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LIFE  
AFTER  
MAGIC



A MONSTROUS  
MIDLIFE  
WITCHING AFTER FORTY

# A MONSTROUS MIDLIFE

A LIFE AFTER MAGIC MYSTERY

WITCHING AFTER FORTY

BOOK EIGHTEEN

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A Monstrous Midlife

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*Congratulations to Ann Ivey and Christine Fitzer for naming  
our new little monster! Read on to see the name they picked  
out. <3*



# OLIVIA

FINALLY! I'd been wanting to see this movie for ages. I settled into the plush couch, balancing a bowl of buttery popcorn on my lap. Sam snuggled up next to me, his arm wrapped around my shoulders. Our handsome little man, Sammie, sat on my other side, nearly in my lap. Don't be fooled. It wasn't me he wanted. It was my popcorn.

My mom, Phira, sat across from us in the loveseat with a mug of steaming tea. Beside her, Luci, my dad, and the King of Hell, scooted closer up to Phira. It was the fourth of July but since there were two brand new babies next door, we'd all opted for quiet days at home, watching movies and relaxing. We could barbecue any time.

"All right, everyone ready?" I reached for the remote. "Let's see if this comedy lives up to its hype."

"Hit play already, Olivia," Luci said, rolling his eyes. "I've got things to do later. People to see, souls to torture, you know."

"Of course you do," I replied with a snort, rolling my eyes playfully at him as I pressed the button.

We had barely made it through the opening scene when, without warning, a figure materialized in the center of our living room. I blinked in surprise, taking in the tall, regal man standing before us. Uncle Mitah, ruler of the Fae, had a mischievous glint in his eye that matched his silver hair perfectly. He looked like he belonged in one of those old fairy tale books—all ethereal beauty and grace.

“Uncle Mitah,” I exclaimed, popcorn flying everywhere as I jumped to my feet. “What are you doing here?”

“Olivia, dear niece,” he said, inclining his head in greeting.

“King Mitah,” Sam added, rising in a half bow-crouch thing from the couch to give a respectful nod.

Phira set down her tea and stood as well, a warm smile on her face. “Mitah, it’s always a pleasure to see you.”

“Indeed,” Luci said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Quite the surprise.” As he studied Mitah, his eyes narrowed, the wheels turning in his head. How had my fae uncle managed to appear in our living room without any of us, especially the all-knowing King of Hell, noticing?

“Why are you here?” I asked, stepping closer to Mitah. Oops. That sounded a bit rude. My heart raced with anticipation, wondering what could have possibly brought him all the way from the fae realm. It had to be important because he’d never come to the human realm unannounced, as far as I knew. Especially without a big entourage of fae guardians and soldiers.

He chuckled lightly. “I bring good news. So good, in fact, I wanted to deliver it myself. The fae council has unanimously voted to grant your witch friend, Winnie, the fae body she needs. We could do the ritual to transfer her soul into her new body as early as tonight if you’d like.”

“Really?” I gasped, excitement bubbling within me. “This is huge. Not just for Winnie, but for the entire supernatural community.”

Mitah nodded sagely. It meant that the fae were taking steps to improve their relations with the witches, and it could open doors for even more collaboration and understanding between our worlds. “Oh, my *gosh*. Thank you so much,”

I couldn’t contain myself any longer. I jumped up and down, clapping my hands together like a giddy child on Christmas morning. Then, without thinking, I threw my arms around my uncle in a fierce hug.



He grunted as I squeezed him, surprised by my enthusiasm, but then he patted my back gently as I squealed with delight. His stiff posture told me that he didn't normally get overly enthusiastic hugs, but heck. I didn't care.

"Olivia, dear, calm down." He chuckled, extricating himself from my embrace. "It's not just me you should be thanking. It was a collective decision by the entire council. We believe that this will go a long way toward fostering goodwill and cooperation between our people."

"I'm so grateful," I said, wiping at the tears of joy that threatened to spill over. "Winnie and Ava will be over the moon when they hear about this."

"Olivia, dear," Phira said, her voice laced with a slight apology as she glanced between me and Uncle King Mitah. "Perhaps you should try to contain your excitement just a tiny bit."

Uncle Mitah simply laughed and waved her off. "Nonsense, Phira. It's refreshing to see such enthusiasm. She is my niece, after all."

My cheeks heated at my mother's words and my uncle's response. I couldn't help it, though. The news about Winnie was too amazing not to be excited about.

"Right," I said, taking a deep breath and trying to regain my composure. "Sorry, everyone. I'm just so happy for Winnie."

"It's understandable." Sam gave me an encouraging smile. He always had my back. Geez, I loved that man.

"Anyway," I continued, my heart still racing but my voice now steadier. My blood pressure and adrenaline were still through the roof, despite my smooth talking. "I need to go tell Ava and her family the news. They're going to be thrilled."

"Go on then," Phira urged gently, waving me out of the room. "We'll be here when you get back."

"Thanks." With one more look at my family, I hurried out of the living room and made my way through the big yard toward Ava's house, my mind buzzing with excitement and anticipation.

Cheeks still flushed from the excitement of Mitah's news, I increased my speed until I was practically sprinting. Bursting through the front door, I found them all gathered in the living room, watching the same movie we had been watching just moments ago, albeit with a few more people gathered in a smaller living room. Funny how small-town life worked sometimes.

"Hey everyone," I called out, panting slightly from my mad dash. I really needed to add some cardio to my routine.

"Olivia," Ava greeted me warmly, her green eyes sparkling with curiosity at my sudden appearance. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's great, actually," I reassured them, not wanting to cause any unnecessary worry. "I have some amazing news!"

It was then that I realized Winnie and Alfred were conspicuously absent. But before I could ask about their whereabouts, Lucy, Ava's talking cat, got up from her lounging spot on the couch, glaring daggers at me.

"Who invited her?" she spat, stalking from the room with her tail held high.

"Guess she's still mad at me about the whole chicken thing." I shook my head. That didn't matter right now. Nothing could dampen my spirits. "Anyway, that doesn't matter. Guess what?"

"What, tell us already?" Ava asked, her voice filled with anticipation.

"King Mitah just dropped by." I couldn't contain the grin spreading across my face. "He said the fae unanimously voted to allow Winnie to have the fae body."

"Really?" Ava jumped to her feet. "That's incredible."

"Wow, that is awesome news," Beth, Ava's mom, and Winnie's sister, chimed in, her eyes wide with amazement.

"Right?" I agreed, beyond happy for my witchy bestie and her family. "Winnie's going to have a whole new life now. Where are Alfred and Winnie?"

“Upstairs.” Ava was already heading towards the staircase. “Come on, let’s go tell them together.”

I hurried after her up the stairs, followed by pretty much everyone else in the family, except for Lucy, who was still boycotting my presence. Ava yanked Winnie and Alfred’s bedroom door open, revealing a cozy room filled with books, plants, and magical trinkets. Winnie and Alfred cuddled together on the bed, looking up at us in surprise. My heart ached at seeing Winnie so sick. She’d been fairly skinny before. Now she looked like a true ghoul.

She didn’t have long. If it weren’t for Ava’s healing magic bolstering her up, she would’ve already succumbed to this illness. Ava couldn’t heal it, but she could keep Winnie’s body as strong as humanly, er, magically possible.

“Olivia? What’s going on?” Winnie asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“King Mitah stopped by our house earlier,” I said, practically bouncing on my toes. We hadn’t told her this was a possibility. “They agreed to give you the fae body. No more witch cancer.”

“Are you serious?” Winnie gasped, her hands flying to her mouth in shock.

“Absolutely.” I beamed as Ava grinned from ear to ear. “This is such amazing news.”

“Wow,” Alfred whispered, his mouse-like voice choked up with emotion. He got off the bed, then ever so gently picked Winnie up, cradling her tenderly in his arms. “This changes everything.”

I backed up, giving them a little room. “The best part is Mitah said we can do the body transfer right away or whenever you like.”

“Let’s get everyone together and go now,” Ava suggested, her eyes shining with excitement.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” I said, already envisioning a massive party with all our loved ones. “Hold on, I’ll create a portal to gather everyone.”

Alfred rose from the bed and picked Winnie up to carry her downstairs where Beth, John, Drew, Wallie, and Michelle waited. Ian would've been there, but he was off on a special hunt for Pearl.

When we turned around, they were all crowded in the doorway.

I giggled. "Go downstairs, give us some room to work with."

Once down in the living room, I turned to Ava. "Are Zoey and Larry coming?"

"No, they're in New Orleans," Ava replied, her expression softening. "They're visiting Zoey's family and attending Rowan's funeral."

"Ah," I nodded, understanding the gravity of their situation. Rowan was Zoey's cousin. Even though Rowan had plotted to kill Zoey, that is before she found out that Zoey was already dead—well undead. Rowan was still Zoey's family. Besides Zoey probably wanted to be there to support her aunt and uncle. "Well, we'll be sure to fill them in on everything when they return."

"Definitely," Ava agreed, her smile returning as she picked up one of Lucy's new kittens and gave it a smooch before putting it back in the basket and giving the other the same treatment.

I typed a quick text to Sam.

**Bring Sammie to Michelle and Wallie, then meet me in Faery. Bring L&P.**

After I hit send, I opened a portal. "Are we all ready?"

Sam's reply came through quickly.

**Be right there.**

"As much as we'd like to come visit, we'd better stay," Michelle said. "Imogene and Selby are asleep."

Ava and Drew gave Michelle a quick hug and Ava squeezed Wallie's hand. "Back soon."

Everyone else stepped through the portal. Even Lucy-Fur, Snoozer, and their baby kitties followed us, surprising me. I

hadn't expected Lucy to come anywhere near me.



# AVA

AS I STEPPED through the portal, I gasped at the breathtaking landscape that unfolded before us. Sure, I'd been there before, but the beauty of the place *always* took my breath away. Lush green hills rolled in every direction, dotted with vibrant flowers of every color imaginable. The air was thick with magic, sending tingles down my spine as I breathed it in. Even Snoozer and Lucy were taken aback, their eyes wide with feline wonder.

Drew stepped out of the portal behind me. Wallie and Michelle had stayed behind to watch the babies.

“Welcome to Faery,” a melodic voice chimed from behind me, causing me to jump and whirl.

I turned to find a group of fae attendants standing there, their iridescent wings shimmering in the sunlight. Not all Fae had wings. Most didn't, actually, so all I wanted to do was run over and rub my hands all over the little fluttery appendages. They were dressed in flowing robes of various shades of green, effortlessly blending into the surrounding foliage. Their warm and welcoming smiles instantly put me at ease.

“Thank you for allowing Winnie to have the body,” I replied, still in awe of the enchanting world we had entered.

“Come.” A gorgeous fae woman beckoned with a graceful wave of her hand. “We will guide you to the location of the transfer ceremony.”

“Transfer ceremony?” Lucy asked as she trotted alongside me, her tail flicking curiously.

“Shh,” I chided gently. If she’d stayed in the room when Olivia had told everyone, then Miss High and Mighty would know why we were here. “Next time pay attention. Why did you come, anyway?”

She flicked her tail and rolled her eyes. Could cats roll their eyes? “I go where I want.”

Pfft. “I thought you’d learned your lesson about entering portals after you got stuck at the academy all day.” I still laughed at that. My dad had found her under his desk a little freaked out.

She sniffed delicately. “I’ve learned to not follow Olivia through portals. That woman is gunning to get rid of me.”

Olivia turned and stared at Lucy. “I’m not trying to get rid of you.”

Lucy stuck her nose up in the air and moved around Olivia to follow Alfred, who still carried Winnie. Snoozer and the kittens trotted right on Lucy’s heels.

As we followed the fae through the flourishing landscape, every step felt like walking through a dream. The grass beneath our feet absorbed our footfalls, leaving no trace of our passing. The earthy scent of damp soil and fresh blooms made me wish I could bottle the essence of this magical realm.

“Are you nervous?” Drew whispered in my ear.

“About the ceremony?” I replied, forcing a confident smile. “Not at all.”

“Liar,” he said playfully while pulling me into him. He would know better than anyone thanks to our magical bond. My feelings flowed through the bond link to him and vice versa.

“Here we are,” one of the fae attendants announced as we reached a small clearing surrounded by towering trees. Their branches wove together in a canopy that cast a dappled pattern of light and shadow on the forest floor below.

“Whoa, this is perfect,” I breathed, taking in the enchanting scene before us. The clearing was a haven of serenity. The lush green grass swayed in the breeze, and the surrounding trees



rustled softly as if whispering secrets to each other. The air was fragrant with the scent of wildflowers, and the birds sang a sweet melody that lifted my spirits. In the distance, a babbling brook glistened in the sunlight, adding to the idyllic scene. A sense of peace washed over me as I took it all in.

“Thank you,” the attendant replied with a modest bow. “We have prepared everything for the transfer ceremony. All that remains is for you to begin.”

“Right.” I nodded, steeling myself for the task ahead. As much as I wanted to bask in the beauty of Faery, there was work to be done.

The fae began their preparations for the ceremony, creating a sacred space within the clearing. They drew intricate symbols on the ground with what appeared to be crushed gemstones, the vibrant colors shining like stars against the earth. They placed tall, ornate candles at each corner of the space, which flickered to life with an ethereal glow that pulsed in time with the heartbeat of Faery itself.

In the center, a fae woman’s body lay on a bed of rose petals. The makeshift bed was wide enough for Winnie as well. Alfred stepped forward and settled Winnie down as slowly and carefully as he could beside her new body.

As the attendants continued their work, they placed various magical artifacts around the ritual area—a chalice filled with shimmering liquid, a dagger with an intricately carved hilt, and a living wreath of flowers and vines that breathed with a life of its own.

The attendants backed away as King Mitah and a woman entered the clearing.

The woman was tall and regal, her long, silver hair cascading down her back like a waterfall of moonlight. Her eyes were the color of twilight, deep and mysterious, and she wore robes that shimmered like the night sky, adorned with constellations that danced across the fabric. She was, without a doubt, the most breathtakingly beautiful creature I had ever seen.

“Who is she?” I asked in awe, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Ah, that would be our fae priestess,” Olivia replied. It was a bit odd to hear her speak of the fae possessively, but she was half fae. She had every right. Come to think of it, it was nice that she was beginning to acclimate to their culture a bit. Olivia deserved to be happy and have a big, loving family. Even if they were the mysterious fae

Phira added, “She will guide the transfer process and ensure that all goes smoothly.”

“Hello.” The priestess’s ethereal voice enchanted us with its captivating beauty, matching the allure of her appearance. “I am Lady Celestia, and they have chosen me to perform this most sacred of rites.” She turned her attention to me. “I understand you are Ava, high necromancer, and you,” she turned to Olivia, “must be Olivia. It is an honor to meet you both.”

“Thank you,” Olivia replied, her own voice filled with wonder. “We’re honored to be here.”

“Indeed,” I echoed. I wasn’t at all a high necromancer, but if she wanted to think that, who was I to correct her?

Maybe High Necromancer should be a title. It could come with a crown and scepter. Though Lucy would probably just steal them. I shook off the thought and smiled at the priestess. “We’re grateful for your help.”

“Think nothing of it,” Lady Celestia said with a graceful smile. “It is my duty, and my pleasure, to aid those in need. Now, let us begin.”

As we watched in awe, she took her place at the center of the ritual space a few feet from Winnie’s and the donor body’s heads. With every fiber of my being, I prayed that she would be able to guide Winnie’s soul safely into her new body.

I glanced over at Alfred. He’d clasped his hands together in front of him and his eyes were filled with a mixture of hope and trepidation. The weight of the moment pressed down on

all of us, but especially on those two, who had so much riding on the outcome of this ceremony.

“Hey,” I said softly, moving closer to him. “She’s going to be just fine, okay? We’ve come this far, and we’re not going to let anything go wrong now.” It was a bit of an empty promise. This was all on the fae now. I couldn’t do jack about this. Completely out of my element.

Alfred offered me a small smile. “Thank you,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “Your support means everything to us.”

“Of course,” I replied, my eyes pricking with tears. “That’s what family is for, right?”

“Yes,” Alfred agreed, his gaze never leaving Winnie’s face in the center of the clearing. “We will never forget the lengths you have gone to in order to help us.”

Before I could respond that she was my Aunt Winnie and I wanted her alive just as much as Alfred did, Lady Celestia stepped forward, her robes rustling like leaves in the wind. “Are you ready?” she asked, her voice gentle yet commanding.

“We are,” Winnie and Alfred replied in unison, Alfred’s voice strong and Winnie’s weak. Despite sounding like a breeze would carry her off, she looked at the priestess with surety. She wanted to do this.

“We’ve already said our goodbyes,” Alfred whispered. “Just in case.”

Oh, geez. I hadn’t taken the time. It was too late now.

“Very well,” Lady Celestia said, lifting her arms as she chanted in an ancient, melodic language. The surrounding air thrummed with power, the very atmosphere crackling with energy. A soft breeze stirred, carrying with it the scent of wildflowers and the faintest hint of some sort of fruit.

As the fae priestess continued her incantations, a circle of glowing light formed around her, pulsing in time to the rhythm of her words. This circle expanded, its light weaving intricate patterns in the air as it enveloped Winnie and the body. Their bodies now bathed in a shimmering aura of magic.

“By the power of the fae,” Lady Celestia intoned, her voice rising in pitch and intensity, “I call upon the elements of earth, air, fire, and water to aid in this sacred rite. Let the soul of one be guided into a new vessel.”

As she spoke these words, tendrils of energy snaked out from the glowing circle, spiraling around Winnie’s body like vines seeking sunlight. The air grew heavy with the scent of rain and the taste of electricity, and the hairs on my arms stood up as though charged by a powerful current.

The tendrils of energy had now completely encircled Winnie, forming a cocoon-like shell around her. She looked at Alfred one last time, her eyes filled with love and determination, before closing them and allowing herself to be enveloped by the magic.

“Let the transfer begin,” Lady Celestia commanded, her voice ringing out like a clarion call over the sounds of the wind and the rustling leaves. With a brilliant flash of light, the energy surrounding Winnie flared up, consuming her in a column of blinding radiance.

The transfer felt like a moment suspended in time, as if the very fabric of reality had been stretched thin and we stood on the precipice of something monumental.

“Faeries and sacred rituals,” Lucy said, her eyes fixed on the swirling energy engulfing Winnie. “It’s like something out of a fairy tale. “Or no, more like out of one of those paranormal romance novels Ava loves so much.”

Despite the monumental moment, I chuckled at her snarky observation, but she was right. It was like we were living in the pages of a book.

The fae priestess raised her arms, and the cocoon shimmered in response. The energy thrummed around us, tingling against my skin like sparks from a crackling fire. The air grew heavy with magic, so thick it blurred the edges of reality.

And then, with one last surge of power, Lady Celestia released the magic she’d been holding. The cocoon shattered like glass, sending iridescent shards flying. In its place stood Winnie, but

not the Winnie we'd known before. This Winnie looked more like the Winnie I'd grown up with. Plump, pleasant, on the shorter side.

"By the gods," Beth breathed, stepping closer to her sister. "Winnie, you're..."

"Beautiful," Alfred finished for her, his voice catching on the word.

"Alive," I added, happier than I'd been in a long while. Aunt Winnie was alive!

Winnie blinked, her newly formed hazel eyes wide with wonder. She looked down at herself, taking in her new body—milky white skin and curvy, with waves of chestnut hair cascading down her back. She flexed her fingers, watching them move with a mix of fascination and awe.

"Is this me?" Winnie asked, her voice soft and hesitant. She had a pleasant tone.

"Every inch of you," I assured her. "Your soul, your essence, everything that makes you who you are, it's all there, just in a new package."

"Alfred?" Winnie whispered, reaching out to her love.

"Right here," he replied, stepping forward and wrapping his arms around Winnie in a tight embrace.

"Thank you," Winnie murmured into Alfred's shoulder as she dissolved into tears.

A lump rose in my throat as I watched them. The way Alfred looked at Winnie told me those two wouldn't be coming out of their bedroom anytime soon.

Like a couple of horny honeymooners. Oh, geez. Now I had a visual, one that I didn't need stuck in my head.



# OLIVIA

I WAS in the middle of reciting random facts about snails to a few fae children when King Mitah pulled me aside. His regal expression betrayed a hint of urgency, which immediately put me on edge.

“Olivia,” he said, his eyes scanning our surroundings for potential eavesdroppers. “I need to speak with you privately.”

“Of course,” I replied, trying to suppress the outward signs of my curiosity. We stepped away from the group, and he lowered his voice. “Something is amiss in Faery,” he began, his gaze intense. “Intruders have entered our realm, but they’re unlike anything we’ve encountered before. They’re elusive, leaving little trace of their presence. I believe them to be human.”

“Who are they?” I asked, my mind racing with possibilities.

“We don’t know yet,” King Mitah admitted. “But their intentions can’t be good. It’s imperative that we find them and stop whatever it is they’re planning.”

“Count me in,” I said without hesitation. Family meant everything to me, and I’d do whatever it took to protect mine and the realm I had come to love. Besides, who could resist a good old-fashioned mystery?

“Thank you, Olivia,” King Mitah said, relief clear in his voice. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Of course,” I replied, my determination solidifying. Phira and Luci walked over, bringing my two older children, Jess and Devan, with them.

“King Mitah just informed me that we have some unexpected visitors in Faery,” I explained, keeping my voice low. “We need to find out who they are and what they want.”

“Sounds like fun.” Devan smirked, his eyes glinting with excitement. “Count me in.”

“Me too.” Jess bounced on her toes, the way she had when she was little and too excited to contain it.

“Great,” I said, my heart swelling at the idea I’d get to spend time with them. It’d been touch and go since their father turned his back on them when they came into their magic. I’d been giving them their space, hoping that we could form some kind of family bond and strengthen our relationship in the long run.

Turning to my parents, I asked, “Are you in?”

“Of course, darling,” Phira replied with a big grin. “I do love adventure.”

“Indeed.” Luci looked thoughtful. “I can torture souls any time.”

“Perfect,” I said, satisfied with our team. “Now, let’s get down to business.”

“Sam, sweetheart?” I turned to my husband.

“I heard,” Sam said, tapping his ear. Of course he did. Vamp hearing and all that. “I’ll stay home with Sammie. Plus, I have to work at the bar.”

“You are the best husband ever.” I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck and passionately kissed him, the scorching heat of our connection intensifying with each moment.

He squeezed me tighter. “Promise me you’ll be careful?”

“Always,” I whispered into his shoulder, savoring the warmth of his hug for a moment before pulling away. “Now, let’s go congratulate Winnie and Alfred on their new situation before we head out.”

As we approached the couple, we smiled at the happiness that radiated from them. Winnie was positively glowing, and



Alfred looked like he'd just won the lottery. In a big way, he had.

"Congratulations, you two," I exclaimed, giving each of them a warm hug.

"Thank you, Olivia," Winnie replied, her new cheeks flushed with excitement. "We can't thank you enough."

"Before you go," King Mitah interjected, his voice somber. "Eh, there's something you should know. You cannot leave Faery."

"Wait, what?" Winnie asked, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Why not?"

Ava stepped forward with her fists clenched and electricity crackling around them. Uh-oh. This was going south fast. "You never said we couldn't leave."

Mitah smiled and held his hands up. "I only meant Winnie can't leave. She is in a fae body now and that makes her fae." He focused on Winnie and continued. "You're one of us now. You must stay here to learn your new powers and our traditions."

"But do I have to stay here forever?" Winnie asked with a hint of panic in her voice.

Mitah shook his head. "No, dear, of course not. You may visit your family and they can come to visit you. Eventually, you'll be allowed to come and go as you please."

"Can Alfred stay with me?" Winnie gripped Alfred's hand like he was her lifeline.

"Of course," Mitah said.

"Oh," Winnie said while breathing out a sigh of relief. Her shoulders slumped and she sagged against Alfred. "Where will I stay?"

Mitah handed her a key. "You may have all of Willow's personal belongings, including her house and everything in it."

Winnie's face sobered as she took the key from Mitah. "Thank you, so much, but won't that be hurtful to her family?"

“You are welcome, and no. Willow had no family left. She would want you to make use of her things.” Mitah turned to a fae teen. “Please show Winnie and Alfred to their new home.”

After Winnie and Alfred said their goodbyes to everyone and then left with the girl, Ava turned to me. “If you need help, just call. I’ll be snuggling babies.

“Snuggle them for me too.” I gave Ava a hug and created a portal so they could go back home.

“I will,” Ava said with a wave before stepping through the portal with the rest of her family.

Mitah created another portal to his castle. We stepped out into his study in front of a large round table in the center of the room. On it was an old hand-drawn map.

“Is that...?” I began.

“Indeed,” he confirmed. “This is the map of Faery. It’s been passed down through generations of rulers, and it’s said to show every corner of our realm.”

“Wait,” Jess interjected, peering at the map with a furrowed brow. “I thought Faery was constantly shifting. How can this be accurate?”

“Ah, you’re correct,” King Mitah replied, tapping a finger on the map. “Faery does shift, but so does the map. It updates itself to reflect the changes in the landscape. However, this also means that we must be vigilant, as the intruders’ location may change along with the terrain.”

“Great,” Devan muttered, rolling his eyes. “More complications.”

“Let’s focus on what we can do,” I suggested, studying the map intently. It was beautiful, intricate, and filled with symbols I couldn’t even begin to decipher. “Where are we now, and where do we think the intruders are?”

“Here’s our current location,” King Mitah pointed to a spot near the middle of the map, then traced his finger over to an area off to the east. “And this is where we believe the intruders have been causing the most disturbances.”

“Then that’s where we should start our search,” I said. “We’ll travel there and see if we can find any clues about their intentions or how to stop them.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Luci cracked his knuckles. “The sooner we get going, the better.”

Phira nodded. “We don’t want to give them any more time to wreak havoc on our realm.”

“Very well.” King Mitah’s gaze met mine with a mixture of pride and concern. “Stay safe, all of you. And remember—Faery is a place of wonder and magic, but it can also be treacherous.”

“Thanks,” I replied, giving him a small smile. “We’ll find them.”

As we ventured out of Mitah’s palace, I marveled at the beauty of our surroundings. The trees towered above us, their branches intertwining to form a lush canopy that filtered the sunlight into a soft, dappled glow.

“Too bad we couldn’t do a locator spell.” Since we didn’t know who they were or why they were here, a locator spell wouldn’t work.

“I might have something we could try,” Phira said. “I have been working on a spell to find lost things. It might work in this case.”

“Really?” I stopped and faced Phira. “How does it work?”

“Well,” Phira began. “It’s a bit complicated, but essentially the spell creates a sort of magical compass that points toward whatever you’re searching for.”

“Think of it like this,” Luci added with pride in his voice. Aw, I bet he helped her with crafting the spell. “The spell forms a connection between the caster and the object they’re seeking, allowing them to sense its presence no matter how far away or well-hidden it might be.”

“How cool,” I said. “Let’s give it a try.”

We huddled together, forming a tight circle as Phira guided us through the incantation. We spoke a rhythmic chant, the words

resonating with power as they flowed from our lips.

A jolt of energy surged through me. In the center of our little circle, a compass appeared, floating in midair.

Jess furrowed her brows and leaned in to look at the compass. “I don’t think it worked.”

Phira narrowed her eyes as she scanned our surroundings. “The compass isn’t pointing in any specific direction—it’s as if it can’t quite lock onto what we’re looking for.”

“Maybe that’s because the intruders aren’t lost,” Luci suggested with a frown. “Perhaps they’re hiding in plain sight, blending in with the natural ebb and flow of Faery’s magic.”

“Or maybe they’re using some kind of cloaking spell to shield themselves from detection,” Devan suggested, frowning as he considered the possibilities.

That was possible also, which would mean we weren’t dealing with regular humans.

“Sorry, Olivia,” Phira said apologetically, her face etched with disappointment.

“It’s all right.” I offered a small, tired smile. “It was worth a shot. We’ll just have to keep searching the old-fashioned way.”

“Look,” Luci said, pointing to the compass. “It may not have pinpointed the Intruders’ exact location, but it has given us something.”

I peered at the compass, noting how it stopped. Phira took out a map and levitated it under the compass. An area on the map lit up. It wasn’t an exact location, but it’d help get us closer.

“Better than nothing,” Jess said.

I nodded and studied the map as I tried to commit the area to memory. Bah. This was no use since Faery was always changing. “At least now we have a starting point for our search.”

As Jess said, that was better than nothing.



## AVA

“ARE you sure you can handle this?”

I turned to my husband and watched him bend over the crib to kiss the babies. “Of course I can handle this.”

It was my first time having the two bundles all to myself. What could possibly go wrong? It wasn't like I hadn't ever taken care of a baby. I got through it just fine with Wallie.

Drew straightened up and wrapped his arms around me, placing a kiss on my temple. “I'm just a phone call away if things get too crazy.”

Sliding a hand around to the back of his head, I pulled him and claimed his lips for a proper kiss. Boy, oh, boy, that man could curl my toes every time. Breaking the kiss, I said, “I'll be fine. Wallie and Michelle are here if I need them. I'll wake them up if I have to.”

He pursed his lips like he didn't believe me. “Okay, this is your last chance to ask for help.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved him toward the front door. “Go before you're late for work.”

Not that the sheriff of Shipton Harbor could be late. He arrives precisely when he means to, or something like that.

Drew chuckled and pressed another kiss to my forehead. “I'll see you tonight.”

“Have a good day,” I called out as he left.

I perched myself on the edge of the sofa, surrounded by an assortment of baby paraphernalia, and watched the two babies in the portable crib. Selby, the adorable ogre baby with a penchant for drooling, lay on one side of the crib while my grandbaby Imogene slept soundly on the other. The air in the room was thick with the scent of baby powder and that unmistakable newborn smell—a mixture of milk, warmth, and something inexplicably sweet.

Drew and I had named the baby ogre just a few days ago. We'd each taken a name. I chose Selby because it was a Walker family name and Drew's middle name. Drew had chosen Selby's middle name, Makenzie because it meant both the son of a great leader and fire-born. Selby's mom had died moments before her body expelled him. It was a good thing I'd been there to catch the beautiful baby boy but talk about being born in fire.

I wasn't so sure about the son of a great leader part of the meaning, but Drew says it was now true. My loving husband said that I was a great leader. Hmm, yeah, the jury was still out on that one.

"Hey there, you two," I said softly, leaning over the crib to pick up Selby. "Time for a little diaper change, hmm?"

Selby's plump cheeks wobbled as he gurgled happily, his big, round eyes staring up at me with unabashed curiosity. Ogre babies were surprisingly cuddly, despite their slightly off-putting appearance. Sure, they had a few fewer toes, and their skin was more greenish-gray than rosy-pink, but there was no denying the charm of those chubby limbs and that infectious grin.

Don't get me started on his baby laugh. He was only a few weeks old now, but he was already laughing, holding up his head, and acting very much like a three-to-four-month-old. Imogene, by comparison, was very much still a newborn, though no less cuddly. Selby also ate twice as much formula as Imogene.

We had no idea what we were dealing with here, but who didn't love a good challenge?

“Who’s a good little ogre baby?” I cooed as I gently laid him down on the changing pad. I couldn’t help but smile as he kicked his legs excitedly. While it’d been about twenty years since I last changed a diaper, I’d quickly re-become an expert at it.

“Almost done, sweetie,” I reassured Selby, wiping away the last traces of mess before securing a fresh diaper around his waist. He sighed contentedly and patted his belly with both hands, clearly pleased with the change.

I settled him back into the crib and turned to little Miss Imogene. “Okay, it’s your turn now.” I lifted her from the crib and cradled her against my chest. She stirred slightly, her delicate features scrunching together in momentary confusion before relaxing again as she recognized my scent.

“Hello, my little love.” I pressed a soft kiss on her forehead. Her skin was warm and smooth, and that scent, oh my geez. “Let’s get you all cleaned up too, shall we?”

Imogene’s diaper change went smoothly, her tiny body still limp with sleep. I couldn’t help but marvel at the differences between her and Selby—where he was all rolls and ripples, she was slender and delicate. But despite their contrasting appearances, they both held equal places in my heart.

I nestled Imogene back into the crib beside Selby. “All fresh and clean. Now, let’s see if we can get a little more rest before your parents wake up, hmm?”

As I settled back onto the sofa, I glanced over at Snoozer and Lucy curled up together on the windowsill, Poe and Lenore nestled between them. The sight of my little family filled me with warmth and contentment, reminding me that, even in this crazy world of magic and mayhem, there was still room for love and tenderness.

I had just picked up the remote to turn on the TV when the basement door creaked open. Frowning, I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was way too early for Wade to be up and about. As a newly turned vampire, he wouldn’t be able to resist falling dead asleep when the sun rose. Plus, now that I thought about it, Wade had texted that he was going to sleep in his



office at Red Lipped Mary's because he had to cover the night shift. It was just easier for him to sleep there.

A slender figure with tawny skin, icy blue eyes, and black hair stepped into the living room, her eyes wide with shock and confusion. My necro magic told me she was a vampire, sort of like spidey-senses tingling.

"Who are you?" I demanded, my voice quivering with the effort of keeping it steady. My nerves were a-janglin'. This chick was super strong. As she stepped closer, I jumped up, putting myself between her and the babies. "What are you doing here?"

"Apologies for the intrusion," she replied, her voice a smooth, velvety purr. "I didn't mean to. I walked into a closet and ended up here."

I frowned. She must have used the portal connecting Wade's basement apartment with his old house in Philly. "Are you staying with Jax?" I asked.

She nodded, looking around me at the crib.

"Well, you're not supposed to be here."

"Ah. My mistake," the vampire said, her gaze flickering over the room before settling on me with a curious intensity. Her eyes widened more and something unreadable flickered across her face. "You're a necromancer?"

I tensed, one hand instinctively moving to shield the babies' cradle as I nodded curtly. "Yes, I am. And you would do well to remember that."

"Of course." She took a hesitant step back as Imogene cooed. The female's gaze went back to the little cradle that was now mostly shielded by my body. "I meant no disrespect. I'll leave immediately."

"Good." I watched her retreat down the basement stairs, her movements quick and graceful like a shadow slinking away from the light. When the door clicked shut behind her, I sighed.

“Wow,” I muttered, sinking back onto the sofa with a shaky laugh. “That was unexpected.”

A sudden cry from Imogene brought my attention to the crib. “Everything’s okay, sweethearts,” I cooed softly to them, trying to soothe their distress as well as my own. “That nasty vampire won’t bother us again.”

Just to make sure, I picked up my phone and dialed Jax’s number. He was the vampire king of North America or something like that. That also reminded me that I’d promised to give him the anti-compulsion charms [4] I made ages ago when Luci moved in next door.

“Hello, Ava,” Jax said when he answered the call.

“Hi. I just had a run-in with a vampire who came through the portal from Wade’s house. It was a pretty big surprise.”

There was silence for a few minutes before Jax replied. “We have, er, guests in town. I’ll have Paige go down and lock the closet door to keep the nosey vamps out of it.”

“Thanks. With new babies in the house, it was unnerving. I just remembered those charms, too. I’ll get them to you soon.”

After he thanked me and we hung up, I sighed in contentment as Selby stirred from his nap, those big, round eyes blinking open to reveal a curious gaze. I smiled at his unique features—the greenish-gray skin and the shock of wild, curly blue hair that had a bit of a life of its own.

“Hey there, little guy,” I cooed, reaching down to lift him gently from the crib. “Did you have a good nap?”

Selby burred in response, his tiny fingers grasping at the air as if trying to reach for something. I chuckled, enamored by the sight of it all. Who would’ve thought that I’d be able to love an adopted ogre baby with such fierce protectiveness?

“Want some snuggles, huh?” I settled in the rocking chair Drew and Wallie had dragged from the attic with Selby cradled in my arms. He gurgled again, nestling against my chest with an almost purr-like sound. I hadn’t realized until that moment how much I’d missed having a baby around.

As I cradled Selby in my arms, gently rocking him back to sleep, Imogene stirred in her crib. Her little fists rubbed at her eyes, and she whimpered sleepily before opening them fully, revealing two beautiful pools of bright blue.

“Hi, pretty girl.” I stood and placed Selby in his swing.

Imogene let out another whimper that turned into a scream. “Looks like someone’s ready for lunch.”

I glanced toward the staircase. Wallie and Michelle were still upstairs, napping.

“Shh, sweet pea,” I whispered, scooping her up. Her tiny body practically swam in the soft purple blanket we’d wrapped her in. As soon as I brought her next to my body, she nuzzled against me as she searched for sustenance.

“Okay, okay.” I reached for my phone with one hand while trying to keep Imogene balanced in the crook of my other arm. “Let’s see if we can wake up your mama and papa.” With my thumb, I clumsily typed out a message to both Wallie and Michelle.

Imogene is awake + hungry. SOS.

My fingers moved slowly as molasses, and Imogene’s whimpers morphed quickly into full-fledged wails.

“Shh, shh.” I cooed, bouncing her gently in an attempt to soothe her hungry cries. “Help is coming, baby girl.”

Snoozer and the kittens hightailed it out of the living room like their butts were on fire. Not that I blamed them. This girl had some pipes. Lucy glared at Imogene as she casually made her way out of the room, as though nothing could make her rush, not even a squalling princess.

They hadn’t replied to my text, so I sent another.

Help. Magical baby not happy.

Just then, tiny raindrops began to fall around us, rapidly growing in size and speed until it was like we were standing in the middle of a downpour.

“Oh, great,” I grumbled, conjuring a large umbrella to cover me and the babies.

Winston rattled his floorboards, extremely unhappy with the indoor rain shower. Soon the front door opened and slammed shut.

“Calm down,” I called. “I can remove the water once it stops.” Imogene was quite the powerful little thing. If she got too upset, things like indoor rain showers happened. It was fairly unheard of for a baby to have this much power this young.

Also a bit overwhelming.

The sound of footsteps upstairs sent a tiny bit of relief through me. Okay, a lot of relief. “Mama is on her way.”

“Oh dear,” Michelle said with a small laugh as descended the stairs. Her dark hair was mussed from her nap, but there was no mistaking the gleam in her blue eyes.

“Thank goodness you’re here. We were just trying to figure out how to handle this little...um, weather situation.” I looked up at the floating umbrella. Michelle was a water witch. She’d be able to fix this faster than me.

“Leave it to me,” Michelle said confidently, raising her hands and murmuring a quick incantation. Within seconds, the rain began to slow, then stopped altogether. As if by magic, heh, the water on the floor and our soaked clothes evaporated, leaving us all dry and comfortable once more.

Michelle efficiently arranged pillows and blankets to create a comfortable nursing station. She was so calm and collected, even after being abruptly woken up from a much-needed nap by a sudden rainstorm in the living room.

“Here, give me Imogene.” Michelle reached out for the baby. I handed her over to her mom.

“Thanks, Ava,” Michelle said warmly, lifting her shirt, settling Imogene against her chest, and guiding her to latch on. The baby quieted, her tiny hands curling around Michelle’s fingers as she began to suckle.

“Is there anything else you need, Michelle? Water, snacks, a magazine?” I asked, a bit helpless in this situation.

“Actually, if you could grab me a glass of water, that would be wonderful,” she replied, shifting Imogene slightly so that she could nurse more comfortably.

“Of course,” I said. As I passed Selby, I smiled at the sight. He had his thumb in his mouth, watching Michelle and Imogene.

He caught me looking at him, and he gave me a big grin. “Don’t get any ideas.” I wagged my finger at him. “These ta-tas are just ta-tas now. Not milk stations. You’ll do fine on formula.”

He gurgled. Oh, geez, what a cutie. I loved my babies.



## AVA

WHILE MICHELLE TOOK care of Imogene, I picked up Selby and went to my office. I conjured his swing and set him up right next to my desk. He looked around the room, taking in all the things he could get into. Good thing he wasn't mobile yet.

"Don't think about it, Mister," I said, bopping his little nose. He grinned again and my heart melted. "This is mommy's office and not for your little hands."

He was going to be a handful when he started crawling. I could see it now, so instead of working on my next book, I started baby-proofing my office. Starting with the bookshelves, I removed all the books from the bottom two shelves.

Standing upright, I looked for a place to relocate the books. Crud. All my shelves were full.

As I started double-stacking books, Winston shook and a few seconds later, the wall next to the window shifted into a brand-new, built-in bookshelf.

"Thanks, Winston."

His response was a slight tremor of the floorboards under my feet. I glanced down at Selby. "It's nice having a magical house."

Lifting him out of the swing, I used my magic to spread out his blanket on the floor then sat with my legs spread so I could lay him down between them. "Oh, hang on." I conjured the stuffed dragon that Hailey had sent over. I had a baby ogre, she

had a baby dragon. Plus, I sort of had a baby super strong witch. It was baby season, yeesh.

My phone rang, interrupting the blissful moment between Selby and me. I glanced at the screen, surprised to see Clint's name flashing before me. It had been a while since I'd spoken to my old boss at Imaginary Homes Bookstore. Hopefully, nothing was wrong.

"Hey, Clint," I greeted him, trying to keep my tone casual despite my curiosity. "What's up?"

"Uh, Ava, you might want to come down to the bookstore, if you could." Oh, no. Something was wrong. He sounded really strained. "We've got a bit of a situation here."

"A situation?" I frowned, wondering what made him call me of all people. As far as he knew, I was just an author. Not somebody to be called for *situations*. "What kind of situation?"

"Um, uh." He paused, then said, "It's probably easier if you just see it for yourself. Can you swing by?"

"Sure," I said hesitantly, wondering what on earth could be happening at a quiet little bookstore to warrant such urgency. "I'll be right over."

"Thanks, Ava. See you soon."

I hung up, anxiety and anticipation churning in my gut. With a sigh, I scooped Selby into my arms and headed out to the living room, where Wallie was now sitting next to Michelle, chatting amiably as Imogene napped in her crib.

"Hey, guys." Thank goodness Wallie was up now. I didn't mind leaving both babies with them one bit, but I would've felt bad sticking Michelle with them both. Nursing a baby made it sometimes difficult to get anything else done. "Do you mind watching Selby while I run into town? Clint just called from the bookstore, and he needs me to check something out."

"Of course," Wallie said with a smile, reaching out to take Selby from my arms. "We'll be happy to watch the little guy."



“Thank you both so much,” I said as I grabbed my keys and headed out the door. “I’ll be back soon!” Winston shut the door behind me, and I jumped in the car, driving a little faster than my sheriff husband would probably be happy with.

The moment I stepped into Imaginary Homes Bookstore, I knew something was off. The familiar scent of old paper and ink that usually greeted me had been somehow distorted. Magic hung heavily in the air, which raised all kinds of red flags for me. Since Owen had moved to North Carolina and no longer worked here, there shouldn’t be anything magical going on in this little bookstore. Clint stood behind the counter, a worried expression on his face as he waved me over.

“Thanks for coming,” he said as I approached.

“No problem.” I gave him a curious look. “What’s going on?”

He handed me a book from the nearest shelf. “Take a look at this.” The cover looked normal enough, a cozy mystery with a haunted teapot on the front. But then when I opened it, I was met with an array of unrecognizable symbols that danced across the page.

“How odd,” I said, unable to tear my eyes away from the strange text. “That is definitely not English.”

“Or any other language I’ve ever seen,” Clint added, scratching his head. “The thing is, it’s not just this book. It’s every single one in the store. All of them.”

Well, that wasn’t good. “All of them?” I echoed, glancing around the shop. My heart hammered as I contemplated the implications. This wasn’t just some prank or accident. Someone had done this deliberately, and it reeked of magic. Quite literally.

Feigning confusion, I turned back to Clint. “Why did you call me? I’m no language expert. You should probably find someone who knows about, um, languages and stuff.” This was so freaking weird.

“Uh, about that.” Clint hesitated, then sighed. “Oh, come off it, Ava. I know you’re a witch. I’ve known for a while now. I figured if anyone could help with this, it’d be you.”

My stomach dropped, and I probably looked as though I had swallowed a mouthful of ice. He knew? How?

“You *know*?” I stammered, trying to regain my composure. “But...how? When? *How*?” I didn’t like the idea of someone knowing my big secret. Someone I hadn’t let in on it, anyway.

Clint pointed at the ceiling, and my gaze followed his finger. There, in plain sight, were several security cameras that I had somehow never noticed before. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and I let out a nervous laugh.

“Seriously? I’ve worked here for how long, and I never noticed those? What kind of witch am I?”

“Apparently, not a very observant one,” Clint said with an amused smirk. “It’s not like you were trying to hide it either. Those dust tornadoes you used to clean the store were a dead giveaway. Also, very helpful. Any time you want to stop in and do one, I’m totally okay with it.”

“Ugh,” I muttered, beyond embarrassed. “You’d think after all these years of keeping my magic a secret, I would have developed some better stealth skills.” My mind raced with thoughts of all the other times I might have accidentally revealed my true nature. Was I really that bad at hiding it?

“Hey,” Clint said softly with a smile. “It doesn’t change anything between us. If anything, I’m glad I can finally talk to you about it.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, a little reassured but still embarrassed by my oversight. “I’m sure you have questions, which I’m happy to answer, but let’s see if we can figure out what’s going on with these books.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, his expression turning serious again.

With my witchy secret now out in the open, I let my power take over, scanning the bookstore to see if I could pinpoint the source of the magic I’d sensed when I arrived.

“Clint, stand back a bit,” I warned as I extended my hands toward the nearest bookshelf. “I’m going to try to siphon off the magic from these books since I can’t tell where it came from.”

“Um, that’s a thing? Okay.” He took a step back and watched me intently.

My fingers tingled as I concentrated on drawing in the spell’s energy. As the glamor began to unravel, I watched one of the books open on the counter. This wasn’t an actual language at all, but rather a clever illusion created by a sophisticated spell. Whoever had done this was no amateur witch.

“Interesting,” I muttered as I pulled more magic from the books then released the magic into the ground, under the bookstore. “Open some at random?” I nodded toward the shelves. As I kept siphoning the magic off, each book Clint opened reverted back to its original state, revealing familiar titles and authors.

“Any idea who might’ve done this?” Clint asked, curiosity shining in his eyes. “Or what?” Oh, yeah, he was having way too much fun with this.

“None yet,” I said. Why would anyone want to mess with the books at Imaginary Homes Bookstore? “Do you have any enemies?” I asked. “Or anyone who is pettily angry at you?” It wasn’t like they’d burned the place down. Just freaked Clint out.

He shook his head. “No. Could it be another witch in town just playing a prank?”

“Maybe, I guess.” I shrugged. “I know them all, though. They’re not much for pranks. I suppose it could be someone passing through. This is definitely advanced magic, so they must be pretty skilled, and I definitely know everyone skilled in the area.”

Clint shook his head. “I never thought I’d be dealing with witchcraft in my bookstore, not once you and Owen quit.”

“Life’s funny like that,” I said with a half-smile. “But you’re all magic-free now.”

“Thanks, Ava,” Clint said sincerely. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“Anytime, my friend. It’s nice to know that you accept me as I am.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I should’ve told you ages ago.”

As I headed toward the door, I used a bit of the excess magic and, with a sound like a bell, made all the dust nearly instantaneously leave the shelves and collect in a ball in front of Clint’s face. “I don’t have to use tornadoes anymore.”

He burst out laughing and followed the ball as I led it out of the store in front of me, using magic to open the door. “Are you sure you don’t need a job?”

I just laughed as I walked out. Heck, I didn’t need it, but I did miss working with books and people in town.

Oh, well, I’d rather spend my time with two especially cute babies.

As I walked away from the bookstore, my mind left the sweet babies and went back to the mystery of the book glamor. I still had zero idea who could’ve done it and why.



# OLIVIA

AFTER A PLEASANT TWO-HOUR WALK, surrounded by the tranquility of nature and the peaceful sounds of birdsong, we crested a hill. I admired the picturesque landscape around us, a lush blend of vibrant greens and earthy browns that stretched out as far as I could see. The sun was high in the sky, casting a warm glow on all of our faces without being hot enough to make us sweat.

While I'd been in Faery several times, I never had the luxury of exploring the kingdom. It was beautiful and spending time with my children and biological parents, all of us together, was a luxury. Usually when we all managed to be in the same room, it was a zoo with all of Ava's extended family along with us. Not that I didn't love them, but this was nice, too.

Jess stopped and studied the map in her hands. "We should be in the general area the locator spell told us to look."

"Great," I said as a zing of power touched my awareness.

Beside me, Devan widened his eyes. He scanned the horizon for any signs of trouble. He'd felt it too.

A split second later, a Sphinx emerged from behind a large boulder, its majestic form both awe-inspiring and terrifying.

Uh-oh. This couldn't be good.

My heart leaped into my throat, and I reached out to grab both Jess and Devan close, as though I could somehow shield them from what might come next.

“Mom,” Jess said, sounding not at all worried. That stinking brat sounded excited! What a turd. “The old Greek legends about the Sphinx are true. If we can’t answer the riddle, she’ll eat us. If we can, she’ll help us.”

I swallowed hard, my pulse racing at the thought of facing such a challenge. I had always been quick with the random facts but knowing that frogs can hear both above and below water didn’t mean I’d know something as obscure as the answer to an ancient riddle. Still, I couldn’t let my fear show. I needed to remain strong for my children.

“Hello,” I said, attempting to sound calm and collected.

Before I could say anything else, Luci stepped forward.

Oh dear.

“Bless my eternal soul, a real Sphinx,” he said with an enthusiasm I’d never seen from him. “I’ve only met one of you magnificent creatures once before.” “Who dares approach me?” the Sphinx asked, her words booming through the air, making it sound like it was coming from everywhere all at once. Luci freaking Morningstar, the Prince of Darkness, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Baphomet, Lord of the Flies, the Antichrist, Father of Lies, Moloch, Satan himfreakingself bowed lower than I’d ever imagined he would or could. “I am Luci, the humble King of Hell, and may I present my lovely partner Phira, my daughter Olivia, and my grandchildren, Jessica and Devan. We seek your wisdom, oh great Sphinx.” Luci straightened the sleeves of his black button-down as though he hadn’t just acted like he was meeting the Queen of England.

May she rest in peace.

“Very well,” she said, studying us carefully. “Answer my riddle, and I shall grant you assistance with one problem. Fail, and you shall become my next meal.”

Hmph. She wouldn’t eat us without a fight.

“Fair enough,” Luci said, his confidence unwavering. I wished I was that sure of myself.

“I am always hungry, I must always be fed, the finger I touch will soon turn red. What am I?” As the Sphinx spoke her riddle. The answer didn’t immediately come to me, so panic bloomed in my gut.

Oh, freaking hell, I wanted to vomit. This was it. Our lives were on the line, and all I could do was stand there and hope that my father would come through for us because all that would come to mind was that one princess who pricked her finger on a spinning wheel. Why was I thinking about her?

“Fire,” Luci finally answered, after what felt like an eternity. Oh, no. That sounded right, but what if it wasn’t? What if he was—

“Indeed.” The Sphinx bowed her head in acknowledgment.

Sweet baby turtle doves.

“Your answer is correct. I shall assist you with one problem. What is it that you seek?”

“Thank you, wise Sphinx,” Luci said respectfully. “We are in search of intruders who have trespassed upon the Fae lands. Can you tell us where they went?”

The Sphinx pointed her nose down the path, her gaze never leaving us. “That way,” she said simply.

“Thank you,” Luci said with a nod of appreciation.

We hightailed it past the Sphinx, absolutely hot-footing it, beyond thankful to be alive and for Luci’s riddle-solving skills.

This world was more dangerous than I’d ever imagined, and it made me question whether Jess and Devan should be spending so much time here. I looked over at them hesitantly. “I had no idea Faery could be this perilous. Maybe you shouldn’t be here as often as you are. At least, not leaving the palace.”

Phira waved me off. “Jess and Devan are perfectly safe here. As much as any other fae. Don’t worry so much about them. Plus, they’re excelling in all of their magical training.”

“It’s not that bad here,” Devan said. “There are areas that are unsafe, but we avoid those. Never go into the dark forest alone



and so on.”

Jess and Devan exchanged amused glances before Jess added, “We’ve, that is, Dev and I, have been thinking about this, as a matter of fact. We want to take a year off from college and spend it in Faery.”

“A year?” I blurted out, my eyes widening. Oh, hell no. That was not happening. They’d lost their damn minds if they thought I’d be okay with this.

“Yeah, school can wait,” Jess added, her tone firm. “It’ll always be there. This summer has been amazing, and we learned so much, like an incredible amount.”

It didn’t matter if they’d learned how to turn water into freaking wine. “Abso-freaking-lutely not.” I shook my head, my tone firmer than firm. My tone was Mom-Firm. Trademark pending. “You’re immortal now. You can spend the rest of your lives in Faery if you want to. School is important, and it’s happening now.”

Devan stopped in the middle of the road with a cheeky grin on his face. “If we’re immortal now, we can go to school any old time, right?”

“Nice try, but no.” Time to play the mom card. “Don’t make me call your father.”

The mention of their father turned the atmosphere cold. I hadn’t really meant it. It was a habit that always worked on Sammie. That was who I was referring to, who I’d meant. Don’t make me call Sam.

Jess and Devan didn’t know that, though. Their piece of crap father had abandoned them when he found out they were part Fae, and the wound still festered. I regretted bringing him up immediately. It had slipped out.

“Damn it,” I muttered. “I wouldn’t really call him. I’m sorry.”

The kids turned their backs on me and continued to walk down the path. I glanced at Luci and Phira, who both offered me sad expressions, and followed them.

The air was charged with an undeniable tension between us as we continued our trek through the Faery realm. The vibrant colors of the lush foliage and the glint of sunlight on dewdrops did little to lift the heavy atmosphere. It was pretty and all, but I'd made a major faux pas.

"Look, I'm seriously sorry I brought up your father," I said finally, breaking the silence. "That wasn't fair of me. Really, when I said it, in my mind at least, I was thinking of Sam because I use that threat on Sammie when he's being stubborn. Sam isn't your father. I'm sorry."

After a few moments, Jess said, "It's okay, Mom. We know you're just looking out for us. You have to admit, it would be pretty amazing to spend a year here, learning about our heritage and all."

I sighed. Darn it. There was some truth in her words. However, I couldn't shake the thought that maybe they were using this opportunity to escape their responsibilities. "Yes, it sounds wonderful," I said. "My answer remains the same. A month, maybe. Not a year."

Devan kicked at a pebble on the path. "You never let us do anything fun," he muttered under his breath.

"Fun? This isn't about fun, Devan," I said, trying not to let my frustration show. I'd been such a crap mom to them for so long all I wanted to do now was give them their hearts' desires.

Right now, that was not an option. "This is about priorities. Right now, your education is a priority."

"Can't you just trust us to make our own decisions?" Jess implored. "We're adults now, Mom."

"Being an adult means making tough choices, and sometimes that's putting long-term goals ahead of short-term desires," I told them, hoping so much they'd understand. "When you've finished college and built a solid foundation for your future, then you can decide how much time you want to spend here or anywhere else."

"Fine," Jess said, clearly not happy with my decision but accepting it. Thank heavens.

Devan didn't look so obliging.

“Thank you,” I said, reaching out to touch her arm. “I know it's not what you want to hear, but I truly believe it's for the best.”

As we continued our journey, I ignored a pang of guilt for denying them this experience. But I had to remind myself that as their mother, my job was to guide and protect them, even when it meant making unpopular decisions.



## AVA

I SCRUBBED the last bit of stubborn sauce off the pan and rinsed it under warm water. Just as I placed the now spotless pan on the drying rack, a sudden gust of air sent the hair on the back of my neck on end. A familiar pulse of magic mingled with my own.

I walked into the living room just as a portal opened, the swirling colors dancing like watercolors. Out stepped Winnie, her new immortal fae magic glowing radiantly off her, followed by Alfred. Winnie raised her hand, and with a flick of her wrist, the portal closed behind them, leaving a faint echo of their passage. Holy crow.

“Wow, Winnie.” Wallie jumped up and smiled at her. “That was amazing. You made a portal,”

Michelle nodded in agreement, her eyes wide with admiration as she held Imogene and nursed the sweet girl.

“Thanks, guys.” Winnie beamed, her new plump cheeks, so like her original, and yet so different, flushing a soft pink. “It’s all part of the new fae magic package.”

“Color me impressed,” I said, wiping my hands on a towel to give my aunt a big hug. “How is your training going?”

“Great.” Winnie glanced at Alfred. “Though, there is something we need to ask you.” She glanced at Alfred, who shifted uncomfortably under her attention.

“Sure,” I said, gesturing toward the kitchen table. When they sat, Wallie and Michelle, now baby-less as Imogene rocked in her bouncy-rocky-chair thing beside Selby in his swing, joined

us at the table. We did all of our best problem-solving from the kitchen table. “What’s going on?”

As everyone settled in, Winnie took a long, slow breath, her fingers intertwined with Alfred’s. “You know that since my, erm, resurrection, I’ve become an immortal fae, right?”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded, not sure where they were going with this. The front door opened, and Drew walked in, fresh off his shift. Winnie nodded at him before continuing as he hung up his gun belt and put his gun in the fingerprint safe at the top of the hall closet. Not that Winston would let that gun get into the hands of the wrong person, but better safe than sorry.

“Well,” she continued, her voice wavering slightly. “Thanks to the chasm, Alfred is now human. While I wouldn’t trade our love for anything, the thought of watching him age and die while I remain unchanged is unbearable.”

“Mitah refuses to help,” Alfred added, bitterness creeping into his tone. “He said it’s something Winnie has to figure out on her own, whatever that means.”

Figuring things out seemed to be the theme of our lives lately, so I couldn’t blame them for seeking answers. My heart ached for their predicament. Life was never easy, even with magic involved. Sometimes especially with magic involved.

“I don’t have any immortality spells off the top of my head,” I said. “But I promise you that I’ll do everything I can to find a solution. I’ll reach out to the coven, research our family’s grimoires, and consult with other witches. There’s got to be something.”

“Thanks, Ava,” Winnie said, her voice choked with emotion. “That means a lot to us.”

Drew entered the kitchen then and said, “I’ll search the Hunter archives for any information that might help. We have records dating back centuries. There has to be something useful in there.” The hunters had digitized some years back, so Drew could just log on and search. Super handy.

I smiled at my husband as he bent down to kiss me.

“Thank you,” Winnie said as Alfred nodded in agreement.

“Of course,” I said. “We’ll do whatever it takes to make things right for you two.” I wasn’t sure why they’d been nervous to talk to us about it to begin with. I was more than happy to help.

Selby’s soft cries drifted from his swing in the living room. I got up to get him while Drew went to the fridge to grab one of the bottles I’d prepared that morning. I found it was easier and saved time to fix him several bottles each morning. I didn’t have the luxury to hook him up to a tit when he was hungry, like Michelle, though she’d definitely argue that it wasn’t always a luxury.

When I returned to the kitchen, Alfred took Selby from me and the bottle from Drew. As Alfred held the baby ogre, cooing down at him, the doting uncle, Winnie shared what she had learned during her time away.

“I’ve been assigned an adviser, as King Mitah calls her. She’s more like a mentor. She’s taught me a lot about my new abilities,” she said, her eyes shining brightly. “I’m so much more powerful now than I ever was before I died. I can manipulate elements, control nature, and even heal others. It’s truly amazing.”

“That sounds incredible. Just promise me you won’t let all that power go to your head, okay?” I teased.

Winnie laughed, shaking her head. “Don’t worry, I won’t. I know how important it is to use my powers responsibly.”

Imogene chose that moment to announce that she was awake. Michelle stood and grinned. “I’ve got this one.”

While we were still engaged in conversation, I discreetly pulled out my phone under the table and started contacting my list of people who could potentially help.

I sent Melody a text first.

Hey. I’ve got a bit of a situation on my hands. Do you know of any spells or rituals that could grant immortality to a human without a sacrifice? It’s for Alfred.

She replied right away.

No. But I'll look into it for you.

Thanks!

Then I sent a message to my mom and dad on group chat. They were at the academy for the week. It was easier for them to stay there and come home on weekends.

Hey, do you guys know anything about making someone immortal, by any chance? Could you ask the godmothers too? It's for Alfred.

My dad got back for both of them.

Not without killing him and making him a ghoul.  
☹️ We'll ask around.

Dad thought he was sooo funny. I was fairly sure Alfred didn't want to be a ghoul again.

Thanks.

“Who else should we contact?” Drew asked as he peered over my shoulder at my phone. He showed me his. He'd already texted Pearl, his grandmother, and the ice-queen matriarch of the hunters. Faster than checking the archives, though no doubt he'd do that, too. Pearl would most likely know off the top of her head.

“Let's see. Maybe try some of the other hunters? Or even some witches from different covens?” I said, racking my brain for anyone who might have valuable information.

“Got it,” Drew nodded as he kissed my forehead and stepped out the back door. His phone was ringing. “Hey Pearl, we could use your help with something...”

Big surprise she'd called instead of texting back. I was a little surprised she hadn't just popped in.

Hope sparked inside me. We would figure out how to keep these two lovebirds together for eternity, one way or another. We had one heck of a network of incredibly powerful people at our disposal.



After Winnie and Alfred disappeared through the portal back to Faery, I took Selby to my office where I'd moved all of my family's grimoires and spell books a few weeks before, thus the need for the shelf expansion. I cleared my desk and started going through the ancient pages of my family's magical books. Selby cooed in his playpen nearby, while Lucy and Snoozer curled up with their baby kitties on a large dog bed Wallie had bought for them.

"Anything useful?" Lucy asked around a yawn. I didn't ask how she knew what I was looking for. She looked like she'd been sleeping, but no doubt she'd hung onto every single word.

"Unfortunately not." I sighed, running my fingers over the faded ink. "But I won't give up."

"Of course you won't," Lucy said. "You're stubborn like that."

"Thanks for the support." I gave her a twisted smile, but she'd already tucked her nose under her long fluffy tail and closed her eyes.

About an hour later, I closed a spell book and blew out a breath. My eyes were starting to cross from reading through grimoires while Selby played with his toes. Giving up on the magical research for now, I scooped the little ogre into my arms and headed to the conservatory. Bright, warm sunlight streamed through the glass walls, casting a warm glow over the lush greenery inside.

"Okay, kiddo, Mommy's going to make you something special." I cooed as I settled him inside the small basket I put in there for when I worked on spells. While I'd mastered my necromancy powers, I'd neglected my witch side. I was working on fixing that.

Selby babbled happily, reaching for a nearby fern. I smiled. He was so alert to the world around him and was definitely progressing more than a normal baby would. Well, he wasn't a normal baby, though, was he? He was my super special Selby-belby-boy.

Today I was working on a spell that would allow Selby to look like a regular human baby boy so I could take him shopping, to the park, and to visit Drew without alarming the humans about Selby's true nature. "I just need to make sure that whatever I put the spell in doesn't choke my baby boy," I said to the smiling ogre in a babyish voice. I couldn't help myself.

"Great plan," Lucy said from the doorway with Poe and Lenore tumbling around her paws. "Wouldn't want to accidentally kill him."

I glared at the white cat. "Why are you following me around the house with your words of wisdom?" I lined up the ingredients for the spell on my work table.

"Just making sure that *thing* doesn't eat my babies."

I gasped at Lucy. "First of all, his name is Selby. He's not a thing. Second, he wouldn't eat your babies."

"What do you think ogres eat?" She sniffed, then reached down to lick Lenore's head. "Just ask Luci." With that she flicked her tail and turned to leave, Poe and Lenore following behind her like dutiful children.

I watched her until she was out of sight, then glanced down at Selby. In fact, I *had* asked Luci what Selby should be eating, and he'd told me anything a human child would need to grow. Selby was growing like a weed, so the baby formula seemed to be agreeing with him.

Ignoring the sassy white cat and her unseemly words, I carefully chanted the incantation and mixed the herbs together, focusing my energy on the intention of the spell. It would need time to brew, so I let it do its thing while I rustled through a drawer that had oddball pieces of jewelry and gemstones. I needed to find the right pieces for Selby.

It would be best to make two amulets. I conjured my sewing kit and sewed one into his favorite blanket and the other into the little dragon stuffed animal that Hailey had sent. At least now, we'd have options when trying to keep his true nature hidden without putting something on him that he could potentially choke on.

Picking up Selby, I smushed a kiss onto his cheek and cuddled him close. “Now Mommy will be able to join that Mommy and me group with Michelle.”

As I stepped into the living room, my cell phone rang. I pulled it out of my back pocket to see a number I didn’t recognize. “Hello?”

“Hi, Ava, it’s Ben.”

Ben Stamp and his twin brother, Brandon, were coven members and owned the Shipton Harbor B&B. The only thing they might be calling about was a lead for Winnie and Alfred.

“Hi, what’s up?” Please have a lead!

“We have a strange...I don’t know how to explain it. Can you come to the B&B? It’s best if you see it for yourself.”

Oh, that didn’t sound good. In fact, he sounded an awful lot like Clint had when he’d called about the spell on the books. This didn’t sound very lead-worthy. “I’ll be right there.”



# AVA

THE MOMENT I stepped into the backyard of Ben and Brandon's bed-and-breakfast, I froze. The same strange magic I'd felt at the bookstore hummed in the air.

"Where are the ducks?" I scanned the area, not seeing them.

"Look closer," Brandon said.

Stepping closer to the pond, I watched. After a second or two, I saw them. The ducks, who usually paddled around the pond with all the grace of ballerinas, were now submerged in the water, swimming more like fish than birds. They'd stay underwater for several minutes before breaching the surface, only to dive back down again.

"Wow. That is super odd."

"Yep," Ben said, shaking his head. "But that's just the half of it. Look to your right."

I looked where he gestured and spotted a bunch of small fish flopping around on the grass surrounding the pond. How I hadn't noticed them when I first walked back here was beyond me.

"Okay, that's just super weird," I said, crouching down to examine one fish. It didn't show any signs of dying, despite being out of its natural habitat.

Then, to my utter astonishment, one of the fish quacked, startling a big laugh out of me. Soon all the fish were quacking, quacking and flopping. Trying to stop the wave of

giggles before they started, I said, “This is the same magic I encountered at the bookstore.”

I filled Ben and Brandon in about the books that had been spelled to make them look like they’d been written in another language.

“You think this is the same magic?” Ben asked.

Brandon added, “It’s an illusion spell?”

“Yeah, sort of. I should be able to siphon off the magic.” I approached the first fish, placing my hands on either side of its body without touching it. I closed my eyes, focusing on the magic running through the creature. As gently as possible, I siphoned the magic out and the fish went still beneath my hands. The new problem was that now the fish started flopping around like it was fighting to breathe.

Scooping it up, I tossed it into the pond.

“Nice,” Ben said. “How did you do that?”

“I lock onto the magic around them and pull it toward me. Then I release that magic into the earth or the air. I’m not sure what it would do to me if I held onto it.” I frowned at the other fish around us.

Brandon nodded. “Understandable. Can we do them in groups?”

“We can try,” I said, moving to a group of fish acting like ducks.

Together, we siphoned the magic from the fish, returning them to their watery home. Each time, it got a little easier, like my body was adapting to the strange energy.

“Last one,” Brandon said, holding a particularly large fish that had been flopping around near the edge of the pond. When he took the magic from it, he tossed it into the water.

Next, we worked on the ducks that were swimming like fish. Those were a little trickier, but we managed to get them back to normal.

My phone rang as we got the last duck onto the grass to start drying, and I groaned. This couldn't be good news. "Ava here," I answered without checking the caller ID.

"Hey," Drew said. "You're not gonna believe this, but we're getting all sorts of calls about animals behaving strangely."

"Trust me, I believe it," I said, casting a glance at Ben and Brandon. "We just had our hands full with fish acting like ducks and ducks acting like fish."

"Really? Well, that's not even the weirdest part. The police dog has started meowing like a cat."

"Meowing?" I chuckled. "Now that's something I'd like to see."

"Me too, but things are getting out of hand," he sighed. "I don't know what's going on, but we need to get to the bottom of this."

"Any idea what could be causing it?"

"None yet, but—" Drew cut himself off suddenly. "Hold on, I've got another call coming in."

He put me on hold and came back a few minutes later. "You're not gonna believe this one either."

"Try me," I challenged, my curiosity piqued.

"Someone just called to say their horse is trying to climb a tree and making monkey sounds."

"Okay, you were right. I don't believe it." I shook my head, half amused and half concerned. "This is definitely some next-level weirdness."

"Tell me about it. I'm starting to think we should bring in some reinforcements." Drew sounded like he was ready to retire and move away to a remote island. I was totally with him on that plan. Unfortunately, the weirdness would almost definitely follow us.

"Good idea," I said, glancing at the twins. "I'll see if any coven members can lend a hand. Why don't you tell people to bring their pets to the station? I can easily handle them as they

come in. The ones that can't be brought in, I'll send a witch to siphon the magic."

"Will do. I'll see you in a few." Drew hung up and I looked at the twins, not sure where to start.

"Another round of bizarre animal behavior?" Ben asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yep," I confirmed, filling them in on the latest reports. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

"Leave it to us," Brandon said confidently. "We'll wrangle this monkey-horse and whatever else comes our way."

"Thanks, guys," I smiled, so happy for their support. Leaving them to inform Melody and the other coven members and explain how to siphon, I got back in my car and drove to the police station.

Inside the station, I found Drew frantically fielding phone calls and scribbling down addresses. He looked up as I entered, relief washing over his face.

"Thank goodness you're here."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," I said with a grin.

That got me a smirk from the sexy sheriff as he rounded the counter and planted a toe-curling kiss on my lips.

The chime of the front door broke us apart. I turned to see Melody busting through the door, her arms laden with cups of steaming coffee and a determined expression on her face.

"The cavalry has arrived. I was nearby when the twins called."

I rushed over to her and pulled her into a hug. "You're a lifesaver. Thanks for coming."

"This was too good to pass up. Just when you think Shipton is boring we get pets gone wild." She laughed as she set the drinks down on the nearest surface and immediately took command of the situation. "Everyone, listen up," she called, catching the attention of the frazzled police officers and bystanders milling around the station. "I'll be coordinating



efforts to address the animal issues in town. If you have an address or need assistance, come see me.”

“Thank you, Melody,” Drew said, grabbing a coffee and smiling at her like she was an angel from heaven.

“Of course,” Melody said, flashing him a quick smile before turning back to setting up a magical hotline center at the first desk she came to.

Some of the office staff and officers gaped at her open use of magic. While the witches tried to keep the magic and paranormal out of the public eye, most of the town knew magic was real. I didn’t bother explaining anything.

A second later, a young couple came in carrying a ferret that chirped like a bird and kept trying to take flight from their hands. Its tiny body wriggled and strained, its beady eyes filled with fear as it flapped its nonexistent wings.

“Easy there, little guy,” I said, gently stroking his head to calm him while siphoning off the magic. As expected, it was the same spell as the previous cases. The ferret gave one final, half-hearted chirp before snuggling into its owner’s arms, content to be wingless once more.

“Next,” Melody called, already waving over the next person in line.

And now there was a line. It went out the door and down the street. Holy animal drama, Manbat.

A teenage boy approached, sheepishly holding an iguana that refused to use its legs, instead slithering around like a snake. It coiled around the boy’s arm, flicking its tongue out at anyone who got too close.

“That’s new.” I giggled and touched it on the forehead, siphoning away.

“Isn’t it?” the boy said, clearly amused by his pet’s antics. “He’s never done anything like this before.”

“Let’s see if we can fix that,” I said, focusing my energy on the reptile. It took a bit more effort this time, but eventually, its

legs twitched back to life, and it clambered up the boy's arm like normal.

The boy grinned. "Thanks, I'm sure Lizarardo appreciates it too," he said, giving the lizard an affectionate scratch under its chin.

"Anytime," I said, smiling back at him and giggling at the name.

One by one, the strange cases came in, each more bewildering and hilarious than the last. At times, I laughed at the absurdity of it all. But Melody kept us organized and efficient, ensuring that no address went unattended as she sent the other coven members out to those who couldn't bring their pets to the station.

As the last animal was confirmed as spell-free and the calls stopped coming in, an exhausted silence settled over the police station. I leaned against a desk, the day pressing down on me.

"Is it over?" Drew asked, looking as worn out as I was.

"Looks like it." I sighed, rubbing my temples. "I just want to go home and cuddle Selby."

"Me too," he said, his eyes softening at the thought.

"Great work today, everyone," Melody said, surveying the room with pride. "We couldn't have done it without your help."

She waved her hand, magically putting the desk back to the way it was before her arrival.

"Thank you, Melody," I told her sincerely. "You were amazing."

"Hey, what are friends for?" she said, her eyes crinkling with a tired smile.

With that, we all returned to...normal? Well, as normal as it got in Shipton Harbor, anyway.



# OLIVIA

WE STUMBLED upon a campsite with a fire that was still flickering. It was a cozy little setup, complete with the remains of someone's dinner, a half-eaten rabbit roasting on a makeshift spit.

"Someone left in a hurry," I said dryly as I scanned our surroundings. The woods were eerily quiet, and there was no sign of whoever had started this fire. I raised my hand to cover the flames in dirt, but Devan touched my arm.

"Let me," he said with a proud gleam I hadn't seen before.

I pulled my arm back. "Be my guest."

One of the things I'd missed in recent months since Sam was turned into a vampire was spending time with my older two children and learning about magic with them. I was grateful to have Phira and Luci help out in that department, but it was so good to see them in action.

Devan lifted his hands and moved them in a circular motion and a ball of water formed in the air. The more magic he added, the bigger the water ball got. When it was as big as the fire, he tossed his hands out, putting out the fire with a big hiss and puff of smoke.

"That is so cool. You have water magic." I grabbed Devan and drew him into a tight hug. Relief flooded me when he wrapped his arms around me without hesitation. He was a little taller than me, which was so bittersweet.

"Yeah. I can control earth too. Jess can control earth and air." Devan let go of me and stepped back.

I turned to Jess and smiled. “That’s awesome.” I took her hand and squeezed it as I looked at Phira. “I have earth magic too. Is that common for fae?”

“Not really. I mean all the fae are elemental in some way. The royals have always had a stronger connection to earth.”

I did have a strong connection to the earth element. My fire magic was just as powerful, if not more. My demonic side no doubt had a hand in that.

“Now what? Did anyone see anyone?” That sounded like an echo. I snorted at my unintentional joke, getting stairs from my family.

“We can use the food to try the locator spell again,” Phira offered.

“Okay,” I said while Jess pulled out the map and spread it out on a large boulder nearby.

We gathered around it. I focused on the spell and the familiar rush of magic surging through me. Once again, the locator spell proved too unreliable. The area it highlighted on the map was massive, practically an entire coastline.

“Great, that narrows it down,” Jess said, rolling her eyes. “I’ve been to this area before, though. Let me try creating a portal.”

“Please, lead the way,” Devan said, gesturing grandly with a grin.

Jess concentrated for a moment and a shimmering portal appeared before us. We walked through, expecting the coast, a beach, a massive ocean. Erm, what? As we stepped through, everything changed.

“Are we in a freaking corn maze?” I blurted out. The ocean had disappeared, replaced by towering stalks of corn that stretched on forever.

“Apparently so,” Luci said, raising an eyebrow.

“Let’s just blast our way out,” Devan said, forming a ball of energy in his hand.

“Good idea,” I said, forming one of my own.

Luci, Phira, and Jess did the same. We threw the energy balls as fast as we could conjure them, but every time we blasted the corn, more stalks sprang up to take their place. It was like trying to fight a hydra. Cut off one head, and two more would grow back.

“Okay, new plan,” Jess said, looking slightly frazzled. “Why don’t we try floating the corn away?”

“Or we could float ourselves?” Phira said, her voice tinged with hope.

“Either way, let’s give it a shot.” I worked on a levitation spell.

On the count of three, we all levitated ourselves. Instead of rising above the corn to float out, we hovered just inches above the ground, unable to rise any higher.

“Seriously?” I groaned, frustrated. “Fine, looks like we’re walking.”

“Welcome to the world’s most annoying corn maze,” Devan said as we trudged forward, surrounded by an endless sea of green.

“Okay, seriously, how big is this maze?” I muttered twenty minutes later as we continued plodding through the maze. The cornstalks seemed to stretch on forever, and there was no end in sight.

“Beats me,” Jess said with a shrug.

A few yards up the path we turned right and stopped as a unicorn stepped out of the corn and faced us. This wasn’t the unicorn I was used to seeing in fairytales. This one had a dark, twisted horn and eyes that pierced my soul, sending shivers through me. We didn’t stick around to chat. We turned around and went the other way.

“Definitely not the My Little Pony version,” Devan said as we hurried away from the creepy unicorn.

“Understatement of the century,” I said, trying to shake off the lingering unease.

The next corner we came to, the kids and I peeked around it to see if anything was there. It was clear. Good.

Another few feet down, a giant snail materialized in the middle of the path. Sounds harmless enough, right?

Not. This particular gastropod had an affinity for telling dirty jokes.

“Why don’t witches have babies?” it asked.

“Um.” I exchanged a glance with Luci. “Why?”

“Their husbands have crystal balls.”

I bit my lip, but Luci made a snorting sound, and I glared at him as he bit back a laugh. I hoped he choked on it.

“Did you hear the one about the witch and the broomstick?” it asked, its slimy body undulating grotesquely as it laughed at its punchline.

“Uh, maybe later,” Jess said, steering us away from the snail before it could continue.

“Hey, suit yourselves,” it called after us, still chuckling.

“Never thought I’d be fleeing from a snail,” Phira mused as we picked up our pace.

“Me neither.” I sighed. “There are way too many things in my life I never could predict.”

Further into the maze, we found a giant turkey strutting around and gobbling loudly. It must have been at least ten feet tall, its feathers shimmering with an iridescent sheen.

“Stay back,” Luci said, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the oversized bird. “I don’t trust it.”

“Scared of a little Thanksgiving dinner?” Devan teased, but Luci’s expression remained stony.

“Let’s not find out what it does,” Jess said, and we gave the turkey a wide berth.

As we turned the next bend, we were greeted by a headless horseman, his pumpkin head tucked under one arm. I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Oh, hell to the no,” I said, backing away quickly. “I’ve seen that movie. We are not dealing with that.”

We all took off running in the opposite direction.

After escaping the headless horseman, we stumbled upon a griffin, a hydra, and a freaking yeti enjoying an ice cream cone. The corn maze seemed to have become some sort of fantastical creature convention.

“Okay, this is getting ridiculous,” I said as we veered away from what appeared to be a two-headed ferret.

“Almost there,” Jess assured us, her brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to navigate the maze. I wasn’t sure where she got a map from, but she was studying one.

Finally, we emerged on the other side, our hearts pounding. As we caught our breath, two figures ran away from us. They were far enough ahead that we couldn’t make out their faces, but something told me they were the intruders.

“Come on,” I shouted, breaking into a run after them.

“Olivia, wait,” Luci said, but I was already sprinting across the open field.

Just as we were closing in on the fleeing duo, the landscape shifted again, and suddenly we found ourselves back at the ocean. The pair had vanished, replaced by the crashing waves and a salty breeze.

“Where did they go?” Devan demanded, looking around wildly.

“Don’t know. They were clever enough to use the shifting landscape to get away.” I sighed, my frustration bubbling over.

And we were back to square one.





# AVA

STEPPING THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR, the sight of Michelle and Wallie greeted Drew and me. Both kids were asleep on the sofa. Selby and Imogene slept soundly in their cradle, their tiny bodies cocooned in soft blankets.

“Looks like we missed story time,” Drew whispered, careful not to disturb the sleeping duo.

I smiled at the scene before us. Our unconventional family was growing, and the love I had for them warmed me from within.

“Lucy, what on earth are you doing up there?” I asked, noticing our feline friend perched on an end table beside the cradle. She glared down at the babies with a look of utter repulsion, her fur standing on end like another cat was challenging her territory.

“That is not the baby I thought was going to come out of Michelle,” Lucy complained, her disgust evident in every syllable. “This thing is just ugh.”

Without another word, Lucy jumped down, landing gracefully on the floor. She sauntered into the kitchen, where the kittens played under Snoozer’s watchful eye.

“Lucy can be so dramatic sometimes,” I muttered, shaking my head.

Drew chuckled softly as he watched the crazy cat walk away.

“Michelle,” I said, gently nudging her shoulder. “Wake up, sweetie.”

“Wha...?” she mumbled, her eyes fluttering open. The soft glow of the nearby lamp illuminated her sleepy face, making her look even younger than a twenty-two-year-old mom.

“Go to bed,” I told her softly, my expression warm and understanding. “You need your rest. Drew and I will take care of the babies tonight.”

“Are you sure?” she asked groggily, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. “I can stay up if you need me to.”

“Absolutely.” I helped her to her feet. “You’re doing a great job, but now it’s our turn. Go get some sleep, okay?”

“Okay, I’m not going to argue. I’m too sleepy.” She chuckled and leaned over to wake Wallie. “Come to bed.”

They made their way to the stairs. Wallie yawned and said, “There’s a couple of bottles of breastmilk in the fridge if she wakes.”

I waved them off. “Go sleep.”

I was still a little wired from siphoning magic all day. I wasn’t going to be able to sleep anytime soon. Knowing me, that could change the moment I sat down.

As I lowered my butt toward the couch, Selby whimpered, his little face scrunching up as he began to stir. Drew scooped him up into his arms, cradling the tiny baby close to his chest, so I continued my descent.

“Hey there, little guy,” he said tenderly, rocking Selby back and forth. “Did you miss us while we were gone?”

I melted at the sight of Drew holding Selby so lovingly. He’d never had children of his own. Selby, while an ogre, already had cemented a spot in Drew’s heart as his son.

If only Selby’s new grandmother Pearl would be so accepting. I dreaded that introduction.

“Who knew you had such a gentle touch?” I teased, watching as Drew continued to soothe the baby.

“Hey, I’m not just a tough hunter,” he said playfully, his eyes never leaving Selby’s face. “I have a soft side too.” That much

I knew.

I kicked off my shoes and settled on the couch to watch them. A wave of contentment washed over me. Our lives might be anything but ordinary, but in this moment, everything was just right.

“See?” Drew said softly, a proud grin spreading across his face. “He’s settling down already.”

“Good job. You’re a natural at this parenting thing.”

He beamed, relishing the idea of being a father. “Maybe we’re not too old for this after all,” he mused, still rocking Selby in his arms. “I mean, sure, our bones might creak, and our joints might ache, but we’ve still got it where it counts.”

“Speak for yourself, old man,” I shot back playfully, poking him in the side. “I’m as spry as ever.”

“Old man?” he said mockingly, raising an eyebrow. “Just remember who you’re talking to, witchy woman.”

“Wouldn’t dream of forgetting.” Selby started fussing, so I held my arms out to him. “Here, let me take him.”

Drew hesitated for a moment, looking reluctant to let go of the baby. “Let me feed him?”

How could I say no? “I’ll be right back with his bottle.”

“Thanks, Ava.” He flashed me a smile as I got up off the couch and my dang ankle popped. “What was that about not being creaky?”

“Shut it. You’re still older.”

As I warmed the bottle and checked the temperature of the formula, I thought back to the first time I held Selby in my arms. There had been an instant connection between us, something powerful and magical that I couldn’t quite put into words.

With the bottle ready, I returned to the living room and handed it to Drew, who had settled himself in the recliner with Selby nestled against his chest.

“Here you go,” I said, sitting down next to them on the edge of the recliner. Drew shifted slightly to make room for me, and together, we watched as Selby eagerly drank from the bottle.

“Look at him go,” Drew said, his gaze filled with wonder. “He’s so tiny, yet so strong.”

“Like father, like son,” I said, giving Drew’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you, Ava,” he said, his gaze never leaving mine. “For everything.”

“Always,” I promised, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his lips.

As we sat there, basking in the warmth of our love, and watching Selby drink his fill, I felt a contentment I hadn’t experienced in a very, very long time.

“Who would have thought we’d end up here?” I mused, resting my head on Drew’s shoulder. “With two babies and a house full of magical creatures?”

“Life certainly has a way of surprising us,” he said. “But I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Neither would I,” I said, closing my eyes and allowing the peace of the moment to wash over me.

Selby’s bottle was almost empty, and his little eyelids began to flutter closed as the last few drops of milk disappeared. Drew gently patted his back, coaxing out a tiny burp that made me giggle. The sound echoed in the quiet room.

Drew stood and lowered Selby cradled into the crib next to Imogene. He adjusted the blanket around them both, tucking it securely under their chins before stepping back with a satisfied smile.

“Look at them,” he said, glancing over at me. “They’re so perfect.”

“Absolutely perfect,” I said, my heart swelling with love as I gazed at our sleeping babies. In that instant, I knew there was nothing I wouldn’t do to protect them. No magic too dangerous, no challenge too daunting. They were my world, and I would move heaven and earth to keep them safe.

We settled down on the couch, exhaustion pressing heavily on us. The fire crackled in the hearth, casting warm, flickering shadows across the room. Drew and I sat side by side on the couch, our legs entwined beneath a soft blanket. Despite the bags under his eyes and the lines of exhaustion etched into his face, Drew still managed to look handsome, if a little worn out.

“Can you believe it?” I mused, my gaze drifting over the sleeping babies nestled in their cradle nearby. “We’re parents.”

“Technically, you’ve been a parent for a while now,” Drew reminded me, nodding toward the stairs and the slumbering kids upstairs. “Yeah, having babies makes it more... real, somehow.”

Even though Wallie, Michelle, Zoey, and Larry were over eighteen and fully into the new adult stage of their life, they were still ours to protect and love.

“Real and terrifying,” I said with a shaky laugh. “I mean, what do we do about raising magical children?”

“About as much as you did when you had Wallie, I suppose,” he said, his voice tinged with amusement. “Then the ghouls. I never even thought about having kids. Ian, Lily, and I always felt the same way. We didn’t want to raise kids the way we were raised. Then Lily married a man who had kids. It worked out for her, but that didn’t mean I wanted them.”

I nodded. Lily had told me the story before. She still considered her stepkids as though they were her own, even though she was divorced now. And she spoiled the hell out of her grandbabies.

As I glanced over at Drew, who had closed his eyes for a brief moment of rest, my thoughts turned back to the quiet sweetness I’d witnessed between him and Selby earlier. The way he’d cradled the tiny baby in his arms, rocking him gently to sleep, had filled my heart with a love so profound it was almost overwhelming. Their bond was already so strong, so unbreakable, and it filled me with awe and gratitude I couldn’t quite put into words.

“Thank you,” I said, brushing a stray lock of hair from Drew’s forehead. “For everything.”

He opened his eyes, gazing with surprise and affection. “What for?”

“For being an amazing husband and father,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. “For loving our kids, all of them, unconditionally. For always being there, even when things get tough.”

“You’re stuck with me.” He leaned into me and kissed me. “Always.”

“Always,” I echoed, allowing myself to lean into his warmth and strength.





# AVA

THE BEDROOM DOOR creaking open drug me out of a dream where I was riding on a giant hummingbird through a field of lightning flowers. My eyes fluttered open to see Wallie's tall figure looming over me, his usually tousled hair even messier than usual.

I was beginning to think that he styled his hair like that on purpose.

"Morning, Mom," he said, easing into the bedroom. "I just wanted to let you know that Michelle and I fed and changed the babies, and they're asleep."

"Thanks, Wallie," I mumbled, still half-asleep and tangled in my sheets.

"We were hoping you could watch Imogene for us. We need to do some shopping and if you could watch her, we could go to the big store on the mainland." Shipton Harbor was just a big island, which we loved so much, but it meant we didn't get big stores. That was okay. I liked frequenting the mom and pops.

"Of course," I said, trying to sit up and failing miserably. "Just give me a minute to wake up."

"Thanks." Wallie left the room, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

As soon as the door closed, I flopped back onto my pillow, sleep tugging me back under her spell. The babies were asleep, which meant I could catch a few more Zzzs before they woke up again. As I drifted back to sleep, I briefly wondered if giant

hummingbirds and lightning flowers were a thing somewhere out there in the supernatural world.

My peaceful slumber ended abruptly when my phone buzzed loudly on the nightstand. Groaning, I reached out and grabbed it, squinting at the bright screen. Urgh, it was Clint again. I swiped to answer the call, rubbing my eyes as I did so.

“Clint?” I asked, my voice thick with sleep. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Ava, sorry to bother you so early, but we’ve got a bit of a situation here, well, not at the bookstore. Over at the bakery.”

Uh oh. The bakery was right next door to Clint’s bookstore. My brain snapped into focus as I sat up in bed.

“Strange how?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Well, I went to pick up breakfast before opening the bookstore and the baked goods seem to have developed a mind of their own. They’re moving around and causing quite a spectacle. It’s not normal, Ava. I think it might be,” he lowered his voice, “magic.”

I giggled at his whispers. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Ava. I appreciate it.”

Hanging up the phone, I rolled out of bed and rushed around the room, getting dressed.

“Hey, Drew,” I called out five minutes later as I raced down the stairs. “I need your help with the babies. Clint called about some weird stuff happening at Peachy Sweets.”

Drew appeared in the kitchen doorway, his eyebrows raised. “You mean *we’re* taking Selby and Imogene on a magical field trip to the bakery?”

I laughed. “Looks that way. Unless you’d rather sit here with them, and I’ll go take care of the animated baked goods?”

He held up both hands. “Oh, no. I need to see this. Let’s get these munchkins ready for an adventure.”

I walked into the living room, hearing someone cooing. Selby lay awake, babbling away. “Hi, Little Man.” I lifted him and

handed him off to Drew. “Can you change him while I get Baby Butt ready?”

“Okay, buddy,” Drew said and took Selby to the changing table along the far wall of the living room. Rather than asking Winston to expand again so we could communally care for the babies in here, we’d adapted. “Let’s get you cleaned up and into some fresh clothes.”

“Same goes for you, Missy,” I said, tickling Imogene’s tummy as I changed her diaper. She flailed her arms and kicked her feet. I put my hand near hers and the little beauty grabbed my finger with surprising strength.

With both babies freshly diapered and dressed, we moved on to packing the diaper bag. I tossed in their bottles, spare diapers, wipes, and an extra set of clothes for each baby. I zipped it up, confident we had everything we needed.

We each scooped up a baby and made our way to the front door. Drew managed to get the door open, and we stepped outside into the morning air.

“Wait, where’s the diaper bag?” I asked, suddenly realizing my arms were emptier than they should be.

“Didn’t you grab it?” Drew asked, his eyes wide.

“Ugh, no,” I groaned, looking back at the house. “I’ll go get it. You stay here with the babies.”

Hiking Imogene higher in my arms, I retrieved the diaper bag from the floor beside the changing table. As I jogged back toward the front door, I saw Selby’s pacifier on the counter. Of course, we’d forgotten that too. As if on cue, Selby started crying outside in Drew’s arms.

“Here.” I rushed out and handed Drew the pacifier. “Emergency meltdown prevention device acquired.”

“Nice save,” Drew grinned, popping the pacifier into Selby’s mouth. He immediately quieted down, his eyes drifting closed. If only everything today could be solved so easily.

“Okay,” I said, shifting Imogene in my arms as Drew locked the front door. “Now we’re ready. Peachy Sweets, here we

come.”

We got the babies into their car seats in Drew’s SUV and climbed into the front. While Drew started the SUV, I did a double check of the contents in the diaper bag. “I didn’t get the bottle warmer.”

“Can’t you just conjure it when we get there, if we need it?” Drew said, his eyes pleading. “How long do you think we’ll be gone?”

“I’m not sure what we’ll be walking into.” He was right about conjuring, though.

Focusing on my magic, I envisioned the items I needed. A small, portable bottle warmer appeared in my hands, straight out of the kitchen cabinet. “I think we’re ready now.”

“Nice,” Drew said, impressed. “You’re getting better at this witchy stuff every day.”

“Thanks.” I smiled, tucking the items securely into the diaper bag. “Now let’s get going before I remember something else I forgot.”

As we finally left for the bakery, our journey was smooth. Until I remembered something else. “The dragon!”

“Really?” Drew said with amusement. “How did you manage to forget Selby’s dragon?”

“Hey, old man. You could’ve remembered it, too.” I needed to make a list for next time. “I don’t remember it being this crazy to leave the house when Wallie was a baby.” I conjured Selby’s cute little dragon and tucked it into his car seat with him. “There, problem solved.”

After a near-collision with a squirrel, we had to pull over because Selby spit up all over himself and needed a quick change. Then it started pouring rain, a sudden downpour that had us scrambling to roll up the windows and make sure the rain wasn’t coming from Imogene. It wasn’t so we carried on and finally arrived at Peachy Sweets. Our nerves were frayed, and our energy was nearly depleted.

“Next time,” Drew said, parking the car and turning to look at me with an exhausted smile. “We’re using a portal like Olivia does. This traveling with babies thing is no joke.”

“Now that is an idea. Put portals at the bookstore and the police station. I bet Ben and Brandon would let us put on at the B&B,” I said, unbuckling my seatbelt and reaching for the door handle. “For now, let’s deal with the bakery issue and get back home as quickly as possible.”

“Selby, sweetheart,” I said as I opened the car door and reached in to grab our little magical bundle of joy. “Time to look like a regular baby, okay?” I chuckled, knowing full well that Selby didn’t quite understand what I was saying, but I didn’t care. He liked hearing my voice.

I tucked the blanket around him. As the blanket enveloped him, the magical illusion took effect, and Selby now appeared like any other adorable, non-magical infant. I smiled at the sight of his rosy cheeks and big-but-normal-sized eyes. “There we go, all set.”

“Great,” Drew said, reaching into the back seat to grab Imogene. “Now, how do we get this wrap carrier thing on again? I swear, it’s like solving a puzzle every time.”

I shifted Selby to one arm as I reached for my phone with my free hand. “I’ll look up a video tutorial. Again.”

“Thanks, babe,” Drew said, smiling at me as he attempted to wrangle Imogene into the wrap carrier with little success. Frustration built in his eyes. If we didn’t figure this out soon, we’d have two cranky adults along with two cranky babies on our hands.

“Okay, here’s a video,” I said, pulling up a tutorial from a cheerful-looking mom who seemed to have mastered the art of baby-wearing. “Let’s see... Oh, right, we have to start by wrapping it around your waist first.”

“Of course,” Drew muttered, rolling his eyes as he followed the instructions on the screen. “Why didn’t I remember that?”

“Probably because we’re running on caffeine and willpower,” I said, watching him struggle with the wrap carrier for a

moment before offering my assistance. “Here, let me help.”

Together, we managed to get Imogene securely fastened in the carrier, her tiny face peeking out at us sleepily. Drew sighed in relief as he adjusted the wrap and tied it tight, shifting her weight on his chest.

“Comfy, baby girl?” he asked, leaning down to plant a gentle kiss on Imogene’s forehead.

I got Selby tucked into the carrier I was wearing, one that had straps and didn’t need a degree in origami, and off we went. I even remembered the diaper bag, thank you very much.

The moment Drew and I stepped into Peachy Sweets, the sweet aroma of freshly baked goods enveloped us like a warm embrace. The bizarre sight before us quickly overshadowed the delightful scent. I blinked a few times just to make sure I wasn’t seeing things, but the scene remained unchanged. The baked goods were moving on their own. Shifting, wiggling, vibrating. One croissant was even dancing. It was like a scene from a cartoon movie, except more hilarious than magical.

“What the heck?” Drew muttered, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to hold back my laughter.

“This is weird,” Drew said, shifting Imogene in the wrap carrier as he stared wide-eyed at the animated pastries. A croissant gracefully twirled through the air, its flaky layers shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the window. A donut, with its vibrant pink glaze, bounced playfully from one display case to another. Meanwhile, a cinnamon roll gracefully unfurled itself, revealing its delicate swirls as it pirouetted across the bakery.

“Definitely.” I cradled Selby close while trying to assess the situation. “This looks eerily similar to what happened with the animals and the books.” My witch instincts kicked in at the familiar tingle of magic in the air, the same kind of magic I’d felt before.

“I’ll siphon the magic,” I said, stretching out my free hand toward the nearest animated pastry, a raspberry-filled croissant that was playfully dodging a bemused customer’s attempts to

grab it. Focusing all my energy on the magic within, power surged out of the croissant and into me. I'd gotten good at this. I was able to do them all at once. Almost instantly, the baked goods stopped moving. The once lively croissants, muffins, and cookies now lay motionless on their trays, looking completely ordinary again.

"Okay, mission accomplished," Drew said as we stepped out of the bakery, a big box of pastries in hand, a thank you from the owner. "Now let's get these babies home."

"Yes." I moved to the SUV and put Selby in his car seat while Drew put Imogene in hers.

We got about halfway to the house when both babies started crying. Then the smell hit us.

Uh-oh. Somebody did a stinky. We rolled down the windows while Drew found a safe place to pull over.

Once he stopped, I got out and carefully lifted Selby from his car seat, carried him to the back of the SUV, and spread out a blanket to lay him on to change his diaper. The poor guy was squirming and kicking his legs, making the task more difficult than it needed to be.

"Come on, sweetheart," Drew said to Imogene, attempting to console her as he dug through the diaper bag for a bottle. "You'll have your milk in just a moment."

"Got it," I said finally, securing the clean diaper onto Selby and returning him to his car seat. He continued to cry, but it seemed slightly less intense than before.

"Here," Drew said, passing me the bottle he'd prepared for Imogene. "If you could feed her while I change her diaper, that would be great."

"Of course," I said, taking the bottle and holding it to Imogene's lips. She latched on immediately, her cries quieting as she began to suckle hungrily. We were really lucky that she went back and forth from breast to bottle so easily.

"Good girl," I cooed, watching Drew expertly change her diaper. He did better than I had with Selby. Imogene was far less wiggly, but we'd let Drew have all the credit.

“All done,” Drew said once Imogene was clean and dry, securing her back into her car seat. “I think we’re ready to hit the road again.”

“Finally.” I sighed, climbing into the backseat between Selby and Imogene. “I’ll hold their bottles while you drive. Maybe we can get them both fed and settled before we get home.”

“It’ll be a miracle if it works,” Drew said, sliding into the driver’s seat and starting the engine.

As we pulled onto the road, I held a bottle in each hand, feeding the babies as they continued to cry intermittently. They didn’t love eating in the car seats.

“Are we cut out for this?” I looked at Drew in the rearview. “It’s a lot. Somehow harder than taking on the vampire council or navigating ghostly or hellish dimensions.”

“Hey,” Drew reassured me, casting a glance. “We’re doing the best we can, and that’s all anyone can ask. We’ll figure it out as we go. Those are two of the most loved babies in the world. That counts for a lot.”

Aw, he was right. I hummed as I jiggled the bottles slightly, which seemed to make the babies latch a bit better.

Several minutes later, Drew turned into our driveway, where Wallie and Michelle were just getting out of their car.

“Perfect timing,” I muttered, unbuckling myself and carefully unbuckling the fussing babies from their car seats. Drew parked the car and hurried around to help me, lifting Imogene into his arms while I got Selby.

“Hey, guys,” Michelle said cheerfully as she and Wallie got out of their car, arms laden with shopping bags. “How did everything go?”

“About as well as you might expect, considering our lack of recent experience with infants,” I said with a wry smile. “We managed.”

Drew filled them in on the bakery incident.

“Sounds like quite the adventure.” Wallie walked over to help us with the babies. “Here, let me take Selby.”



“Thanks, Wallie,” I said, passing him the now-calm infant. “How was your shopping trip?”

“Very productive,” Michelle answered, beaming. “We found some great deals, and we picked up a little something for you two as well.” She rummaged through one of the bags and pulled out a pair of matching mugs, *World’s Best Grandma* and *World’s Best Grandpa*.

“Aw, thanks, guys,” Drew exclaimed, laughing. “We’ll definitely make use of these.” It meant so much to me that they accepted Drew as Grandpa without a second thought, despite the lack of blood relation.

“Anytime,” Wallie said with a grin. “Seriously, thank you both so much for taking care of the little ones today. We appreciate it.”

“Of course,” I said, watching Michelle take Imogene from Drew’s arms. “We’re always here to help.” I pressed a kiss to Selby’s head. “But it’s your turn now. I’m going to take a nap.”



# OLIVIA

“READY?” Jess asked as she held up a map for us to focus on. We each touched a finger to the map and concentrated, willing the spell to lead us to our target.

“Anytime now,” Devan muttered under his breath.

“Hush it,” I said, trying to stay focused. The map glowed briefly, highlighting a new location.

“Unexplored territory.” Luci examined the map. “This means we have no choice but to walk.”

“Great.” I turned to head farther down the beach. Personally, I preferred portaling around. It was much faster. We’d been wandering around Faery for days. Sometimes time passed a bit differently here, too. It’d been much longer back home. I’d portaled back a couple of times to check on Sammie and kiss Sam.

“Could be worse.” Jess smirked in a way only daughters could at their mothers. “We could be stuck in another corn maze.”

“Har-har,” I said as I stopped to dump sand from my shoes. Again. “Very funny.”

So, we walked. It started pleasantly enough, with warm sand beneath our feet and the scent of saltwater in the air. I took my shoes off and walked a bit easier.

“Nice place for a vacation,” Devan said, clearly thinking along the same lines. Maybe when this was all done, I could grab my boys and conjure a big, fancy tent. Glamping on the beach sounded like a great vacation.

“Guys,” Jess interrupted, pointing ahead. “What’s that?”

We squinted in the direction she pointed. A thick bank of clouds was rolling in at an alarming rate. Within moments, the warm beachy climate vanished, replaced by a blizzard-like snowstorm. I conjured my shoes back on, along with big warm coats for all of us.

“Okay.” I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself as I conjured fuzzy hats and handed them out. “I did not sign up for this.”

“None of us did,” Phira said, her breath visible as she spoke. “Despite that, we can’t let a little bad weather stop us. These people have eluded all of Mitah’s forces. He needs us to at least give it our best shot.”

“A *little* bad weather?” Devan scoffed, his teeth chattering. “This is insane. We didn’t deal with this much snow when Dad took us skiing in Aspen.”

“Insane or not, we have to keep moving,” Luci said. “The intruders won’t wait for us to catch up.”

“Fine,” I said through clenched teeth, my every word punctuated by bursts of white air. “But if I freeze to death out here, I’m coming back to haunt all of you.”

“Deal,” Jess grinned, though the effect was somewhat lessened by the icicles forming on her eyelashes.

Devan trudged forward through the snow. “Let’s just find these people before we all turn into popsicles.”

They were right, of course. I conjured a fireball to Hoover in front of me as we walked. Devan and Jess moved closer, tucking into my sides. That part was kind of nice. They hadn’t been snugly since they were little. Neither of them had been particularly hug-loving children. Sammie was different. He loved a good hug.

Of course, I hadn’t been the warmest, most nurturing mother back then. I’d been more interested in my next spa day or keeping up with the Joneses.

Man, if I could go back and do things differently. Coulda, shoulda, woulda.

Luci formed a bigger fireball that floated above our heads. It helped to keep us from freezing to death. I just hoped the landscape would shift again soon.

After what seemed like a mile, or maybe it was half of a mile. Maybe it was fifteen feet, I didn't know jack diddly at this point. Phira stopped and said, "Okay, that's enough. We're going back to the palace to warm up and regroup."

"Finally," Devan muttered, his words muffled by the scarf he'd conjured moments ago to wrap around his face.

"Everyone, gather close," Phira instructed. We huddled together, shivering against each other as my mom raised her hands and a shimmering blue light enveloped us all. It wasn't a portal. More like a gentle magical carriage ride that only lasted a second or two. In a blink, it whisked us away from the frozen tundra and deposited us into the warmth of the palace.

"Ah, sweet warmth." I sighed, spreading my arms wide and basking in the cozy heat from a roaring fireplace.

"Thank goodness," Jess said, pulling off her gloves and holding her hands out toward the fire. She moved closer to me and shivered. "I think my toes are frozen."

"Mine too." I wrapped an arm around her, and she snuggled into me. My heart melted. Having this time together was a blessing. Time to get to know them better.

A fae woman entered the room, bowing low. "Your Majesties, King Mitah requests your presence at dinner. He wishes to be updated on your progress in locating the intruders."

Phira gave the servant a pleasant smile. "Thank you. We'll be right there."

The mention of dinner woke up the beast inside my belly, and it wanted to let everyone know it was hungry. I followed the others out of the room and toward the dining hall after Luci snapped his fingers, changing us out of our snowstorm clothes and into flowing robes appropriate for a meal with the fae

king. I smoothed my ponytail as Jess used her magic to make her hairdo look fresh.

As we entered the dining hall, King Mitah looked up from his conversation with a courtier, his eyes narrowing as we approached. “Ah, there you are.” He waved us over. “Please, join me.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Luci said, taking a seat as the rest of us followed suit.

Mitah studied us intently. “Tell me, what news do you have regarding the intruders?”

“Well,” I started, exchanging glances with my companions, “we performed a locator spell and almost caught up with them several times. We were really close when the landscape shifted. They used that to get away.”

“That’s interesting,” Mitah said as he cut into his steak.

As he took his first bite, I began filling my plate from the bowls on the table, waving off one of his servants. I was freaking hungry.

“Indeed,” Phira said. “We got caught in a blizzard we didn’t see coming.”

“First it was sunny and warm, and we were walking on a beach,” Jess added. “Then, out of nowhere, it turned into a blizzard. It only took about five seconds.”

“You must’ve been on the coast,” Mitah said. “The beach enjoys a snow day once in a while.” He sighed. “It seems the realm is doing its best to protect these intruders. Or confuse them.”

“Or perhaps just to make our lives difficult,” Devan said, earning himself a stern look from Phira.

“Either way,” Luci said, “we’ve returned to the Palace to regroup and devise a new plan for tracking them down. And thaw.”

“Very well.” Mitah nodded and finished chewing. “I expect regular updates on your progress. These intruders are a threat to us all, and we cannot rest until we catch them.”

After dinner, we gathered in Phira's study to perform another locator spell. The flickering light of a few candles placed strategically around the space dimly lit the large room. The scent of lavender filled the air as Phira placed her hands on the table before us. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

Jess, Devan, Luci, and I joined hands, forming a circle around Phira. She closed her eyes and chanted softly under her breath. As she did so, the air in the room hummed with energy. I squeezed Jess's hand tightly, seeking comfort in her familiar warmth.

After a moment, Phira opened her eyes and looked around at each of us. "I have it," she said solemnly. "I know where they are."

"Where?" I whispered.

"Somewhere high up in the mountains," she said, her blue eyes clouded with concern. She pointed to a place on the map. "There. It's a dangerous area, but I'm familiar with it. We'll have to be careful."

"Of course." I sighed, trying not to let my fear show. "What's life without a little danger, right?"

"Exactly. That's my girl." Luci smirked. "Now come on, let's get moving, shall we?"

"Right," Phira said. "First, our clothes."

We conjured the warm clothes back, bundling up. Devan even handed out goggles like skiers wore. Once we were properly cozy, Phira held her hands out. "Everyone, grab hold."

We grasped onto her, our fingers intertwining as we prepared for the familiar sensation of portaling the Phira way, Phira transported us from the comfort of her study.

The moment we arrived, the cold air bit at my cheeks, the temperature a stark contrast to the warmth of the Palace. At least we had warmer clothes on now and this wasn't nearly as cold as it had been on the beach.

We stood atop a mountain, surrounded by dense woods with a babbling creek nearby. The view was breathtaking, but I

couldn't help feeling uneasy. This place seemed to hold secrets that were better left undiscovered.

Phira surveyed our surroundings. "The locator spell showed that they're somewhere in this general area."

A sudden sneeze caught me off guard, making my eyes water. I sniffled, looking around as Jess, Devan, Luci, and Phira glanced with concern. "Sorry," I mumbled, wiping my nose with the back of my glove. "I don't know what came over me. I didn't even know I was going to sneeze until it came out."

"Unpredictable magic," Phira said, her eyes scanning the area. "This area is known for it. It can make your allergies go haywire."

That was a new one for me. "Great," I muttered. The mountain was beautiful, but danger lurked in the shadows like we were constantly being watched.

"Look," Jess suddenly exclaimed, pointing down the mountain. "There they are!"

We all turned to see a man and woman running through the trees, their cloaks billowing behind them. Without hesitation, we gave chase, running and nearly tumbling down the side of a dang mountain.

"Stop," I shouted, pointing at the fleeing figures. "You're not getting away this time!"

"Mom, be careful," Devan warned, right on my heels.

As we closed in, we began throwing spells at them, hoping to slow them down or incapacitate them. The unpredictable magic of the mountains seemed to want to work against us, causing our spells to behave erratically. I threw a fireball at them. However, instead of the familiar burst of flames, a stream of iridescent bubbles floated gently from my fingertips.

"Seriously?" I muttered, flabbergasted. "Bubbles? What the crap?"

Jess attempted an ice spell, but it turned into harmless snowflakes.



“Dang it,” I said, frustration mounting. “Why won’t anything work?”

“Keep trying,” Phira encouraged, her spells meeting similar fates as her fireball turned into a firework over our heads. At least it was pretty. “We can’t let them get away,”

“Watch out,” Devan shouted as a bolt of energy shot from the woman’s hand, narrowly missing me.

“Whoa,” I gasped, stumbling but regaining my footing. “Why is their magic working?”

As we continued to chase the man and woman, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the realm was working against us, like it was protecting the intruders.

“Come on,” Jess panted, her face flushed from exertion. “We’re gaining on them.”

“Almost—there.” I wheezed, pushing myself to run faster, my legs burning with the effort. Just as we were about to close the gap, something unexpected happened.

“Olivia, Look out!” Luci shouted, his voice laced with panic.

It was too late. A wall of solid rock appeared between us and the intruders, stopping us in our tracks. I slammed into it, the impact knocking the wind out of me. Holy freaking crap. “What the hell was that? Owwww.” I groaned, rubbing my bruised shoulder.

“Seems like the realm is trying to help them escape,” Luci said grimly, his eyes narrowed in anger. “Why?”



## AVA

“WHAT’S GOTTEN INTO SELBY TONIGHT?” Drew and I walked the beach, trying to soothe our cranky ogre baby. The moon hung low in the sky, casting a silver sheen over the waves that licked at the shoreline.

“He might have an upset tummy,” Drew said, rubbing Selby’s back. We’d wrapped him in the carrier for the walk, but it wasn’t doing a lot of good.

After a few minutes, the night air and ocean sounds seemed to help calm him. I was hoping this wouldn’t be a habit. While I was a night owl, I liked my late nights spent in my fictional worlds, not outside.

“Maybe you could try some earth magic to help him relax,” Drew said, offering me a warm smile.

I nodded and focused my powers, letting the energy flow through me. A gentle breeze circled us, and the scent of eucalyptus filled the air.

“Ah, there we go,” Drew said and rubbed the baby’s back.

Selby’s breathing evened out, and his eyes closed. “Finally,” I breathed.

We walked a few more yards before turning back toward the house. When we crested the small cliff, we stopped in our tracks. “What?” I gasped. Instead of a big ol’ Victorian waiting for us, there was nothing but a big bare spot in the landscape where Winston was supposed to be. Even the guest houses and pool were gone. There should’ve been a basement

and a series of underground tunnels exposed with the house gone. Nope, it was just dirt. Plain dirt.

“Um, possibly a silly question. Where’s the house?” Drew asked, raising an eyebrow as he stared at the empty lot.

It was so shocking I didn’t know what to say. “I don’t know. It’s not like Winston could just get up and walk off.” At least I’d never seen him walk. The vein of magic underneath the house was pretty dang powerful, there was no telling what the house could do.

“Then where is it?” Drew asked.

“That is a good question. I—” Oh, crap. Wallie, Michelle, and Imogene were in the house, wherever it was. And Lucy, Snoozer, Lenore, and Poe. Wade was possibly in the basement. He might’ve been at the club, though. Ian was still on a hunt. Zoey and Larry were still in New Orleans, Olivia was in Faery, as were Winnie and Alfred, Luci and Phira, Devan and Jess. Luci’s house looked safe and sound across the yard, so presumably Sam and Sammie were there. Mom and Dad were at the academy.

Wondering if the house was under a spell like the pets and the books were, I moved closer to the empty lot. Opening up my senses, I scanned the area for magic. There was a crap ton of magic tightly wound around where the house should have been.

I held my hands out with my palms facing the empty space and tried to siphon the magic. Nothing happened. I dropped my hands, feeling defeated. “Drew, can you use your new ability to boost my magic?”

“Sure.” He adjusted Selby and moved closer to me so he could hold my hand.

A while back, Pearl came by with a cat figurine and made Drew hold it. We didn’t know that the porcelain cat was a magical relic that woke up hidden magics inside others. When Drew touched it, his new ability woke.

My husband could amplify powers in others.

However, his boosting ability wasn't working on the spell around the house.

Drew and I spent the next hour trying various spells and incantations to locate our missing home, but our attempts proved unsuccessful. We also got no reply on Wallie's or Michelle's phones. Mom and Dad couldn't portal back here. We'd called them and they'd tried to go through the portal that would take them to our new portaling room, but the portal was deactivated. We couldn't get a hold of anyone in Faery.

"This is nuts." I threw up my arms. "Absolutely bonkers." Thankfully, Selby had slept the whole time nestled against Drew's chest. Drew bounced Selby a little when he stirred, but he quieted right back down. "We'll find it. For now, I think we both need some rest. At least we know the house is still there, just under a spell."

"Where are we supposed to go?" I asked, looking around. There was only one option. I glanced at Luci's large gothic mansion. The downstairs lights were on. "Let's go over to Luci's. Sam and Sammie are there, and I'm sure they won't mind if we crash for the night." We hadn't called Sam, because he didn't have the kind of magic that could help us find Winston, and it was right at Sammie's bedtime. We didn't want to wake him.

Drew nodded, and we walked across the property. We'd only had the guest houses and pool a short time, but them not being there was so freaking weird.

As we approached the front door, Sam opened the door. "Hey, guys," Sam greeted us with a warm smile. "What brings you over at this time of night?"

"Long story," Drew said, rubbing his temples. He moved back so Sam could look past him. "Care to hazard a guess?"

Sam's jaw slowly dropped as he stared at the empty lot next door. "That's not good. Come in." He stepped aside to let us pass.

We followed Sam to the living room. Sam turned and studied Selby, sleeping on Drew's shoulder. "So, um, what?"

I shrugged. “Selby was fussy earlier, so Drew and I took him for a walk on the beach. When we got back, Winston was gone.”

“That is weird. Where did it go?” He vamp-speeded over to the window and looked out. “Is it like a practical joke?”

“No clue,” I said. “I’m trying not to freak out because the kids are in there. We’ve tried everything we can think of to locate it, but nothing’s worked. We’re at a loss.”

Drew adjusted Selby. “We saw the lights on here and came over to see if we could stay the night. It’s getting late. We’ll figure out where our house went in the morning, not that we’ll be able to sleep.”

“Of course,” Sam said, nodding empathetically. “You three are welcome to stay as long as you need.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“No problem. It’s been quiet with everyone away. Sammie goes to the Rune Academy during the day, and I’m either here bored to death, or at the bar.” Sam waved for us to follow him. “I can get you set up in one of the guest rooms. We’ve got Sammie’s old pack-and-play in one of Luci’s rooms. I’ll grab it for Selby.”

Several hours later, I tossed and turned in the guest bed, my mind raced with thoughts of our missing home and the kids and the strange happenings in town. No matter how hard I tried, sleep eluded me. What if the kids were in danger or hurt? Should we have called and woken up Melody and the coven? Was there anything else we could’ve done? Drew had even called Pearl, but she hadn’t been able to find any precedence for disappearing houses in the hunter archives.

Giving up on sleep, I threw off the covers and decided to explore the house. After all, we were staying in Luci’s house, which practically oozed supernatural vibes. What better way to get my mind off of the missing house and family?

Leaving Drew and Selby to their sleep, I tiptoed down the hallway, the floorboards creaking softly beneath my feet. The dimly lit corridor stretched out before me, lined with closed

doors that seemed to whisper secrets as I passed. Unable to resist the allure, I turned the knob of the nearest door and stepped inside.

“Whatcha doing?”

I jumped, startled by Sam’s sudden appearance. “Geez, Sam, You scared the life out of me,”

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “I couldn’t sleep either. Figured you might be up to something interesting.”

“Umm... yes please.” It would be nice to have some company to keep my mind off of things. “Stay close. We don’t know what we might find here,” I warned.

“Oh, I’ve heard stories of when you and Olivia go exploring up here,” he said with a grin. “I generally avoid it, but I’ve gone on a few adventures myself.”

As we ventured deeper into the maze-like house, we encountered one peculiar room after another. Each space possessed its own unique brand of weirdness, offering glimpses into the mysterious world that surrounded us.

“Check this out,” Sam said, opening a door to reveal a room filled with what appeared to be thousands of snow globes. Each one contained a miniature scene, and as we watched in awe, the tiny figures inside moved, going about their daily lives.

I reached out to touch one, only to have Sam swat my hand away. “Look, but don’t touch.” He waggled his eyebrows playfully. “You never know what kind of magical booby traps Luci might have set up.”

“Point taken,” I said, stepping back from the shelf.

“Hey, do you remember that time we found that haunted dollhouse at Mrs. Perry’s yard sale?” Sam asked as we entered another room, this one filled with plants that shifted and changed color in response to our presence.

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” I groaned, recalling the terror we’d felt when the dolls inside began acting out our deepest fears.

Mrs. Perry had been an old witch friend of Ya-Ya's. "I still have nightmares about that thing."

"Ah, good times." He chuckled, nudging me with his elbow. "We've always had a knack for finding trouble, haven't we?"

"Trouble? Us?" I feigned innocence, batting my eyelashes dramatically. "Never."

"Right." Sam snorted, rolling his eyes. "And I'm the Queen of England."

I offered him an exaggerated curtsy. "Your Majesty, shall we continue our royal tour?"

"Indeed," he said, mimicking a posh accent. "Onward, my loyal subject."

We continued our exploration, and it wasn't long before we stumbled upon a room that looked like it belonged to a hoarder of unopened mail. Stacks upon stacks of envelopes, packages, and mysterious parcels filled the space, leaving little room for us to navigate.

"Wow." Sam whistled, stepping carefully over a mountain of letters. "Looks like someone's been avoiding their responsibilities."

"Or their fan mail," I said, eyeing a particularly glittery envelope with suspicion. "Maybe Luci has a secret admirer."

"Wouldn't surprise me." Sam grinned, stuffing a handful of letters into his pockets.

Laughing, I followed him out of the room and into another one that was a stark contrast to the previous. This one was a veritable shrine to vintage video games, with consoles, controllers, and cartridges meticulously arranged on shelves and display cases.

"Whoa," Sam said, his eyes wide with excitement as he took in the impressive collection. "Look at this, They've got everything from Atari to Nintendo 64. I've got to bring Sammie in here." He eagerly flipped through a stack of game cartridges.



“Didn’t peg Luci as a gamer.” I shook my head and smiled at my friend’s excitement.

“Neither did I, but this is amazing.” He held up a copy of a gold game. “Do you know how rare this is? I have to play some of these.”

“You might want to ask Luci about that before you start. Don’t want to end up in Jumanji,” I reminded him gently.

“Right,” Sam sighed, reluctantly tearing himself away from the games.

After I shut the door and we strolled past a few more, I said, “Have you talked to Olivia? She’s been gone for a while.”

“She sent me a message earlier today. They’re still searching for the intruders, but she thinks they’re getting close.” Sam shrugged. “She did say that she was bonding with Jess and Devan, which is good.”

Well, that was nice for her. “Yeah. She needs to connect with them. I’m glad she gets a second chance to be in their lives.”

Sam nodded as we came to the next room. This one was filled with clocks of all shapes and sizes, each set to a different time. The cacophony of ticking and chiming was almost deafening, and I shuddered at the eerie atmosphere.

“Looks like someone’s got a serious obsession with time,” Sam said over the noise, tilting his head as he studied a particularly ornate grandfather clock.

“Or they’re trying to keep track of multiple timelines,” I said, my mind racing with possible explanations for the bizarre collection.

“Could be,” Sam said, his brow furrowed in thought. “Let’s not dwell on it too much. Time’s a-wasting, after all.”

“Pfft.” I pushed at his shoulder.

“Come on, come on.” He chuckled, leading me out of the room and into another one that immediately sent chills all over my body.

This room was filled with photographs, paintings, and even charcoal sketches all depicting people. That wasn't the creepy part. Their eyes definitely followed us as we moved. The unsettling sensation of being watched made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"Okay, this is officially disturbing," Sam said, inching closer to me as we surveyed the eerie collection.

"For sure," I said, unable to shake the feeling that the subjects of the pictures were somehow, ugh, alive. "Let's get out of here before the walls close in on us or something."

"Yep, good call." Sam nodded, practically sprinting toward the door after grabbing my hand and dragging me with him.

"Okay, this room takes the cake for weirdness," I muttered as Sam and I cautiously stepped into a chamber filled with mirrors. At least it wasn't creepy. Just odd. They were all different shapes, sizes, and styles. Some were ornate and gilded, others simple and unassuming.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" Sam struck a pose in front of one.

"Very original, Brother Grimm," I teased. "Seriously, there's something off about these mirrors."

"Like what?" Sam asked, studying his reflection.

"Look closer," I said, leaning in to get a better look at one particular mirror. It appeared to be a normal reflection at first glance, but upon further inspection, the image wasn't just a reflection at all. It was another realm entirely. I was the same but everything behind me was different.

"Whoa," Sam said, catching on to what I saw. "These mirrors are like... windows to other worlds or something."

"Exactly," I said, my curiosity piqued.

"Only one way to find out." Sam extended a hand toward one of the mirrors. Before he could touch it, I grabbed his arm, yanking him back.

"Wait," I said. "We have no idea what will happen if we touch it. We could end up trapped in another realm or worse."

“Good point,” Sam said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Ah, well. You should probably get some sleep.”

“Yeah,” I said, yawning. He was right. I’d distracted myself from my worries, but exhaustion was starting to set in.

We retreated to our respective rooms. “Night,” I said as I opened the door to the guest room. Hopefully, I would be able to sleep.

“Sleep well,” he called in a hushed voice. “We’ll get your parents and the coven here in the morning. Maybe they can do something about the spell on Winston. Try not to worry, okay?”

Easier said than done.

The following morning, Drew and I walked downstairs, still bleary-eyed from a restless night. Selby was still asleep. He’d woken an hour ago for a bottle. Surprisingly, I’d been able to conjure his formula, which led me to believe the house was still there where it was supposed to be, but maybe just invisible.

“Please be there, please be there,” I said as we looked out the back door of Luci’s house. My breath caught in my throat as we laid eyes on the familiar structure of our beloved home. Winston was back.

“Thank the gods,” Drew exclaimed, relief washing over his face.

“Seriously,” I said, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. “I’ll get Selby and leave Sam a note.”

Little Sammie was also still asleep, and I didn’t want to wake him or his dad.

A few minutes later, I pushed open Winston’s back door, and a faint smell of cinnamon and sage wafted through the air. The familiar creaks and groans of the house seemed to sigh in relief at our return, as though Winston had missed us just as much as we’d missed him.

“Wallie? Michelle?” I said, hoping they were okay after their long night with Imogene.

Shuffling feet echoed down the stairs, and my heart dropped when I saw Wallie and Michelle at the top, looking like they'd just survived a war zone. What had they gone through?

"Thank the gods you're back," Wallie exclaimed, his voice crackling with exhaustion. Dark circles underlined his eyes, and it looked like he hadn't slept a wink. Michelle's hair was a tangled mess, her once pristine white blouse now stained with what looked like spit-up.

"Are you guys okay?" Drew asked, concern etching lines into his forehead as we hurried over to them. "What happened while you were gone?"

"What do you mean while we were gone?" Wallie asked. "You're the ones who were gone all night. We've been worried."

"No," I said carefully. "We went for a walk and when we got back, the house was gone. With you in it."

"Imogene," Michelle croaked, rubbing her temples. "She cried. All. Night. Long. We've been walking the house trying to get her to stop. Rocking, singing, bouncing. Nothing worked."

"Nonstop," Wallie added, his slumping as he leaned against the banister for support. "We tried everything, even some calming spells. Nothing worked."

"Is she okay now?" I asked, wishing I could've been there when they needed help.

"Yes, she's finally asleep," Michelle whispered. "We're afraid to even breathe too loudly, in case we wake her up again."

"I thought the house disappearing had something to do with the stuff going on in town," I said. "Now that I think about it, it makes sense that Imogene made the house invisible. Now that she's asleep, the house reappeared. This little girl is beyond powerful."

Michelle laughed weakly. "I have no idea how to combat that."

“Right now, you two need to get some rest,” I said. “We’ll watch the babies while you catch up on sleep.”

“Thank you,” Michelle said. “She’s in the nursery.” She waved before they both retreated to their bedroom.

Selby woke at that moment, ready for another bottle. I grabbed one from the fridge and used my magic to warm it. Then Drew and I took our baby boy upstairs to the nursery, climbed onto the big bed in there, fed Selby settled him in the crib beside Imogene, and went back to bed ourselves.



# AVA

THE SUN HUNG low in the sky, casting an amber glow through the living room windows. The day's heat had begun to wane, and I was thoroughly enjoying my afternoon cup of tea. Selby, wrapped snugly in his glamor blanket, snoozed peacefully in a nearby bassinet, looking like an adorable human baby boy with the sweetest white-blond hair. I liked him better as an ogre, his true self, but this was currently the only clean blanket in the house. The rest were in the wash.

It belatedly occurred to me I could conjure another or spell these clean, but at that moment, the front door swung open, drawing my attention to who was there. Winston only opened the door for people in our inner circle.

Drew's ice queen grandmother strolled through the door like she owned the place and Winston gave the slightest groan. Pearl? What on earth was she doing here?

I sent a little emotional nudge through my bond with Drew to let him know someone was here. We couldn't talk to one another telepathically, but we have learned what certain feelings meant.

What I wanted to send was unabashed panic, but I didn't want to scare the poor guy.

"Hello, Ava dear," Pearl said as she strode into the living room, her eyes alight with a rare warmth. It made me a little suspicious of what she wanted. "I thought I'd drop by and see those new grandchildren of mine."

“Uh, hi Pearl,” I stammered, setting my teacup down before my shaking hands spilled it. Her unexpected arrival had me completely off guard. Yes, of course, she loved her family and all that blah blah, but let’s face it. Pearl wasn’t exactly famed for her spontaneous displays of affection.

“Of course, come on in,” I said, attempting to regain my composure. I glanced over at Selby, still sleeping soundly, and a sudden pang of anxiety. I wasn’t sure how she’d react to Selby not looking human.

“Imogene is upstairs with her parents.” I walked over to the bassinet and peered down at Selby. To my relief, the little guy appeared like a normal human baby, all pudgy cheeks and tiny fingers.

“Ah, so this is little Selby,” Pearl cooed, reaching out to stroke his cheek. “Oh, my. He’s absolutely adorable.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to let my surprise show too much. “We certainly think so.”

Pearl’s gushing was so out of character that I wondered if she’d been replaced by a body-snatching alien. Who was I to complain? If Pearl wanted to shower the babies with love, I wouldn’t stand in her way.

“Would you like to hold him?” I said hesitantly, glancing from Selby’s sleeping form to Pearl’s eager face.

“Of course,” Pearl said, practically bouncing on her toes in anticipation. “I’ve been waiting for ages to meet the newest members of our family.”

I lifted Selby from the bassinet and cradled him in my arms. He stirred slightly, making a soft grunting sound before falling deeper asleep as I carefully handed him over to Pearl.

“What a beautiful baby,” Pearl said, gazing down at Selby with an expression of pure adoration. She shifted her grip, expertly supporting his head as she cradled him.

As Pearl cooed at the baby in her arms, the corner of the glamor blanket slipped off Selby’s shoulder.



I pulled the entire blanket away from Selby's tiny body. The room froze as his green skin and blue hair appeared and he woke. He blinked up at Pearl with wide, innocent eyes, completely unaware of the chaos about to be unleashed.

I held my breath for her reaction, wondering where my husband was. Had he seen his grandmother pulling up and decided to ditch me? He better not have. I'd turn him into a toad.

For a moment, Pearl looked like she might drop Selby in shock, but then something incredible happened. Her face softened. She peered down into Selby's curious eyes and a flicker of maternal warmth passed over her features.

"An ogre baby," she said slowly, more to herself than anyone else in the room. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"Neither did we, to be honest," Drew said from behind me.

I turned and gave him a look, relief and confusion washing over me. This was not the reaction I had expected. From Drew's confused stare, he hadn't either.

"Selby," Pearl said, testing out his name as if it was something precious. "Well, aren't you just the most adorable little ogre I've ever seen?"

I let out an involuntary chuckle at Pearl's unexpected display of affection.

"Never thought I'd hear those words come out of her mouth," I whispered to Drew.

"Neither did I," he said.

Pearl glanced at both of us with amusement. "Life has a funny way of surprising us, doesn't it?"

"Indeed, it does," I said, watching as Selby snuggled closer to his great-grandmother. Even the toughest, coldest hearts could be warmed by the love of family, no matter how unconventional that family may be.

As Pearl's unexpected display of affection continued, footsteps on the stairs drew my attention to Wallie and Michelle as they appeared in the doorway, holding Imogene between them.

They looked equal parts confused and curious about the scene unfolding in front of them.

“Hey Mom, what’s going on?” Wallie asked, his eyes darting between me, Drew, Pearl, and Selby.

“Uh, hello, sweetie. Grandma Pearl wanted to see the babies,” I said, trying to keep my tone chirpy and not shocked.

Pearl looked up and when she saw Imogene, she cocked her head and smiled. “May I hold her?”

“Of course,” Michelle said with a warm smile. Pearl made no move to hand Selby to anyone else, so Michelle carefully nestled Imogene in Pearl’s arms. To my surprise, Pearl cradled both babies expertly in her arms with no hesitation or awkwardness.

“Here, let me take Selby,” I offered, stepping forward with my arms outstretched. I wasn’t sure how long this rare moment of affection in Pearl would last, and I didn’t want her to become overwhelmed.

“No, it’s quite all right,” Pearl said firmly, not relinquishing her hold on either baby. “I can manage.”

“Are you sure?” I said, feeling overly protective of both Selby and Imogene.

“Quite sure,” Pearl said, leaving no room for further argument.

Ah, so the real Pearl was still in there. I glanced at Drew, and he shrugged.

“All righty, then.” I relented, watching as she drifted over to the rocking chair by the fireplace and settled down with both babies still nestled happily in her arms.

In the day’s second surprise, the front door swung open with a thud, revealing Ian, Drew’s brother. He was disheveled, sweat clinging to his brow and dirt smudged across his cheeks. He’d been on a hunt for the last few weeks. What a time to show back up.

His eyes widened at the sight of Pearl with the babies, and he froze in the doorway, a look of utter disbelief etched into his features.

“Um, did I miss something?” he asked, his voice strangled as he stared at the scene before him. “Is this some kind of alternate universe? Or did somebody drug Grandma?”

“Ha, hilarious,” Drew said, rolling his eyes. “No, we didn’t drug her. She just wanted to see the babies, and now she won’t let them go.”

Ian shook his head, still looking shell-shocked. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“That’s what we said.” I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing.

“Hey, Ava,” Ian said abruptly, drawing my attention back to him. “I, uh, found something on my hunt. Thought you might want to take a look at it later. Maybe after Grandmother leaves.”

“Sure.” I nodded, curious about what he had discovered but unwilling to pry further. There would be time for that once Pearl returned to her usual self and relinquished her hold on the babies.

“Really, now,” Pearl said, having overheard our conversation. She looked up from the babies, her gaze steady as she addressed her grandsons. “Must you always assume the worst of me? Can’t an old woman fall in love with beautiful babies without being accused of being drugged?”

“Sorry, Grandmother,” Ian said sheepishly. “I guess it’s just a bit unexpected.”

“Life is full of surprises, dear,” Pearl said with a smile, turning her attention back to Selby and Imogene. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to spend some more time with these two little angels.”

“Uh, sure, go ahead,” Drew said, exchanging a bewildered look with Ian.

Ian pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of Pearl with the babies. I glanced over to see him text the picture to Lily.

A second later, Lily texted back.

No effin' way! What did you guys do to her?

I snorted out a laugh just as my phone rang. I glanced at the screen to find Melody's name flashing.

"Excuse me for a moment, guys," I said, stepping away from the group. "Hi, Melody? What's up?"

"Hey," she greeted cheerfully. "You will not believe what I just caught. Our little magical troublemakers, the source of the problems around town. Two *pixies*."

"Really?" I asked, my curiosity piqued. "How did you catch them?"

"It took some effort, but I discovered it was them when I ran across some very confused chickens running around Main Street earlier. The pixies were still in the vicinity. Anyway, I managed to round the mischievous fae tricksters up, but now I'm not sure what to do with them."

"Why don't you bring them over here? We can figure out what to do with them together." I was hoping Olivia would be home soon. If not, I could go to Luci's house and use the portal they had that led to Faery.

"I'm glad you said that," Melody said. "Cause I'm almost there."

"See you soon," I said, ending the call and turning back to the others. "That was Melody. She's captured two pixies that have been causing all the strange havoc in town. She's bringing them over so we can figure out what to do with them."

"Ah, pixies," Pearl said, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "They can be quite the handful."

"Tell me about it." I told Pearl about all the crazy things the pixies had done. "They're fascinating creatures. I can't wait to see them up close."

"Me too," Drew said, his curiosity piqued as well. "I've only ever encountered a couple in my time hunting, and they're always so unpredictable."

The front door swung open, and Melody breezed in, a triumphant grin on her face. In her hands, she held a tiny cage, as though for a small bird, with two equally tiny, squirming figures inside.

“Behold,” she said dramatically, holding the cage aloft. “The troublemakers have been captured,”

“Nice work,” Ian said, peering curiously at the cage as the rest of us gathered around.

As we all stood around staring at the cage that held the two pixies, I was both fascinated and wary of the tiny creatures. They were only six inches tall, if that, with delicate wings that shimmered in the afternoon light filtering through the windows. Their bodies were lithe and agile, their faces cherubic yet impish, and they emitted high-pitched squeaking noises as they darted about the confines of their prison.

“Who knew something so small could cause so much trouble?” I watched as one of the pixies stuck its tongue out before making an obscene gesture with its tiny hands. I raised an eyebrow, impressed by the little thing’s audacity.

“Is there any way for us to communicate with them?” Melody asked, peering at the pixies with curiosity. “Perhaps if we could understand what they want, we might reach some sort of agreement.”

“Unfortunately, their language consists mostly of those strange squeaking sounds you hear,” Pearl said. “They do not speak as we do.”

“I’ll wait a little while to see if Olivia returns home. If she doesn’t by tonight, I’ll take them to Faery and hand them over to King Mitah.” I giggled at the little guys. “Of all the things.”



# OLIVIA

“GUYS, I think we’re getting close,” I whispered as our group inched forward through the dense foliage of Faery. Jess, Devan, Phira, Luci, and I had been searching for the intruders for hours, but it finally felt like we were making progress.

“Olivia’s right,” Phira chimed in, her blue eyes scanning the area. “I can sense the magic growing stronger. Whoever these intruders are, the magic of Faery has definitely enthralled them.”

“Wait, you mean they’re human?” Devan asked, clearly surprised.

“I believe so,” Phira confirmed with a hint of sympathy in her tone. “Maybe witches since they threw magic at us when we got close last time. Let me try something,” she said, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. As she exhaled, her hands moved gracefully through the air, weaving an intricate pattern as she spoke ancient words under her breath. Gradually, a pulsating energy emanated from her, spreading out into the surrounding forest.

“What is that?” Devan asked, his eyes wide with awe.

“It’s a glamour spell,” Phira explained, her voice barely audible over the hum of the magic. “Humans find it almost impossible to resist. It should draw them right to us.”

“You’re amazing,” I whispered, filled with admiration for Phira’s abilities.

“Thank you.” She hugged me from the side. “Now we just have to wait and see if it works.”

A pang of sympathy for the humans who'd stumbled into this world rose within me. Sure, they were causing trouble, but they were also victims of the enchanting lure of Faery. How much danger were they in?

"Phira," I whispered. "What happens to humans who stay in Faery too long?"

She hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "The longer they stay, the more addicted they become to the magic. The problem is that the magic is addicted to humans. Faery loves humans. That's been my suspicion about why it's made it harder for us to catch them. Eventually, it becomes almost impossible for the humans to return to their realm, even if they want to. They become addicted to the magic and can't live without it, even for a moment."

"But Ava and Drew? Alfred?"

Phira shook her head. "They've been here before for mere hours, Alfred a few days. This sort of thing takes weeks at a minimum, sometimes longer. These humans had to have been here undetected for a while."

The moment the glamour spell took effect, the magic in the air shifted subtly, as if the very essence of Faery itself had been harnessed and woven into an irresistible siren's call.

"Why didn't you try this before?" I asked.

"Every time we got close enough, they ran. This is the first time we've been able to sneak up." She paused and cocked her head. "Here they come," Phira whispered, her eyes fixed on a distant point in the forest where the foliage began to rustle.

Two figures emerged from the underbrush, their movements slightly unsteady but determined. As they approached our group, my heart caught in my throat.

"Penny and Bevin?" I gasped, disbelief coursing through me. "What are they doing here? How did they get here?"

"Unbelievable." Luci growled, his face contorting with anger. "I've been searching for those two ever since they escaped Hell, and now they're here, in Faery?"



Yeah, the one place none of us would think to look.

As soon as Penny and Bevin clapped their eyes on Luci, the recognition snapped them out of their enchanted state. Panic filled their faces, and they turned to flee back into the forest.

“Quick! After them!” Luci barked, his voice booming like thunder.

We sprinted after the fleeing pair, dodging tree branches, and leaping over twisted roots as we pursued them deeper into Faery. My lungs burned with the effort, but I couldn’t let Penny and Bevin get away. Not again, dang it.

“Can’t you just summon them back to Hell?” I panted, struggling to keep up with his longer strides.

“Unfortunately, not,” he replied, grimacing. “Their presence in Faery seems to be interfering with my power. We’ll have to catch them the old-fashioned way.”

As we continued to chase Penny and Bevin through the magical realm, it became increasingly apparent that their time here had left them more agile and attuned to the environment than we’d anticipated. They glided effortlessly over the terrain, their movements fluid and almost otherworldly.

“Phira, can’t you do something to slow them down?” I called out, growing desperate as the gap between us widened.

“Let me try.” She raised her hands to cast yet another spell.

A sudden gust of wind whipped through the trees, sending leaves swirling around us like a miniature tornado. Penny and Bevin stumbled, surprised by the unexpected turbulence, but they quickly regained their footing and continued to flee.

“Damn it,” Phira cursed, frustrated.

“Keep going,” Luci urged, determination flashing in his eyes. “We can’t let them escape again.”

“Mom!” Devan shouted suddenly, pointing ahead. “There. They’re trying to cross that river.”

Sure enough, Penny and Bevin were attempting to wade through the rapidly flowing water, their clothes soaked and

heavy as they fought against the current. This was our chance.

“Come on!” I yelled, my heart pounding as we raced towards the riverbank. With a little luck, we might just be able to catch them before they slipped away once more.

Phira raised her hands to cast another spell. This time, the air shimmered and rippled around us, as if reality itself were bending to her will.

“Be ready,” she warned, her blue gaze locking onto mine. “This might be our last chance.”

I nodded, ready to crawl out of my skin with the weight of the moment.

Phira’s spell took effect, and suddenly we were there, standing mere inches from the dazed humans. She’d told me about this spell before. It took a lot out of her, so she saved it for when she was pretty sure it would work.

Their faces were totally confused as if they couldn’t quite comprehend what was happening.

“Come on, Penny,” I said, grabbing her hand. “You have to come back with us. You don’t belong here.”

“Olivia?” she murmured, blinking in confusion. “But it’s so beautiful here. The magic, it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

With a flick of Phira’s wrist, a wave of energy washed over Penny and Bevin, their bodies going limp as the enchantment took hold. As they crumpled to the ground, unconscious, I couldn’t help but feel relief tinged with sadness.

We’d done it. We’d managed to capture them. These two had been on the run for a long time.

“Let’s get them to the palace, then I’ll go get Ava. She long ago claimed Bevin’s soul, so it’s only fair that she has the final say in their punishment,” Luci said quietly, his gaze fixed on the fallen humans.

Bevin and Penny were the ones who started that shifter fight ring Zoey and so many other children had died in. Bevin had killed Ava’s mom out of jealousy. When Ava had discovered

that, she'd told Bevin that he was hers when he died. I didn't know what Ava had planned for the evil witch. I guessed she would bring him back as a ghoul and make him work or something. I wasn't sure if even Ava knew what she was going to do with him.

"Let's go." I opened a portal to the palace, and we stepped through.



## Ava

THE SCENT of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, mingling with the lingering aroma of cinnamon rolls I'd baked earlier. Drew and I lounged on the couch in my living room, enjoying a rare moment of relaxation when a portal opened in the middle of the room, startling us both.

"Ah, Ava," Luci boomed as he stepped out of the portal. His suit was impeccably tailored as always, and his dark eyes scanned the room with an air of superiority. "And Drew, how delightful."

Drew and I exchanged confused glances before I said, "Um, hi, Luci. To what do we owe this unexpected visit?"

Luci moved closer and looked inside the bassinet. A smile formed on the devil's face. After a moment, he focused back on Drew and me. "I've come to inform you that we have found Penny and Bevin."

I gaped at him for a second and sat up straighter. "Really? Where?" We hadn't even really been looking for them. Too many other things had pressed us.

"You see, Penny and Bevin have become what you'd call enthralled with fae magic. They were the intruders in Faery. I thought you'd like to know and perhaps come to Faery to let us know what you want done with them."

“Oh, heck yeah.” I stood and walked to the kitchen. “Let me grab my shoes.” I’d taken them off by the back door.

Luci followed me. When his gaze landed on the kitchen table, his eyes narrowed at the sight of a cage filled with tiny, flitting creatures.

“Ah, pixies,” he said with a hint of amusement in his voice. “What are these delightful little pests doing here?”

I glanced at the cage. “They’ve been causing trouble around town. Stealing, tormenting animals, generally being a nuisance.”

“Really?” Luci raised an eyebrow. “You managed to catch them all by yourselves?”

“Melody did,” Drew said.

“Ah, I see,” Luci said. “She’s quite the resourceful thing. Catching a pixie is no easy feat. What will you do with them now?”

“Take them back where they belong, I guess,” I said.

“King Mitah would like to know about this.” Luci waved a hand and created another portal. “After you.”

I glanced at Drew and then at Selby in the bassinet. Drew said, “You go ahead. I’ll stay here with Selby.”

I kissed Drew and grabbed the cage with the pixies in it. “I won’t be long.”

I followed Luci through the portal and into the throne room, the scent of lavender and honeysuckle heavy in the air. The high ceilings were adorned with intricate golden vines that moved on their own accord. We approached the dais where King Mitah sat.

“Your Majesty,” I said in greeting with a curtsy.

King Mitah’s gaze fell on the cage, his expression unreadable. “Pixies,” he muttered darkly, before turning his attention back to me. “Explain.”

“These pixies have been causing havoc in our town,” I said. “We captured them and would like to give them back to you.”

He stepped off of the dais and reached for the cage. "I shall look into the matter of how these two got into your world."

"Thank you," I said, relief flooding through me. They were cute and funny but nothing I wanted long-term.

Olivia and Phira walked into the throne room, and I smiled at my friend. It felt like months since I'd seen her last, not a couple of weeks. Olivia rushed to me and grabbed my hand. "I have a prezzie for you."

I laughed, figuring it was Penny and Bevin. I didn't let her know that though, as I followed her through a series of winding corridors. I let her have her fun.

"Here," Olivia said, pushing open a door to reveal a small chamber, dimly lit by flickering candles.

Penny and Bevin huddled in the corner. "Penny? Bevin?"

"Ava," Penny mumbled, not meeting my eyes.

Olivia crossed her arms. "They've become addicted to the magic of the fairy realm. It happened gradually, without them even realizing it. Now, they can't leave."

"Is there no way to break the enchantment?" I asked, desperate for answers. They deserved to be in Hell, eternal damnation, and all that. The things they'd done were unforgivable.

"Forcefully removing them could have dire consequences," Olivia warned. "Their bodies might reject the sudden absence of magic, leading to severe pain or even death."

Not the end of the world, really. "What will become of them if they stay here?"

Olivia shrugged. "Mitah says they could work in the palace as servants. There isn't much more they could do. The other thing is that they'll live indefinitely here. They won't die unless they're killed. They'll live an eternity as servants, waiting hand and foot on the fae."

Also not a bad way for them to end up. Endless servitude. "How did they even end up here in the first place?"

She shook her head. “When you, Sam, Drew, Ian, and Lily were under that sleep spell, Phira and I got tossed into Faery. The portals wouldn’t work, and I had to punch my way out of Faery. We think the hole caused a little trouble.”

Oh, that would do it. She’d ripped a hole in the fabric between the realms. “We should tell King Mitah about this.”

“He knows and is working on closing it. He has people out searching for other rips or holes in the realm walls,” Olivia said. “So, the question remains, what do you want to do with them?” She pointed to Penny and Bevin.

“An eternity of being a royal servant sounds like a fitting punishment for those two, honestly. I mean, all they ever wanted was power, right? Now they have to be around more than they could ever handle.”



## AVA

THE AIR BUZZED with excitement as I surveyed the room, taking in the festive decorations that adorned every corner. It was a big night—a combination of a birthday party for Wallie’s 20th, and a late one for Imogene, Selby, and me. Our friends and loved ones had gathered to celebrate, and the atmosphere was positively electric.

Olivia nudged me playfully. “This is hands down the best party ever.”

I grinned at my best friend. “It’s definitely one for the books,” I said, watching as our friends danced, laughed, and enjoyed themselves. Lively music filled the air, mingling with the sounds of clinking glasses and cheerful conversation.

“Ooh, look at those cupcakes.” Olivia pulled on my arm, her attention diverted by the sight of an elaborately decorated dessert table. “Come on, let’s go grab some before they’re all gone.”

As we made our way through the throng of partygoers, unease crept up my back. My gaze was drawn to Lucy-Fur, my usually snarky and nonchalant cat, perched on a nearby windowsill. She glared daggers at Olivia, her pretty eyes narrowed into angry slits.

The spoiled white cat was still mad about being turned into a chicken by the muffin *she herself* had stolen from Olivia’s cabinet.

Geez, it had been hilarious.



As we continued on our quest for cupcakes, I cast another glance back at Lucy-Fur. Her gaze remained locked on Olivia, unblinking and intense. So, I stared back at her until she looked at me. I wiggled my fingers at her. “I don’t need magical muffins to make you hairless.”

Lucy gasped, then ran off to play with her baby kitties.

As I passed the front door, it swung open, revealing Jax and Hailey standing at the entrance. In Hailey’s arms was a bundle of blankets, with what appeared to be a tiny, sleeping dragon nestled within. Flint. Oh, my goodness. They’d adopted the dragon through a series of events not unlike mine with Selby.

“Surprise,” Jax said, grinning from ear to ear as he strode into the living room.

“Jax, Hailey,” I rushed over to greet them, my earlier concerns momentarily forgotten. “And Flint, you brought him along too, Oh, he’s so adorable.” My voice had gone into a baby-talk-growl and was in danger of never coming back.

Flint snuggled closer to Hailey when I moved the blanket to peek at him.

“Isn’t he?” Hailey cooed, gently rocking the baby dragon in her arms. “We thought it’d be nice for him to meet everyone.”

Drew came up next to me, holding Selby against his chest. Hailey’s eyes widened. “Oh my, he is a cutie.”

“I know, I can’t get enough of him.” I took Selby from Drew, which woke the little ogre up. His big blue eyes locked onto Hailey, and he smiled. “Wait until you meet Imogene. I think Michelle snuck off to feed her.”

Jax reached out and stroked Selby’s cheek with a finger. “I was wondering if I could talk to you about something.”

Hailey sent her mate an irritated look. “We’re not here for business.”

I laughed. “It’s okay. What is it?”

“Nothing too serious,” Jax reassured me. “It’s something we think you should know about. It’s been brought to my attention

that a rogue Necromancer has been causing a stir among the vampires.”

“A rogue Necromancer?” I echoed. “Want me to look into it for you?”

A rogue Necromancer could spell disaster for the already fragile peace between the various magical beings. Especially the vampires.

“That would be great,” Jax said. “Just remember, we’re here to help if you need us. We’ll let you know as soon as we learn anything new.”

“Appreciate it.” My gaze drifted over to Olivia, who had been listening intently. “What do you think, Liv?”

“Definitely something to keep an eye on,” she said, her brow furrowed in concern. “The last thing any of us needs is more chaos and conflict.”

My thoughts were still swirling around the rogue Necromancer when an idea struck me. Maybe it was time to consider forming a council of necromancers, one that could handle situations like this internally and prevent potential threats from escalating. I’d been thinking about doing it for a while now.

I would talk to my dad and Alfred about it after the party. It was definitely something we needed to do.

“Everything okay over here?” Alfred asked, his brow creasing with concern.

“Fine,” I reassured him, not wanting to worry him with the rogue Necromancer situation just yet. “Just discussing some future plans, that’s all. Nothing to worry about right now.”

“Ah,” he said, clearly not buying it but deciding to let it go. Instead, he focused on Winnie, who was watching us with curiosity and amusement.

Winnie smirked at Alfred. “Come dance with me.”

“Me?” Alfred stuttered, taken aback by her sudden proposition. “But I, uh, don’t really dance.”

“Come on,” Winnie teased, grabbing his hand and tugging him toward the makeshift dance floor. “It’s not like anyone here is a professional. Just have fun.”

Alfred shrugged and followed her with an embarrassed grin.

As they moved away from us, Olivia leaned in and said, “I never thought I’d see the day when Alfred would let loose like this. I guess Winnie’s influence is rubbing off on him.”

“Sure seems that way,” I said, watching them join the others on the dance floor.

To everyone’s surprise, Alfred wasn’t half-bad at dancing. Sure, he was a little stiff and awkward at first, but with Winnie’s encouragement, he soon found his rhythm. As they swayed to the music, their eyes locked, and it was clear that the change in their bodies hadn’t dampened their love or attraction for each other.

“Ugh, they’re even grosser now than when Winnie was always half-naked,” Wallie joked, watching Alfred and Winnie’s tender moment with a grin.

“I’m happy for them,” I said. “If only we could figure out how to make Alfred immortal.”

Hailey studied the couple for a few minutes. “Why can’t they magically bond to one another like you and Drew did? It would allow Alfred to take on Winnie’s lifespan. That’s what bonds do.”

Drew and I shared a look before I jerked Hailey into a tight hug. What a simple option. How had I not thought about it? “Thank you. I can’t believe I didn’t think about that.”

“Glad to help,” Hailey said with a smile.

I’d wait until after the party to talk to Winnie and Alfred about the bonding.

The party continued, filled with laughter, dancing, and good-hearted banter. However, as the evening went on, I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that something was off. It wasn’t until the music died down, and people said their goodbyes that I figured out what was bothering me. Snoozer, Poe, and

Lenore sat on the back of the couch, watching the festivities, but Lucy wasn't with them.

"Winston?" I called. "Do you know where Lucy is?"

Winston moaned, or his floorboards did, and it sounded just like he was saying no.

"Has anyone seen Lucy?" I asked, scanning the room for my usually chatty and snarky feline companion. She had been oddly quiet throughout the night, and now she seemed to have disappeared entirely.

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen her since she was glaring at Olivia earlier," Drew mused, concern creeping into his features.

"Okay, everyone, let's spread out and search for her," I said, worry gnawing at the pit of my stomach. "She can't have gone far."

As our friends and family split up, taking different routes through the house and surrounding area, Olivia and I ended up alone in the living room while I held Selby. Her eyes were wide with concern, mirroring my own.

"Olivia, could you and Sam check the woods nearby?" I asked.

"Of course," Olivia said, and she and Sam headed toward the door.

"Be careful," I called after them, my heart pounding. Why was this bothering me so much? Something was really off, but I had no idea what or why.

"Always," Olivia said with a reassuring smile before disappearing into the night.

I took a moment to steady my racing thoughts. Lucy was more than just a pet, she was family. Of course she was mean, but she also loved everyone in the family, or she wouldn't bother being so snarky. Losing her would be like losing a part of myself. As I stood there, alone in the now quiet house, I felt responsible for her sudden disappearance.

“Lucy, where are you?” I said, my voice cracking with emotion. She’d only been missing a few minutes, but something was badly wrong.

It had been a long time since I’d felt this kind of fear. The uncertainty gnawed, refusing to be ignored. As much as I tried to stay positive, it was hard not to imagine the worst-case scenarios playing out in my head.

I spotted Wade coming out of the basement door. “Wade, can you head to Philly and check to see if Lucy went through the portal?”

“Sure,” Wade said with a nod, turning to go back down to his basement apartment.

Stepping onto the back porch, I found my parents. “Mom, Dad, can you two search the academy for Lucy? We can’t find her anywhere. Start with the common areas and work your way out from there.” They exchanged a quick glance before nodding in unison.

“Sure thing,” Dad said, taking Mom’s hand as they disappeared down the hallway.

Wallie and Michelle carried Imogene downstairs to see what the commotion was. “I need you both to head to Michelle’s parents’ house. See if Lucy went through there.”

“Of course,” Michelle said, giving me a reassuring pat on the shoulder before she and Wallie left the room to go up to the portaling room.

“Jax, Hailey, Drew, you three are with me,” I said, rolling up my sleeves and preparing myself for the task ahead. “We’re going to try a locator spell while the others search through portals. We don’t have much time, so we need to act fast.”

“Right behind you, Ava,” Hailey said. “We can’t do the spell, but we can be moral support.” She took Selby as Jax held little Flint.

As I led them into my conservatory, beads of sweat formed on my brow, the urgency of the situation only growing stronger with each passing moment. My hands shook slightly as I gathered the necessary ingredients for the locator spell, my

mind racing with thoughts of what might have happened to Lucy.

“Okay, everyone,” I said, swallowing hard as I attempted to steady my nerves. “Focus your energy on Lucy and visualize her safe return. We need all the help we can get.”

As I chanted the words of the spell, a faint glow emanated from the map laid out on the table before us. My heart leaped with hope as the light grew stronger, only to sink again as it flickered and died.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath, frustration threatening to overwhelm me.

“Hey,” Hailey said gently, placing her hand on my shoulder. “We’ll find her, Ava. I promise.”

Drew asked, “Did you ask Luci if he’s seen Lucy?”

I turned to Phira, who’d just walked into the conservatory. “Where is Luci?”

Olivia and Sam walked in. “He’s not at home,” Olivia said. “We stopped by there to check for Lucy.”

Phira returned my frown. “I haven’t seen him since we got here. I figure he had something come up like he usually does.” Phira’s features paled. “Lucifer, King of Hell, I summon you.”

We waited a few minutes, and he never showed. I tried to summon him but nothing. “This is crazy. Both Lucy and Luci are missing.”

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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.

She also loves to hear from her readers. Send her a note at [lia@authorliadavis.com](mailto:lia@authorliadavis.com)!

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## ABOUT L.A. BORUFF

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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