could heal. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be needed.

“Let’s just get there before Michelle gives birth on the living room floor,” Olivia said as Michelle doubled over with a contraction.

“Agreed,” I said, trying to keep from freaking out myself. Baby Butt’s power wrapped around Michelle and sent pulses of magic outward.

“Come on, Michelle,” I said, trying to sound encouraging as we made our way up the stairs. “Just a few more steps and we’ll be in the portal room.”

“Easy for you to say,” Michelle grumbled between gasps. She was gripping Wallie’s arm so tightly her knuckles were turning

white.

My son didn't complain. He simply supported her and rubbed her back, whispering words of comfort. "Almost there, sweetheart," Wallie told her, his voice strained but loving.

"Great, because I don't think this baby can wait much longer." Michelle's voice was laced with panic. She'd reached the end of her tolerance for pain.

"Deep breaths, Michelle." Olivia brought up the rear with the diaper bag and other supplies, although I knew for a fact Michelle's parents were fully stocked with baby items.

"Deep breaths? Are you kidding me?" Michelle gasped, then let out a sudden, gut-wrenching scream that made me freeze in my tracks.

"Michelle!" Wallie cried, his face a mask of worry and fear.

"Baby's coming now!" she shouted, her legs buckling beneath her.

I dropped to my knees without thinking and reached out just in time to catch the wriggling, slippery bundle that emerged from Michelle. Everyone in the vicinity lost their minds, yelling and scrambling. I kept calm and conjured a blanket, deftly wrapping my brand new baby granddaughter in it as Wallie and Michelle watched in shock.

Wallie picked Michelle up and carried her through the portal to her parents' house. I followed closely with my precious granddaughter in my arms. We moved very slowly, as the umbilical cord still had Michelle and Baby Butt attached to one another.

The moment we stepped through the portal, a wave of warmth and the scent of lavender embraced us. I glanced around at Michelle's parents' hallway before turning my attention back to the tiny miracle in my arms. She had a full head of dark hair and the most beautiful, delicate features I'd ever seen. Her eyes were closed, but I just *knew* they'd reveal themselves as a stunning shade of blue once they opened.

"Wallie, help Michelle get settled in her bedroom," I instructed, my voice soft but firm.

He nodded and carried her down the hall with me shuffling right with them. Once inside her room, Wallie laid her on the bed. Aunt Mandy bustled over, her experienced hands making quick work of the umbilical cord. She examined Michelle while the rest of us respectfully gave the baby all of our attention. Once she pronounced Michelle in tiptop shape, Mandy took Baby Butt from me to do the same. She exchanged a few hushed words with Michelle as she laid the baby in Michelle's arms, who calmed under her care. I recognized it as a relaxing spell.

Wallie curled up beside Michelle and looked down at their daughter. "She's beautiful. I think it's time we tell them this little lady's name. What do you think?"

"Definitely," Michelle said, gazing lovingly at the baby. "Imogene Annette. Imogene after my grandmother and Annette after Yaya." Yaya's name had been Brenda Annette, so that was perfect.

"Imogene Annette," I repeated, rolling the name around in my mouth. "It's perfect."

As Aunt Mandy continued tending to Michelle and baby Imogene, Wallie sat by Michelle's side, showering her with love and affection. It warmed my heart to see them so happy, surrounded by family and magic. In this moment, everything felt right in the world.

"Congratulations, both of you," I told them, beaming at the new little family. "Imogene is absolutely beautiful, and she's lucky to have such wonderful parents."

Drew came in and wrapped his arms around me from behind. "She is beautiful."

I looked up at him, surprised. "Olivia called you?"

He squeezed me tight. "Of course."

I glanced at my bestie. "Thanks."

She just winked and left the room, leaving us to our family moment.

“Thank you, Ava,” Michelle said, her eyes shining with gratitude. “We couldn’t have done this without you. You’ve been there for us every step of the way, and we’ll never forget it.”

“Of course,” I replied, a lump forming in my throat. “That’s what family is for, isn’t it?”

The atmosphere in the room was filled with love and warmth as Wallie and Michelle cradled their newborn daughter. Images of Clay, my late husband, flashed through my mind, and I felt a bittersweet tug in my chest.

“Clay would’ve been so proud,” I whispered to them, my voice thick with emotion. “He’d be over the moon to see his granddaughter.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Wallie gave me a watery smile. He knew better than anyone how much his father had wanted to be a grandpa, and it was a shame they didn’t get to share this moment together.

“Your dad’s spirit is definitely here with us,” I assured him, smiling through my tears. “He’s watching over all of you.”

I moved closer to the new family and gently took Imogene Annette into my arms, marveling at the tiny bundle of life. Her little fingers curled around mine, and my chest filled with an intense surge of love for this child who had just entered our lives.

“Hi there, sweet girl,” I cooed, brushing her soft, dark hair away from her forehead. “I’m your Grandma Ava, and I promise to always be here for you.”

“Isn’t she something?” Drew asked.

Wallie said, “That’s your Grandpa Drew.”

Drew’s gaze jerked to my son. “Thank you,” he whispered. “That’s an honor.”

Wallie gave Drew one of those silly guy nods, and I tried not to bawl, unable to take my eyes off Imogene. As I held her close, a powerful energy radiated from her small body. It was

like nothing I'd ever experienced before, and I knew without a doubt that she was going to be someone extraordinary.

"Wow," I murmured, feeling the baby's power build, even as a newborn. "This little one has some serious magic in her. She's going to be a force to be reckoned with."

"Guess she takes after her grandmother," Michelle said, giving me a grateful smile.

Hopefully so much more.

AVA

I WAS SNUGGLING LITTLE IMOGENE, marveling at the perfect tiny human I held in my arms, when Luci made a grand entrance. The usual sarcastic remark that accompanied his appearance was notably absent. Instead, he looked like he'd just crawled out of a dumpster after being beaten up by a gang of supernatural thugs. His clothes were torn, his face was battered and bruised, and he had an alarming amount of dirt under his fingernails.

"Please, Ava," he croaked, desperation seeping through his voice. "I need your help."

"Wow, Luci." I was unable to resist the urge to add some snark. After all, what would the king of Hell need my help for? "You look like you lost a fight with a lawnmower."

"Ha ha, very funny." He glared at me, then winced as the action clearly caused him pain. "I'm tracking a monster across the remotest parts of the Highlands. It's one of the ones that escaped from Hell, and I could really use your assistance."

"Luci, I don't know if you've noticed, but we're kind of busy here with our own little miracle." I glanced down at Imogene, who'd started to doze off in my arms. "Can't this wait?"

"Normally, I wouldn't ask, but it's urgent." He hesitated, then added, "I don't actually need you to hunt the monster. I need your healing power. One of the few remaining ogres has been injured by this hellbeast, and I need you to heal it."

"An ogre?" I raised an eyebrow, already mentally preparing for the smell that would likely accompany such a creature.

“You know, they aren’t exactly known for their love of humans, right?”

“Trust me, I’m aware.” Luci sighed. “But it’s important. Please.”

I glanced from Imogene to Luci, torn between the desire to help and the need to cuddle with my granddaughter while her mama was asleep.

“Fine, but we’re doing this quickly, and then we’re coming straight back here. Understood?”

“Absolutely.” Luci nodded, relief flooding his features.

“Great. Let me give Imogene back to her daddy.” I carried Baby Butt upstairs and through the portal. When I stepped into Michelle’s bedroom at her parents’, she was awake.

With one last snuggle and a whispered promise to return soon, I handed Imogene over to Michelle and followed Luci out the door, praying that I hadn’t just made a terrible mistake.

I took a deep breath and glanced at Luci. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Thank you, Ava.” He looked genuinely grateful. With a wave of his hand, a bright portal appeared in front of us.

We emerged on the other side to find ourselves in a remote clearing, surrounded by thick trees and the distant sound of rushing water.

“Where exactly are we?” I surveyed the area. Trust Luci to bring us to the middle of nowhere.

“Somewhere in the Scottish Highlands.” He looked around as if trying to get his bearings. “The ogre should be close by.”

“Great. Let’s just hope she’s not the ‘I’ll eat your bones for breakfast’ type of ogre.”

“Ah, there she is.” Luci pointed toward a large figure lying a few yards away. As we approached, I braced myself for the worst. I mean, this was an ogre we were talking about. I expected something out of a bedtime story—huge, ugly, and terrifying.

When we got closer, she wasn't quite what I'd imagined. Sure, she was stocky and had greenish skin, but otherwise, she just looked like an ordinary woman.

Easing closer, I squatted beside her and placed my hand on her cold skin, hoping that maybe there was something I could do to help. Oh, no. "She's gone." What a strange sense of loss.

"Can you bring her back?" Luci asked, his tone almost desperate.

"I can try, but..." I trailed off at an unexpected flutter beneath my palm. Holy freaking crap. "The baby is alive."

"Baby? What baby?" Luci looked as surprised as I felt.

"Looks like your little scuffle with the ogre left more than just one casualty, Luci." My voice trembled as the reality of the situation sank in. "She was pregnant."

"Can you save the baby, then?" Luci's eyes were pleading, desperate. "Ogres are so rare."

"Let's hope so."

Okay, focus. I can save this baby.

I positioned my hands over the ogre's swollen belly. I just need to concentrate and...

Before I could even finish that thought, the ogre's belly convulsed, and with a sudden wet splort (yeah, I didn't know that was a word either), the baby shot out of its mother like a slimy cannonball.

"Whoa!" I managed to catch it mid-air. As the newborn squirmed in my arms, a burst of laughter escaped me. "That's the second baby I've caught today, and I don't want any more surprises like this."

"Is it okay?" Luci asked, his voice cracking with concern.

"Seems so." I wiped the goo off the baby ogre's face. "Congratulations, Luci, you're an honorary uncle."

"Very funny," Luci said, rolling his eyes, but they had relief in them, too.

The baby ogre opened its eyes for the first time, locking gazes with me. Also, for the second time today, I conjured a blanket to wrap him in.

There was something captivating about those deep green orbs, and a strange connection formed between us. This little one had no idea what kind of world awaited him, and neither did I, but at least we'd be navigating the chaos together.

Together it was because I was keeping this baby. At least until we found his family or... Good grief, what would I do with a baby ogre?

I cradled the baby protectively. "Let's get back home and figure out what to do next."

With a nod from Luci, we portaled back home.

We reappeared in my cozy living room. "Seriously though, no more catching babies for me, paranormal or otherwise."

"No more babies." Lucy gave the baby a very Lucy-ish glare. "You know, Ava, there are easier ways to expand the family."

"Tell me about it." I settled down on the couch with the baby ogre nestled in my arms. "But sometimes, life just has other plans."

I glanced down at the now sleeping baby ogre and said, "Welcome to the family, little one."

Drew walked into the living room and stopped mid-step. As a hunter, he'd no doubt sense that the bundle in my arms was not human. He glanced at the baby and a soft smile formed. Meeting my gaze, he said, "I take it we're keeping him?"

"Yes." I tilted my face up so Drew could kiss my lips. "Are you okay with being a dad to a baby ogre?"

"If anyone could raise a baby monster, it's us." Drew hugged me and the baby close.

What was one more member of this magical family, after all?



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Chapter 1

CHAPTER ONE: Blair

Lachlan James was my best friend and the father of my child. I loved him dearly, but if he didn't go away, I was going to neuter him.

"They're like a bunch of whiny pups," he said in an irritatingly petulant voice. He really didn't mean that, but he was the '*whiny pups*' alpha, so he had to deal with them. Well, technically, his beta, Reed, took care of pack issues and disagreements between packmates. That didn't stop Lach from coming to me to complain.

"Yeah, I can sympathize." Looking up from my laptop, I tried to give him *the* look. You know the one. The one that said he was being a brat and needed to get out of my office. Now.

I had work to do.

He didn't take the hint. Instead, he continued to complain about his pack's problems, which weren't really problems at all. Lach had been alpha for about five years now, and sometimes the peopling aspect of the job got to him. That's

when he hid in my office and vented. Sometimes he pretended he worked there, and I took advantage of the free labor. It amused me that he was a born alpha and a darn good leader, yet he was an introvert.

He was one of those introverts who were quiet around people he didn't know and in large crowds, but he was playful and outgoing among friends and family.

I didn't mind him hiding out in my office at my antique store—My Junk, Your Trunk. Truly I didn't... usually. Today, my best friend was wearing on my last nerve. I wasn't sure why.

He turned to me and stared until I glanced up at him again. Then a slow, sexy smile formed. “You want to play hooky from our responsibilities today?”

I shook my head, knowing that we'd end up getting into some kind of trouble. We usually did. Like Bonnie and Clyde, only we didn't rob banks or kill people. And we weren't lovers. Not anymore.

Reaching over, I slapped the desk as I noticed something missing. The staple remover was gone from its usual spot. I certainly hadn't moved it. Narrowing my gaze as if that would help me see something that wasn't there, I shuffled some papers around, thinking it got shoved under them somehow. I needed to go through the monthly accounts receivable reports line-by-line to make sure everything was correct, and it was much easier if it wasn't stapled together.

I recently got a new printer/copier, and it was one of those fancy does-everything-but-wash-dishes-for-you types. When I printed out reports with several pages, it stapled them together. I hadn't yet figured out how to change that setting.

“Lachlan, did you move my staple remover?” I hadn't meant to cut him off mid-sentence, but that's exactly what I did. Rude. Oops.

He stared at me with his brows bunched so closely together they looked like a unibrow. “Why would I do that?”

My reply was simple and to the point, with an eye roll added in for good measure. “Because you thought it would be

funny?”

He and our twenty-nine-year-old daughter were always moving stuff on me and playing all kinds of pranks. Wolves loved to be playful with their family and pack. They could also be fiercely protective. And territorial.

Lach reached across my desk and opened the middle drawer. Sure enough, there was my staple remover. It had been placed in a little nook of the drawer organizer, just big enough for it to fit. Technically, *technically*, that was where it was supposed to go. I used it often and didn't like getting it in and out of the drawer, so I kept it on my desk, on top of my inbox, which was almost constantly overflowing with papers.

He stared at me with amusement in his hazel eyes. His lips twisted as if holding back a smile, knowing I would get annoyed. Like that had ever stopped him before.

“It's not funny!” I wasn't really mad. He loved to play pranks on me, and I usually gave as good as I got. I couldn't pinpoint why I was so irritated today. Just one of those things that happened to us after fifty, which I'd just turned this past September. Random bouts of irritability and impatience.

Hello, midlife.

“Though I didn't put it there,” he began in a perfectly reasonable voice. “That *is* where it goes, isn't it?”

I grumbled something unintelligible, and he smiled. He was always smiling. It was one of the many things I loved about him, just not at this moment.

“Always joking,” I said as he walked out of my office toward the front of the store.

He laughed, not at all offended by my grumpy tone. That was Lach. Always up for a good time—in more ways than one. His inability to be too serious had been one of the main reasons we were still best friends after all these years, but never married, or mated, as shifters called it. We'd tried that once. Dating, not marriage. We'd celebrated a little too hard on my twenty-first birthday and slept together. We'd both woken up the next morning full of regrets and embarrassment. Promises of never

doing the deed again were made. Our friendship was too important. Then six weeks later, a big fat plus sign on the pee stick.

But Lachlan was still a huge part of my life. Despite the lack of sexual interest between us, we made amazing co-parents. I would have never survived raising a shifter baby while being shunned as a hunter. I unofficially retired the day Meggan was born. Our daughter would be turning thirty next June and was the most amazing person, getting the best of both her parents.

We'd done something right in this life, at least.

Making my way to the front, I picked the mail up off of the counter and shuffled through the credit card offers and sales ads, and then went to pick up the letter opener. I liked to open my mail up here so I could toss the junk and my office wouldn't get cluttered with unopened mail. I kept my letter opener behind the counter, tucked in the corner.

It wasn't there.

Lachlan had been up to his old tricks again. I sighed and went back to my office to look in the drawer he'd put the staple remover in. Sure enough, there was the letter opener tucked away in the right side of the drawer.

Lach had a fondness for ghosts and mysteries, which was why he enjoyed playing pranks like this. He used to blame things on ghosts, but I knew better because I got hot flashes when ghosts were around. Don't ask. I don't know why.

It made me laugh despite my mood, and I couldn't wait to see what other pranks he had in store for me. Oh, wait. Yes, I could.

For now, I just needed to get my admin stuff done so I could focus on customers. Ignoring Lach as he sat in the chair behind the counter, pushing off with his feet and twirling in circles, I went to the front door and switched the sign from closed to open.

It was time to get this shop up and running. I would've wished for a slow morning so I could get the rest of my paperwork done, but I needed the business.

I didn't even make it back to the counter before the door chime went off, announcing my first customer. "Hello?" she called tentatively.

Turning, I realized I recognized her. Mrs. Flowers. She'd bought a decorative kettle the day before. Hopefully, she'd loved it and had come back for more. "Welcome back," I said warmly. "Please come in."

"Yes, hi. I need to return this kettle." She held a bag out in front of her like it was a ticking time bomb, and I couldn't help but wonder why, though I had a sneaking suspicion.

She opened the bag and pulled out the kettle, setting it gently on the counter in front of me, then backing away as it might blow at any moment.

"Is something wrong with it?" I frowned down at the thing and hated to ask. At the same time, I needed to know to confirm my suspicion.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "I tried to boil tea in it last night, and it went absolutely crazy. As soon as it began boiling, it shot the hot water all over the kitchen, even in directions it shouldn't have been able to." She shuddered as if the memory of her experience would haunt her for the rest of her days. It just might. "We had to leave it until all of the water was empty from the pot, then clean up."

Oh, geez. I hoped she didn't ask for some sort of compensation. Studying her for injuries, I stretched out my hunter powers to see if I could pick up on ghostly activity. No hot flashes, which meant it didn't have a ghost hitching a ride. "I can't imagine why it would do that."

I kept my voice calm even though I absolutely *could* imagine why, but it wasn't like I could tell her that. It had to be cursed. I specialized in such objects, and it made me more than a little upset that one had slipped past me.

I glanced down at the kettle. It looked like any other, though it was strangely still warm even after sitting in the bag. "Did you want a refund or something else?"

“I’d like a different kettle if you have one,” she said. “This one seems to be some sort of prank pot, but I can’t figure out how. Maybe it was a part of a magician’s set.”

“I bet you’re right,” I said, tucking the kettle behind the counter and sliding it toward Lachlan. He grimaced but grabbed it and took it to the back room. “Go pick out any kettle and if it’s more expensive, we’ll do an even swap.” I only had more expensive kettles, but not very much so. It’d be okay. I was lucky she hadn’t been seriously injured.

Once I got her all settled and promised her this one was a nice, normal kettle, I hurried to the back room behind my office to check on Lachlan. I found him examining the kettle, turning it over in his hands, and tapping its sides like he might find clues inside.

He glanced at me. “I thought you could sense these things?”

I made a noise in my throat. “Usually, I do, but for some reason, I’m not picking anything up from this. Even now, knowing it is cursed.”

That bothered me a lot. I might be a retired hunter, but I still had the magic in my blood. I was born with it. The magic made me stronger and a little faster, and I healed more easily than a normal human. That same power allowed me to sense paranormal beings and decipher which breed they were. My special ability was sensing cursed objects and ghosts. That was why I had opened *My Junk, Your Trunk*.

“Put it in the sink, please,” I directed.

He nodded and lowered it into our basic utility-mop sink. I grabbed one of my many gallons of vinegar—a hunter’s first line of defense against cursed objects—and dumped the whole gallon over the kettle.

It sat there like... well, like a kettle. There was no magic or smoke or anything. Not even a small scream of release.

“Rinse it off?” Lach asked.

I shrugged and dumped the vinegar out of the kettle, then turned the water on. The second the water hit the inside of the basin, the kettle began to shriek like a pig being chased by a

pterodactyl. It could happen if the dinosaur shifters hadn't been run into hiding by the dragons like a thousand years ago.

I squealed as the water erupted from the end of the kettle's spout. Thankfully, it wasn't hot, but it was incredibly cold tap water. With another shriek, I turned the tap off and followed Lach out of the utility room, slamming the door behind me.

"Well," I huffed. "I'll be dropping that off with the hunters, ASAP."

Lach nodded and handed me a towel he grabbed from a nearby shelf. "I thought you were retired," he grumbled.

"Yeah." I mopped up my face. "Me, too."

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ABOUT LIA DAVIS

Lia Davis is the USA Today bestselling author of more than forty books, including her fan favorite Shifter of Ashwood Falls Series.

A lifelong fan of magic, mystery, romance and adventure, Lia's novels feature compassionate alpha heroes and strong leading ladies, plenty of heat, and happily-ever-afters.

Lia makes her home in Northeast Florida where she battles hurricanes and humidity like one of her heroines.

When she's not writing, she loves to spend time with her family, travel, read, enjoy nature, and spoil her kitties.

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L.A. (Lainie) Boruff lives in East Tennessee with her husband, three children, and an ever growing number of cats. She loves reading, watching TV, and procrastinating by browsing Facebook. L.A.'s passions include vampires, food, and listening to heavy metal music. She once won a Harry Potter trivia contest based on the books and lost one based on the movies. She has two bands on her bucket list that she still hasn't seen: AC/DC and Alice Cooper. Feel free to send tickets.

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