



# Who's Your Crawdaddy?

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Mally Jourdain Dubois is not your average princess. She's a witch. And a fairy. It's complicated. Even more complicated? She's expecting the first-ever rougarou-witch-fey baby, and the whole magical world is losing its mind.

Between whispering invisible beings, recon garden gnomes, and creeps from her past, Mally chalks the chaos up to her usual brand of enchanted mischief—until her mate, Etienne, suspects something darker at play. Someone wants their baby... and they're willing to do whatever it takes to get it.

Now, with witches gossiping, shifters scheming, and an unhinged ex-stepmother making cursed wedding plans, Mally must rely on her fierce family, a glitter-slinging Baba Yaga, and one extremely heroic crawfish to stop a magical kidnapping and keep her unborn child safe.

**Total Pages (Source):** 34

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## Chapter One

“Poo Yie, you look like a gator got frisky with a bag of spinach,” Jocko called from his fishbowl. He banged his claws on the glass rim when I didn’t respond. But I was too busy repeatedly swallowing and willing myself not to toss my cookies all over my parents’ expensive Aubusson rug.

I couldn’t even move my head to look in his direction—instead I remained perfectly still, on the world’s itchiest Victorian sofa. My left cheek was mashed uncomfortably against a scratchy needlepoint pillow, and I didn’t even care. I was miserable.

My stomach churned and roiled as it had from my first whiff of dinner. My mother’s cooking was wretched on the best of times, but tonight’s offering had been particularly disgusting. She claimed the foul smelling offering was shrimp creole but never had that dish inspired terror before tonight.

Etienne knelt beside me, his brow creased with concern. It was honestly unfair for someone that pretty to get so wrinkled up about something as minor as my nausea. My stomach flipped again, and I swallowed. Or maybe this was my impending death.

“Chérie, I think I should let me call a doctor.”

Being a witch had a lot of perks, and oddly enough the fact that witch doctors still made house calls was one of them.

“Or perhaps an... exorcist,” Jocko suggested.

Normally, I appreciated my familiar's snarky sense of humor. But not right now.

Etienne brushed a strand of my hair off my clammy forehead, and I caught the smell his cologne and also the faint lingering scent of my mother's so-called 'holy trinity' seasoning mix, which contains neither holiness nor trinity, but apparently a metric ton of MSG and what I suspect is the chemical equivalent of antifreeze.

I gagged, and from Etienne's alarmed expression, I'd turned an even brighter shade of green.

He started to stand. "I'm going to get you mother, at least.

"Don't call my mother," I groaned, "unless you want her to finish the job."

Speaking that many words threatened a spectacular barf-fountain, so I fell completely still again. I closed my eyes and prayed for the sweet release of death. Or at least for a breeze from the open window behind me to neutralize the barrage of aromas in the air.

Jocko's claws pounded his fishbowl again, punctuating the silence. "Your mother doesn't cook, she creates public health hazards. Sacré bleu, she is a menace!"

"Can you not, Jocko?" I said, or try to, but it came out in a croak, like a toad who just choked on a fly. He wasn't wrong, but I didn't want to listen to it right now.

Etienne shot the crawfish a look of such withering disapproval, I half-expected a seafood boil on the spot. He turned back to me, worry still clouding his hazel eyes. "I know your mother is a truly terrible cook, but you only took one bite."

"Sometimes," I mumbled, "one bite is all it takes." I buried my face in the throw pillow and burped.

Etienne rubbed my shoulder, proving not only was he a prince, but he was my true soulmate. I knew I looked—and possibly smelled—atrocious.

“Mally,” he said once the newest wave of nausea calmed. “I don’t think this is just the food. This has happened several times in the past couple weeks. I’m worried something is really wrong. You need a doctor.”

I lifted my head from the pillow, meeting his gaze. “It will pass. It’s just a weird flu or something.”

He looked as if he wanted to argue, but he nodded slightly. “Would you like some water?”

“That would be nice.” I managed a reassuring smile.

“Try holy water,” Jocko offered helpfully as Etienne left the room. “I’ll yell if she starts levitating.”

Etienne cast my familiar another warning look, then disappeared toward the kitchen.

Before I could pull myself together to make a comeback to Jocko, the front door slammed open with the subtlety of a shotgun blast, and my sister Violet rushed in, all flaming red-haired and wild-eyed, wearing her “nobody better die today” face. She spotted me and my greenish complexion before she made it halfway across the foyer.

“Dear Goddess, Mally,” she said. “You look like hell.”

Jocko—who was quickly becoming my least favorite magical creature—chuckled from his bowl.

“Thanks,” I said dryly, but managed to lever myself up onto my elbows. “Did Mom

call you?”

I knew she was missing my parents’ family Sunday dinner because she and her new husband, who happened to be Etienne’s brother, had plans to go to an event for her hospital. My sister was a doctor. Not that I’d even thought to mention my recent symptoms to her. Which I guess I should have.

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“Yes, she called me. And it looks like it’s a good thing.” Violet beelined to me and jammed two fingers into my wrist to check my pulse, healer reflexes going into override.

I pulled my hand away. “I’m honestly fine. It will pass. I’m sorry you were called away from your event.”

Tristan, her husband appeared in the doorway. From his stunned look, I knew I must still look pretty bad.

But I was determined to reassure them. “You had the perfect excuse not to be here tonight. I’m sorry I ruined your escape plan.”

We loved spending time with my parents, and family dinner would be wonderful if Mom would let us just order delivery.

Violet waved away my apology, then pressed the same hand to my forehead.

“You are sweaty, but I don’t think you have a fever. How much of mom’s food did you eat? And what was it?”

“Supposedly shrimp creole,” I mumbled, collapsing back on the cushions. “Just one bite. Apparently one bite too many.”

Violet’s purple eyes widened. “You know to never touch anything with seafood.”

“I know,” I groaned as I swallowed down another bout of nausea.

“In the old country, we respected food. We did not try to kill our family with soup. Here? It is anarchy! Merde!”

When I felt better, I’d ask him what the heck he knew about the old country. And what old country was he talking about? He was born in the bayou.

Etienne returned with a glass of ice water. He smiled with relief to see Violet and Tristan. He brought me the glass, leaning over me to kiss my clammy brow. The gesture would have been romantic if I didn’t feel like the Swamp Thing’s less attractive cousin.

“Did you tell your sister that this has happened more than this one time?” he asked.

Great, he outed me. I shot him an irritated look over the rim of the glass as I took a sip of the gloriously cold water. He shrugged, utterly unrepentant.

“This has happened before?” Violet said. “Then I doubt it’s food poisoning. Even though that was a reasonable deduction.”

“I heard that,” Mom said, walking into the sitting room, followed by my stepfather, JR. They both looked concerned. No one was making me feel reassured here.

Violet immediately gave Mom a contrite look. Even though our mother’s cooking never improved, we still tried to protect her feelings as much as we could.

“It wasn’t my best attempt,” Mom admitted. Of course, it was hard to pick a better attempt.

“When this happened before, did you have a headache? Or just the nausea?” Violet asked, going back into doctor mode.

“I’m a full-spectrum disaster,” I told her. “Head, stomach, soul, whatever’s left.”

Violet pulled at my eyelids, then made me stick out my tongue and say, “Ah.” Then she spread out her hands and hovered them over my body.

“You’re not dying,” she announced, “but your aura looks like a pileup at a Mardi Gras parade. When did this illness start?”

I ignored her question, frowning. “Why did you poke me in the eyes and stare in my mouth if you could just do the hand thing?”

“Habit,” she said, which I guess made sense. She treated humans more than witches. Then she turned to Etienne. “When did she start having these bouts?”

“Off and on for about three weeks or so,” he said without glancing at me for verification. Although he was accurate.

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my water. Which was helping. Thank Goddess.

My sister put her hands on her hips, her patented “let’s be scientific” stance. “Is anyone else sick?”

Etienne shook his head. “No. And this is the worst reaction she has had.

Jocko snorted, and I knew he wanted to make another comment about my mother’s food. But he contained himself. Shocking.



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Violet ignored him. “I don’t think it’s anything dangerous. Do you want me to conjure an emetic or just call it a day with some ginger tea?”

“Neither,” I said, trying to shift upright but only managing to slosh a bit of water on my mother’s decorative pillow. “Just let me die in peace. Or at least with dignity.”

Etienne stroked my hand, his big and warm and steady. “Are you sure that’s all you can do for her?”

My husband could be a major mother hen. Which admittedly could be pretty hot. Who knew?

“Violet poised her open palms over me again, this time staying there longer. She pursed her lips. “This isn’t food poisoning. It feels very magical.”

I grimaced at her. “Magical? What does that mean?”

“Maybe a hex,” Violet said, in a tone that made me nervous.

“A hex?” my mother exclaimed, not reassuring me in the least.

“Merde,” Jocko said slowly. “That doesn’t sound good.”

## Chapter Two

Etienne and I exchanged a look, and for the first time, I saw real fear in his eyes.

I immediately shook my head. “It’s not a hex.”

I sounded far more certain than I felt about my assertion. If anyone was going to get a hex cast on them, it was probably me. I had a few enemies. And my first thought was Etienne’s legitimately crazy ex-wife. She’d kidnapped me once. So a hex didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility.

“You really think someone did this to me?” I asked.

Violet shrugged. “It’s not impossible. I mean, I can feel some crazy magic all around you. And that kind of turbulent magic could make you feel sick. Look at you. Even your freckles turned green.”

“I have freckles?” That surprised me more than the possibility of active witchcraft. I guess I should have expected them now that I spent my days galavanting around the bayou.

Jocko laughed so hard he nearly toppled over his bowl. “She never looks in mirror, only at her man. Bah!”

We all ignored him.

“Can you do anything to diagnose if it’s a hex or not?” Etienne asked, looking between Violet and my mother. It stung my ego a little that he didn’t look toward me. I mean, it was valid to look to them. My magic was still very unpredictable, but I was a witch too. And getting better at my magic. Sometimes.

“We can do a spell that should tell what kind of magic it is,” Violet said. “Then we can probably figure out what is going on.”

“I have everything we will need,” my mother said, waving for them to follow.

Jocko raised both claws in triumph. “To the kitchen! Where the real danger waits!”

Violet snorted—after mom left the room. She scooped up the fishbowl. “You want in on the tea, tough guy?”

“I’ll take mine with whiskey.” Jocko winked.

Etienne helped me upright, one arm around my shoulders, careful not to squeeze too tight. “What if it is magical, Mally?” he whispered, just for me. “I’m worried someone might be trying to hurt you?”

I looked at him, this beautiful, caring man who took a chance on marrying a witch—and a disastrous one at that. “If someone is trying to hex me,” I said, “they should be scared. They don’t know the power of my own magic. Of course, neither do I.”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t mess with you. And we will face them together.”

He meant it. I knew he would protect me with his life.

“All of us will face them,” Tristan added, speaking for the first time. He was the often-quiet brother. Mainly because he was frequently being approached by ghosts, so that had to be a bit distracting. But I knew he meant what he just said as well. All of Etienne’s brothers would protect me.

As we entered the kitchen, I realized that most of my nausea had passed. Which was good because the room still smelled of Mom’s culinary escapades.

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“Does this spell use alcohol?” Jocko asked hopefully as my mother and Violet gathered the ingredients for the spell and set them on the counter. They quietly conferred, ignoring the rest of us.

“Mally,cher, I don’t suppose you feel up to pour me a little drinky-poo?” Jocko said once he realized he wasn’t going to get a response from the other two witches. He eyed a bottle of cooking sherry near his bowl.

I ignored him too as I slid onto a barstool at the island. Etienne

He made a noise of frustration, followed by the sound of bubbles. I didn’t even have to glance at the fishbowl to know what he was doing. He’d gone underwater to pout. Good place for him.

“Okay, we’ve got everything,” Mom said with a nod.

“Is this going to hurt?” I asked, trying to see what they had laid out on the countertop. “Or make me puke?”

“I can guarantee no pain, but I can’t take puking off the table,” Violet said with a regretful look.

Mom focused on adding a concoction of herbs in her well-worn mortar. She used her pestle to grind the dried leaves and flowers together. Then she added some sort of oily liquid. And something that smelled so awful, I threatened to gag. But quickly, the smell seemed to grow less noxious and became almost pleasant.

Then the oven timer dinged.

I rose up slightly off the barstool to get a better look at the magical mixture. “Does it have to be blended an exact amount of time?”

Mom frowned, her pestle pausing. “No, why?”

“The timer,” I bobbed my head toward the oven.

“Oh. No. That’s just my bread pudding.” She dropped the pestle in the mortar and hurried to the oven. She pulled open the door, and the smoky scent of burnt bread joined the other smells of the kitchen.

Tristan graciously suppressed a cough.

I groaned quietly and whispered, “Pray for us.”

Etienne masked his laugh with a cough of his own. I fought a giggle. Violet and JR both shot us warning looks

Mom plunked the pan on the stove top. Clearly, we hadn’t covered out amusement well enough. She turned and fixed us with a stern look, her hands clasped together in front of her like a disapproving school marm. Although my mother was a stunningly beautiful blonde—so she looked more like a disapproving angel.

“Alright. Time for the grown-ups to take over,” Violet said, clearly trying to score points after Mom hearing her earlier comment about her cooking.

“Since when did you become the grown-up?” I asked.

“Neither of you sound like grown-ups to me,” Mom said, nudging Violet out of the

way to return to her mortar and pestle. She gave the herbs a couple more stabs, then looked around at ingredients she had laid out.

“Darn it,” she finally said. “I used all my dried rosemary in the shrimp creole. And fresh rosemary doesn’t work as well for this spell.”

My stomach lurched at the mere mention of her dinner offering. Welp, there was another meal checked off my list of favorites.

“I think I have some.” Violet unzipped a crossbody bag she still wore since her abrupt arrival. She started rooting through the small purse. She pulled out a lipstick, a compact mirror, and a small change purse. Following those expected items, she dug out three bottles of hand sanitizer. In there, plus a harmonica and what looks like a tiny cauldron.

“What are you going to do, disinfect me to death?” I asked, reaching across the island to inspect one of the bottles.

“It’s a habit of working in medicine,” she stated, then began pulling out more items. A harmonica and small cast iron cauldron.

I blinked. “But why a harmonica?”

Violet shrugged. “You never know.”

Finally, she produced a sprig of rosemary stored in a plastic baggie. She handed it to Mom, and we all watched as she laid the dried twig on a plate and drizzled the oily herb and flower mixture of it. Then Mom and Violet joined hands and said an incantation of the whole mess.

Mom nodded. “It’s ready.”

Violet pinched the sprig between her forefinger and thumb and came around the island toward me.

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“I don’t have to eat that, do I?”

She shook her head, then waved the drippy twig over my head. “Just sit still. This’ll just take a sec.”

Etienne stood behind me, hands on my shoulders, steadying me as if he thought levitation was a possibility as Jocko had suggested.

“Is it safe?” he whispered, as if speaking louder would ruin the spell.

“It’s a diagnostic,” Violet said. “Think of it as a magical blood test, only with less needles and more jazz hands.”

I winced as a drop of the oily mashed mess splattered on the top of my head. “Will it make me feel better?”

She shrugged. “No promises. But it should let us know what this magic around you is.”

I felt more oil drip on my head. “I hope so.”

She closed her eyes and chanted something that sounds like a line from a Cajun lullaby. In my peripheral vision, I saw a purple glow. I knew it was Violet’s magic working with the spell. The soft glow was not enough to light up the room, but definitely enough to make Jocko’s shell shimmer like a disco ball.

He popped up from under the water and basked in the light. “Look at me! I am



beautiful!”

“Shut up, crustacean,” Violet said, and then fixed her full focus on me.

The magic felt like a cold drizzling rain splashing over me, starting at my temples. Or maybe it was just the herby oil running down my face. Then a tingle, like the moment just before you sneeze, hit me. Except all over and all at once. I wanted to move or maybe scream, but instead I just sat there, shuddering, while Etienne’s thumbs pressed gentle circles against my neck.

Then it was over. Violet’s eyes snapped open, and she fell heavily onto the stool next to me.

“What the—” she started, then cut herself off. She gaped at me, then at Etienne, then at me again, blinking so fast it was a miracle she didn’t take flight.

“Okay. That was unexpected.” She grabbed a kitchen towel from the island and wiped her palms as if she’d just handled a live wire.

Etienne’s voice was soft and very, very nervous. “What is wrong with her?”

Violet chewed her bottom lip. “Well, it’s not food poisoning. Or a hex. It’s more like...” she trailed off, searching for a word, then blurted, “Mally, you are pregnant.”

The room did that strange, surreal thing where time splits. Half of me was frozen in place, hearing the sentence echo off the hardwood floors and mahogany cabinets, while the other half of me is already floating upward, the queasy swirl replaced by a high, thin dizziness.

“P-pregnant?” Etienne repeated, his accent stretching the word like taffy.

I looked over my shoulder at him, then down at my own body, which has not changed at all except maybe to go back to a slightly shade of green.

“Are you sure?” I asked Violet, my voice barely above a whisper.

Violet nodded her head, her eyes are huge and bright. “Unless you’ve eaten something that is now living inside you, then yeah. That’s a baby in there.”

Etienne was laughing and crying at the same time, which is new, but weirdly adorable. He lifted me off the stool and spun me in a circle, which was probably a very dangerous thing to do given my already green pallor. But honestly feels, for a second, like the best ride at Six Flags.

When he finally set me down, his hands cupped my face, and he was grinning so wide, I almost forgot any nausea. “We’re having a baby, chérie,” he said.

“A baby?” I said, dumbly, and immediately regret it. “But—how? I mean, yes, I know how, but—didn’t we?—?”

Violet cut in, “Contraceptive magic only foolproof if both parties are from the same taxonomic kingdom. Which, fun fact, you two are not.”

Jocko shook his head. “Should’ve read the warning label, mon petit.”

I placed my hand on my stomach, as if expecting a drumroll, or maybe a tiny kick, but there’s only the familiar churning of—morning sickness? “Is it normal to feel this sick?”

Violet’s voice is gentle now, healer-mode in full effect. “It’s not normal. But you’re not normal. Your body’s basically a cauldron of fairy, witch, and werewolf genes. That’s a lot of enzymes. I wouldn’t be surprised if your kid comes out so magical he

or she glows in the dark.”

Etienne’s whole face shone. “It will be the most beautiful child in all of New Orleans.”

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Jocko snorts. “And

I’m felt tears begin to rain down my cheeks, which is mortifying, but I knew I was crying out of joy. Etienne held me close, and Mom came around the island to put her hand on my back. Even Jocko was quiet, watching us with his weird little bug eyes.

“You’re not mad?” I asked Etienne, voice muffled against his shirt. “We didn’t plan for this.”

“Mad?” he said, incredulous. “Chérie, I have never been happier in all my days. Not since meeting you. Not since Hugo and Lisette came into the world. This—this is a miracle.”

Violet wiped her eyes and sniffed, then grinned. “I always wanted to be an aunt.”

Tristan moved to place an arm around his emotional wife, although he beamed with happiness. “And I can’t wait to be an uncle again.”

“Better start learning to knit,” my mom said. “But this grandbaby is not calling me Granny.”

JR came over from where he’d been quietly watching. “This is the very best news.” He slipped an arm around my mom. “We cannot wait to meet our amazing grandchild. Right, Granny?”

My mom playfully elbowed him. He chuckled merrily and left Mom to materialize a bottle of champagne from the refrigerator. He raised it in the air. “This calls for a

toast.”

JR popped the cork with great flourish and poured five glasses. And a thimble of whiskey for Jocko. Etienne got me a fresh glass of ice water.

Mom raised her glass. “To Mally, Etienne and the newest impending member of our wonderful family. This baby will be something so, so special.”

We clinked. I swallowed, feeling complete joy replace my nausea.

“A Rougarou, witch and fey baby,” Violet said, shaking her head with bemusement. “I’m sure there is no baby ever born with that lineage.”

That was true. What would a baby with all those different kinds of magic be like? A bit of nausea returned. Would the baby be okay?

I must have started turning green again, because Etienne gently pulled me back against him, his tall, muscular frame surrounding me instantly making me feel better.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly.

I nodded, feeling better. Well, a little better.

I raised my ice water, and said with more confidence than I was feeling, “To the weirdest, wildest baby in Louisiana.”

Everyone cheered.

I just hoped the baby wouldn’t be too weird.

Chapter Three

After the champagne and bread pudding—which my mother insisted on serving despite the carbonized crust and the distinct aroma of despair—Etienne and I made our way back to St. James Bayou. By the time we reached our house, the evening heat had thickened to a sticky velvet. The stars hung close and bright as if they were crowding in to hear all the details of the new baby, too.

Our house glowed like a lantern against the moss-draped trees. I used to think the turreted structure looked haunted—Victorian, three stories, with a porch wide enough for a family of twelve to rock away their troubles. But now it was just home. Inside, the air was cool from the ancient ceiling fans, and the familiar smell of citrus and bay leaf greeted us at the door.

The first thing I did was toe off my boots and flop onto the fainting couch in the front parlor. Etienne, on the other hand, immediately kicked into caretaker mode. He circled me like a beautiful satellite, plumping pillows and bringing me a glass of water before I even thought to ask.

“Mon ange, are you really feeling better?” he asked, crouching in front of me and searching my face for signs of distress. Etienne’s concern was so pure it sometimes bordered on the ridiculous, but I could never be mad about it. Not when he looked at me like that.

I waved a limp hand. “I need a new stomach, but otherwise, all good. You can go back to being broody in the library—or whatever handsome princes do.”

He grinned, taking my sarcasm as a sign that I was feeling better. “If I am to be broody, it’s only because I worry for you, *chérie*.” He brushed a knuckle along my jaw, gentle as a feather.

I pretended to gag. I could always be counted on to ruin a tender moment. “The only thing brooding in this house should be the ghost in the third-floor guest room.”

“There is no ghost,” Etienne said, almost offended. “Just poor insulation and the sound of the bayou at night.

“Tell that to your brother. I’ve seen Tristan talking with ghosts in this house.”

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He snorted. “He talks to ghost everywhere. Poor guy.”

I nodded, but a little of my tension drained away. Etienne had that effect on me. Even when I was on the verge of vomiting up my immortal soul, he could make me laugh.

He rose and set about locking up the house, checking every window and door twice. It was an old habit, born from a lifetime of being responsible for others. I knew he’d circle back to check on me every thirty seconds, so I tried to look as settled as possible, closing my eyes and sinking into the fainting couch.

I lasted all of fifteen seconds before the agitation gnawing at me kicked in. I sat up, walked into the dining room, and rearranged the stack of mail on the credenza. Then I fiddled with the bowl of salt that Jocko insisted I keep by the front door. He said it was to protect the house from evil spirits, but given the tiny rings I sometimes saw in the white granules, I suspected it was for salting the rim of his glass when he drank margaritas. A favorite of his in the summer.

Then I stared out the window for a solid minute, watching the moonlight break across the bayou. You would think the news of pregnancy would have knocked me clean out, but instead, my brain was running on overdrive, throwing up anxieties faster than I could swat them down.

I started as Etienne’s arms slipped around my waist from behind, and then I just melted into him. He rested his chin on my shoulder, and I felt the rise and fall of his chest, steady and calm. I wished I could just borrow his heartbeat for a while. I was sick of mine feeling as if it might pound right out of me.



“Would you like to go upstairs?” he asked, his breath warming my ear.

I nodded. “Yeah. If I stay down here, I’ll do something crazy like start alphabetizing the pantry. Or vacuuming the curtains.”

“You just need to do something to relax,” he suggested softly against my ear.

A shot him a flirty grin over my shoulder. “Any ideas what that might be?”

He laughed, the sound deep and sexy. He caught my hand and led me up the creaking staircase, our footsteps echoing in the tall, shadowy halls. The third-floor landing still sometimes made me nervous—so many empty rooms, so many eyes (paintings, but still)—but tonight I felt nothing except Etienne’s solid hand in mine.

Our bedroom was at the end of the hall, painted midnight blue with velvet curtains and a brass bed that looked like it belonged to an absinthe poet. Etienne closed the door behind us and sat me on the bed, then knelt to pull off my socks, one by one. His tenderness made my throat ache.

“I’m sorry if I’m being overattentive,” he said, sitting beside me. “But you scared me tonight.”

I stared at my lap, feeling awkward for no good reason. “You’re not overattentive. I mean, maybe a little. But it’s...nice.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Why are you so anxious? Are you afraid?”

I made a face. “No. Maybe. I don’t know.” The words tumbled out before I could stop them: “I keep thinking, what if the baby isn’t okay? What if he or she is not normal? I’m not even normal, Etienne.”

He took my hands in his, bringing them to his lips. “I love you because you are not normal. I would be very bored with a normal witch.”

“Yeah, but there’s not a lot of precedent for whatever’s going on in my uterus right now. Witch, fey, werewolf? That’s like putting gumbo, jambalaya, and étouffée in the same pot. What if it explodes?”

His laugh rumbled deep and soft. “Then we will clean it up together.”

I almost managed a smile. “I just—I don’t want to mess this up. I don’t want our kid to feel like a freak.”

Etienne was quiet for a moment, then lifted my chin so I had to look at him. His eyes were full of something fierce and bright. “Mally. My darling. Our child will never be a freak. He or she will be loved, protected, and cherished. And besides, you have seen my family. Strange is the only thing we do well.”

“You have met my family. I see your strange and raise you full insanity.”

“Well, that proves it, we are perfectly equipped to handle our unusual child.”

That broke the last dam, and I started laughing—wet, ridiculous, ugly laughter, but it felt good. Etienne held me while I laughed and then while I cried. He didn’t try to fix anything, just let me leak all my emotions out onto his expensive shirt.

When I finally stopped snuffling, he kissed me, braving the potential of tears and snot and said, “We will all be fine. Are you ready for bed, chérie?”

I nodded, and we climbed under the blankets together, his arms curling around me, enveloping me like a protection spell. I felt calmer than I had all night, maybe in weeks. I guess I knew something was happening to me—to us, but I hadn’t once

considered a baby.

As I drifted toward sleep, I heard his low voice, warm in the darkness: “You are already a wonderful mother. And our child will be so loved, they will never doubt who they are.”

For the first time since I’d heard the news, I almost believed it.

Unfortunately, one thing Etienne had said to reassure me, had slowly gotten my brain spinning again. I fought the urge to move restlessly. I was trying to sleep. I really was. But every time I closed my eyes, my brain would shift into high gear, pelting me with questions I had zero answers for. Most of them started with "what if" and ended with a slow-motion train wreck. What if the baby came out howling at the moon? What if it was the size of a Kewpie doll and glowed? What if it had crazy, unpredictable magic like me? It was a miracle my magic hadn’t injured myself or anyone else. What if it was a combination of all of the above? And what if I was actually a terrible mother and everyone figured it out right away?

"Still awake, chérie?" he murmured, his lips warm against the nape of my neck.

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So much for keeping still and not disturbing my husband.

"I think I forgot how to sleep," I said, rolling over to face him. "Can you re-teach me? Maybe with a demonstration."

He smiled, a lopsided little smirk that made my heart squeeze. "First lesson: close your eyes. Second lesson: listen to the sound of my voice. Third lesson: try not to think of any more disasters."

"Well, now that's the only thing I'm going to think about."

"Then maybe we talk through them, hmm?" He tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "Tell me what you are fretting about?"

I hesitated, tracing a finger over the warm skin of his shoulder. "That might take all night."

He feigned an alarmed look. "Okay, maybe hit me with the one that's bothering you most, and we'll go from there."

"Are you worried about... Hugo and Lisette?"

He didn't answer right away, which made my nerves buzz with concern.

"Why would I be worried about them?"

I forced a smile, but my insides churned. "I mean, they already have a mother, even if

she's in witch pokey. Now they have me, and a new baby on the way? What if they feel like I'm just... taking over their whole life?"

Etienne was quiet, thoughtful. I loved that he never tried to dismiss my fears outright, even when they sounded dumb. "Lisette adores you," he said finally. "Hugo worships you, but would never admit it. They already see you as family."

"But this is different," I pressed. "It's one thing to be the cool stepmom who lets them have extra dessert and teaches them how to levitate a spoon. It's another to add a whole new sibling into the mix. That's a lot, Etienne."

He smiled softly. "Mally, you have never been 'the cool stepmom.' You are their mother. Far more than their biological mother."

"To be fair, your ex isn't a hard act to follow."

He laughed and kissed the back of my hand, holding it against his chest. "They will love this baby because it is theirs, and because it is yours."

I squinted at him. "You make it sound so easy."

He shrugged. "It is easy. Children are simple. They love, they fight, they get over it. Adults make things complicated." He hesitated, and then: "What is the real fear, chérie? Tell me."

It took me a second to find words. "I just... don't want them to feel like they're being replaced. Or that they're not special anymore." I chewed the inside of my cheek. "When I was little, Mom never made me feel different for my lack of magic ability. But I still felt like an outsider. Everyone is going to be curious, and I'm sure a bit suspicious about our child. The baby is bound to draw a lot of attention. I don't want Hugo and Lisette to feel less important."

Etienne was silent for a long moment. Then he rose up on one elbow, pinning me with a look that could melt asphalt. "Do you know what they said to me just days after meeting you?"

"No?"

"They said, 'Can we call her Mamannow, or is that only for real mothers?'"

My heart stumbled over itself. "They said that?"

"They did. I told them they could call you anything they wanted, but Maman was perfect. Because you are, for them, the only real mother they have ever known."

I sniffed, not bothering to hide it. "You're making this up so I'll go to sleep, aren't you?"

He smiled, kissing away a tear before it could escape. "I am French. We do not lie about such things."

I cuddled in closer, letting the warmth of him seep into me. "Maybe we should do something special for them separate from the announcement party."

On our ride home, we'd already discussed that we needed to have a family get together to tell everyone the exciting news.

"Of course. What do you have in mind?"

"Something fun. Maybe a picnic? Or a day at the zoo?" My mind raced with possibilities. "It has to be perfect. Not too over-the-top, but not boring, either. Maybe with cake."

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"Definitely with cake," he agreed. "And not your mother's cake."

"God, no," I said. "I want the baby to survive past its first trimester."

He chuckled, his arms tightening around me. "I will help you plan. We will make it a day they will remember forever."

For the first time since dinner, the knot in my stomach loosened. "Thank you," I whispered.

He kissed my forehead, then nuzzled me until I laughed. "Now, do you think you can sleep?"

I pretended to consider. "Maybe we could do a bit more to relax me." I kissed him slowly.

"Demanding little witch," he teased, but he came up—or rather something came up—that would definitely help me sleep

And as the night deepened, and the old house settled around us with creaks and sighs that mingled with our own sighs and gasps, I finally felt the edges of real sleep approaching. Maybe tomorrow the world would still be messy and complicated and full of magical curveballs, but tonight, for a few hours, everything was exactly as it should be.

Chapter Four

My eyes snapped open. What had woken me? I turned my head to read the faint glowing numbers on my nightstand clock. Three a.m. I closed my eyes and assessed what could have startled me out of a deep sleep. Not the gentle nagging of my bladder, or even the distant hooting of one of the Great Horned owls that live in the bayou. Maybe I'd been jumped awake by a dream, although I couldn't recall said dream.

Then I heard something. A sharp, clear sound—a single, unmistakable crack echoing through the house.

My eyes shot back open in the dark. For a long moment, I still just lay there, holding my breath. Etienne slept beside me, arm slung across my waist, his chest rising and falling in even, slow waves. He hadn't stirred.

Maybe this was still just a dream. Or simply the old house and all the odd noises it made. Every night it settled, whined, popped, and hissed, a lullaby of structural complaints. But this sound was different. It didn't belong.

I carefully rolled over onto my back and stared at the ceiling, waiting. Five seconds. Ten. Then another sound—a low, hollowthud from somewhere below, like a banging on the wall. Or maybe the door. Was someone here?

I nudged Etienne's shoulder. "Wake up."

He opened his eyes instantly. "What's wrong?" No sleep in his voice. That's how you knew he was a predator at heart.

I whispered, "Did you hear that?"

He listened. The house was totally silent as if it was holding its breath with us.



Then another noise. Not as loud, but eerily closer. That seemed to rule out someone knocking on the front door.

Etienne leapt out of bed in a flash, quickly pulling on his pajama pants. “Stay here,” he said, voice low and serious.

I started to argue, but he shook his head. “Please, Mally. Just this once.”

He kissed my forehead, then slipped out the bedroom door. The heavy wood panel closed with a soft click that still managed to sound like a death knell.

I stayed put for a grand total of thirty seconds before my nervous energy boiled over. I couldn’t just lay here, listening. I needed to know what was going on. Plus, Jocko was in the guest bedroom. Alone.

I grabbed the nearest weapon-like object—a crystal geode paperweight from my nightstand—and tiptoed to the door, opening it just wide enough to peer into the hallway.

Etienne hadn’t turned on any lights, but in the heavy darkness, I got no sense of movement. The air felt different though—electric, almost. As my eyes adjusted, the very shadow stretched a little too far in the watery moonlight warped by the ancient glass panes.

I crept down the hall, bare feet silent on the hallway runners. Adrenaline swished in my veins. As I neared the staircase, I heard another noise, this one higher pitched. Glass on tile? Or claws on wood?

My mind helpfully supplied a list of possible culprits: a raccoon, maybe one of Tristan’s ghost friends, hungry vampire, leftover cousin from the last family gathering. Or maybe it was The Grunch—terrifying creature that lived in the bayou.

They had claws. Big claws. I knew that one firsthand. I decided to go with raccoon.

I paused at the landing and scanned the first floor. Nothing seemed amiss—until I saw the faintest glimmer of movement in the front parlor. I gripped my geode like a grenade and crept closer, heart beating so loudly I worried it would give me away.

Something scuttled across the rug.

I nearly screamed, but then the “something” muttered, “Putain de merde,” and I recognized the silhouette of my favorite crustacean.

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“Jocko?” I hissed. “What are you doing out of your tank?”

His antennae whipped around. “You are supposed to stay in bed.”

“Says the crawfish who just made me think there was a burglar.”

He skittered closer. “I figured I was going to have to save myself. There is something in the house. I heard it. Not just you two snoring like freight trains.”

I scowled. “I do not snore.”

He clicked his claws. “Whatever you say, mon petit. But I swear, I saw a shadow moving in the kitchen. I am not the only one up tonight.”

That last part sent a chill crawling up my spine. I scanned the dark room, every nerve screaming that we were being watched.

I considered calling out for Etienne, but if there really was someone—or something—in the house, I didn’t want to make myself a target. I leaned down to scoop up Jocko, who only grumbled slightly at being manhandled, then tiptoed through the dining room, every floorboard groaning in protest.

We reached the kitchen. The only light was the green digital glow of the microwave clock. The back door was locked and the windows shut. But the pantry door stood slightly ajar, just enough to see inside.

I gripped my geode and reflexively also squeezed Jocko. He wheezed, but didn’t

swear at me in French. That made me realize he was truly scared. That realization did nothing for my own bravery. But I took a deep breath, raised the geode, and nudged the door open. Nothing but flour, beans, and my ever-growing collection of hot sauces. The air was still, except for the faint, unmistakable smell of... cigarette smoke?

Jocko snorted. "I told you."

I shushed him and listened. Now I heard it too—breathing. Heavy, irregular, just on the other side of the laundry room door.

My mouth went dry. "Climb up to my shoulder," I whispered opening my palm so he could use my arm as a ramp. I was afraid if I kept him in my hand, I might crush him. Or throw him at whatever was on the other side of that door in my panic. He got situated, holding onto the material of my baggy tee with both claws.

We edged closer, my grip tightening on the geode. The breathing stopped, replaced by a slithery sound. I hesitated, then pushed the laundry room door wide.

At first, I didn't see anything in the dark. Then I spotted a hunched shadow loomed by the back window. For a split second, I thought it was a person, but then it moved in a way that was just... wrong. A ripple ran through its body, and the moonlight caught illuminating pale, gauzy skin that seemed to almost dance away from its body. Not human. Not even rougarou.

It made a low guttural noise.

Jocko squeaked, "Run," and that was the only sensible thing he'd ever said.

I sprinted back through the kitchen, Jocko clinging onto my shirt for dear life, slamming the swinging door between us and the thing. I didn't stop until we reached

the front hallway, breathless and wild-eyed.

Jocko looked up at me, his shell trembling. “Told you we should have left the salt at the door.”

“I did. You know that, but I guess that thing used the back door.” I wanted to laugh, but mostly I wanted to puke. But I didn’t have long to think about my newest wave of nausea. I could hear footsteps, coming quickly and coming from the direction of the kitchen.

I scurried into the front sitting room and hid behind a large chair in the corner. Not the best hiding place, but all I could find in my panic.

And that is where Etienne found me and Jocko crouched in a ball, hyperventilating and armed with absolutely nothing but a decorative geode and Jocko’s claws which held out in front of him like a karate master. Etienne took one look at us—wide-eyed, panting, possibly feral—and immediately went into husband/pack leader mode.

“Are you hurt?” he demanded, hands scanning me for wounds I didn’t even have.

“Not hurt, just... startled,” I managed, voice way too high.

Jocko dropped his claws and flopped onto his back, gasping. “I think I’m having a heart attack, but nobody cares about the crawfish.”

To punctuate that point, he slid off my shoulder and landed on the carpet with an, “oof.”

Etienne ignored him. “What happened? I heard you running, but I saw nothing.”

I tried to collect myself, but the image of the thing in the laundry room kept flickering

behind my eyelids. “There was something in the house. Not a person, not a rougarou. It was... I don’t even know.”

“It was a zombie,” Jocko said, still laying on his back on the carpet.

Etienne frowned, his skepticism visible despite the dim light. “You are sure it was not an animal?”

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“Unless the local raccoons grew and lost all their hair.”

He considered that, then glanced at Jocko. “Did you see it too?”

The crawfish nodded solemnly. “It looked like a zombie to me.”

Etienne exhaled, then grabbed my hand as I grabbed Jocko. He did swear this time. We started a circuit of the first floor, checking every lock, every window, every inch of possible entry. Nothing was open, nothing broken, not even a loose screen.

We circled back to the laundry room. The only sign anything might have happened was a window in the laundry room was open. A breeze from the bayou fluttered the white curtains out into the room. Each time it danced in the cooler night air the material clung to the ironing board leaning against the wall near the window.

Etienne studied it, then turned to us. “Could that have possibly been your zombie?”

Jocko and I exchanged a look, then I admitted sheepishly, “Maybe.”

Etienne shook his head, a faint smile playing at his lips. “I think we’ve all just had an exciting but exhausting day and our imaginations went into overdrive.”

“But I did hear noises. You heard those too,” I pointed out.

My husband had the good grace to still look concerned about that. “I guess it must have been the house. Or maybe something outside. Maybe some of the nutria Shifters doing a little nighttime fishing or something.”

I knew I looked dubious about his explanation.

“And I did see someone in the house,” Jocko insisted. Then he burped and even as small as he was the sour smell of liquor wafted around us. A crustacean with a drinking problem might not be the most reliable eyewitness.

But my husband was not one to dismiss my concerns. And he could tell I was shaken.

He held up a finger to tell me to wait as he left us in the kitchen. I could hear him taking the stairs two at a time. Soon, he returned with his cell phone. He texted someone—I assumed Marcel, who was his brother who worked closest with the Rougarou Guard—and within minutes, a pair of hulking shapes appeared at the back door, both sporting the distinctive look of rougarous on the job: jeans, muddy boots, and the grim determination of supernatural bouncers. They swept the house twice, then settled on the porch with thermoses of chicory coffee and what looked suspiciously like shotguns.

Etienne led me upstairs, past the ancient portraits and the persistent sensation of being watched. Back in our bedroom, he double-checked the locks and drew the heavy velvet curtains.

Jocko took up residence the bathroom sink, making a comfy bed on a loofah with a washcloth as a blanket. I didn’t blame him for not wanting to go back to his tank in the guest room.

Etienne took a seat on one of the velvet bedroom chairs, his tall frame dwarfing the piece of furniture.

“You don’t have to stay up,” I said. “You need rest too.”

Etienne smiled at me, his gaze soft but intent. “You are more important than sleep.”



I didn't know what to say to that. I wanted to argue, to tell him I wasn't helpless, but after tonight, I was rattled enough to accept the offer. And even though I had a major independence streak, it was hot to have him protect me.

I laid down, but every creak of the house made my skin crawl. Etienne must have sensed my nervousness. He climbed into bed and held me close, whispering old French lullabies, his breath warm against my ear.

It was almost enough to make me believe nothing could hurt us.

Almost. But something nagged at me, but I didn't say anything to Etienne. The window in the laundry room. It had been open. I couldn't recall that window ever being opened.

## Chapter Five

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of something sizzling in the kitchen. My first thought was that the house was on fire, but then I remembered I married a man who considered breakfast an art form. I heard the clank of a pan, which confirmed my suspicion. Etienne was working his own culinary magic.

The sunlight streaming through our bedroom window was a soft gold, filtered through Spanish moss and the haze of early June humidity. I stretched, and every muscle in my body ached in the good, post-adrenaline way, as though I'd run a marathon instead of just... being extremely overwrought for the last twelve straight hours.

Then my stomach growled loudly. And I realized I was ravenous. And not nauseated. Miracles did exist.

I found Etienne in the kitchen, standing over a cast iron skillet, shirtless, hair slightly

damp from his morning shower. He looked like a calendar photo for Hot Bayou Royalty. I imagined what the photo of his month would look like. Arms crossed, tattoos peeking out, wearing absolutely nothing but a very smug expression.

I walked up behind him, pressing a kiss to his bare shoulder.

“Bonjour, sleeping beauty,” he said, flipping an omelet one-handed. “You were making the noises of a contented cat when I left the bed.”

“Did I purr?”

“A little. It was very sexy.”

I plopped myself at the counter, eyeing the breakfast spread with suspicion. “Is there any possibility that isn’t alligator sausage?”

“Zero chance,” he replied, plating my omelet with a flourish. “Jocko said it was the only way to build a proper foundation for the day.”

I smirked and took a bite. It was delicious, obviously. Everything Etienne cooked was. He poured two coffees, then sat across from me, gaze intent.

For a while we just ate, sharing quiet looks and little kicks under the table. I was starting to think that maybe, just maybe, I could pull off this motherhood thing. With Etienne beside me, nothing felt impossible. Difficult, sure, but not impossible.

“So,” he said, breaking the silence with his classic ‘I have news you’re not going to like’ voice, “there is one more thing we must discuss.”

I groaned. “Let me guess. You want to announce the pregnancy on social media.”

“Better.” His eyes glinted. “We must host a gathering for the entire pack. A royal celebration. It is tradition.”

I nearly choked on my coffee. “Like, the whole pack? Every single rougarou in southern Louisiana?”

He nodded, looking way too pleased for my liking. “It is important for the pack to feel included. Especially with news this significant. A new heir, so to speak.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “Isn’t Hugo the next heir?”

Etienne nodded, taking another bite of omelet. “But this baby will still be royal.”

That was true. Heck, I was royal now. Talk about crazy.

“Do you think we should invite the witches and Fae Follet? I mean, this baby is a part of their heritage too.”

Etienne nodded immediately. “Absolutely.”

I tried not to look too overwhelmed, but after a moment, I said, “This celebration is going to be huge. I always feel like an imposter at these big events.”

He leaned in, all warmth and mischief. “You will be perfect. The pack adores you. You saved my life, you saved the truce with the witches, and you always interact with our Rougarous with regal elegance and class.”

“Lie,” I said. “You know that’s a lie.” I gestured to my goth black hair and what I was sure was smudged black eyeliner all around my eyes. I did like me goth look and couldn’t quite shake it.

He laughed. “Alright, you are a unique princess, but you always greet our people with charm and beauty and the biggest heart of any person I’ve ever met.”

I bit my lip, his words making my insides go a little melty. “It just... seems like a lot. I’m barely processing the news myself, and now I have to face an audience of supernatural Cajuns?”

He reached for my hand, his thumb tracing lazy circles on my palm. “I will be by your side.”

I tried to smile, but anxiety nipped at my insides. “What if the pack doesn’t want a hybrid baby as heir? Or what if the witches get mad about it?”

He was quiet, but not troubled. “There will be some who resist. There always are. But most will see it as a blessing. A sign of peace between our people.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

He squeezed my hand. “It will not be easy. But nothing worth having ever is.”

I gazed out the window at the rippling surface of the bayou, thinking of all the things that could go wrong. My brain supplied a dozen disaster scenarios, each more dramatic than the last. But underneath all that, there was a thin, steady pulse of hope.

“We’ll have to buy more folding chairs,” I said finally.

Etienne grinned. “And lots of champagne.”

I looked at him, this man who’d changed my entire world, and decided that if I had to stand in front of a crowd of monsters and misfits, I’d rather do it with him at my side than anyone else.

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s throw a party.”

He rose and leaned over to kiss me. Then he booped my nose. “But first we have to tell all our families.

I did groan. “Two parties. This is torture.”

Etienne laughed as he cleared the dishes away.

I never thought breakingworld-altering news to two children would require so much logistical planning. Or baked goods. I had spent the morning writing out the pros and cons of telling Hugo and Lisette at different outings. All typed out on my computer with bullet points. The zoo had potential, but monkeys and elephants could be too distracting. And Lisette always ended up crying about the animals being in cages. That might create a negative association with the baby. An amusement park was definitely not a good place. Too crowded and I might vomit even on a carousel.

“What about a camping trip?” I said seeing potential there. I started to type that one into my document.

Etienne simply closed my laptop and pronounced, “We are taking them to the bayou. With snacks. They love snacks more than they love us, anyway.”

He wasn’t wrong. If you asked Hugo, age nine, to list his top five favorite things in the universe, cheese-filled snack crackers would place above “both my parents” as well as “jumping my bike.” Lisette, at six, oscillated between a fierce loyalty to her family and an all-consuming obsession with anything in the amphibian phylum. The

entire Dubois clan had agreed long ago: if you needed to butter up the children, you led with Goldfish and a shoebox full of frogs.

Now, at ten in the morning, I'm huddled at the kitchen island with Etienne, prepping our bribe-based outing. There was homemade lemonade, three kinds of cookies (only one from a store-bought mix, but you can't tell unless you taste them side by side), and sandwiches wrapped in brown paper and twine like we were in an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*. Etienne wasn't sure why I had poo-pooed sandwich baggies, but I think the paper was more quaint and memorable.

"Do you want me to carry the lemonade, or the bucket of bug spray?" Etienne asked, propping a sandwich basket on his hip.

"Can you do both and also carry me?" I said, stretching my arms out in what I hope is an irresistible, winsome way. I was tired—whether from pregnancy or my interrupted sleep last night, I wasn't sure.

He grinned. "Always, *chérie*." He gathered up all the picnic gear with supernatural grace, then bent to whisper: "You're overthinking this. They'll be happy."

I snorted. "You think so?"

"They're still kids. They will care more about catching frogs and eating cookies than about another sibling. Even a magical one." He squeezed my hand. "You'll see."

I nodded, but I wasn't convinced. I couldn't remember a time when Hugo didn't rule his little world, and Lisette, despite being the sweet one, had a ruthless streak honed by years of being the "baby."

The kids were in the backyard when we finally emerged. Hugo hung upside down from a tall oak by his knees, a feat requiring considerable strength and, in his case, a

flexible relationship with gravity. Lisette sat below, building a mossy throne for the aforementioned frogs. I called out, “Who wants to go on a picnic and catch some monsters?”

Hugo dismounted with the flourish of an Olympic gymnast, landing on both feet, and yelling, “Me!” before I even finished the sentence. Lisette scurried over, curls bouncing. Within sixty seconds, both kids were racing along the edge of the bayou, headed to the best place to catch monsters—or frogs.

St. James Bayou was not a destination for tourists, and that was exactly why it was perfect. A path winded its way along the water, bracketed by endless cypress. Green water stretched out into the wild, making it feel like stepping into another realm. Spanish moss hung from every limb, and a heron stalked the bank for brunch. There was a dock. A wobbly canoe. It was magical.

We reached our destination and unpacked the lunch while the kids dashed off toward the water’s edge, shrieking at a turtle sunning itself on a log.

“Remember not to get too close to the edge of the water!” I shouted after them, but my warning floated away on the heavy, humid breeze.

I arranged our blanket on a patch of grass, and Etienne sat beside me, his thigh pressed warm against mine. “Look at them. They haven’t even noticed you’re nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m—” I almost said “terrified,” but Etienne is right. They were having the time of their lives, and I should try it for once.

I watched Lisette crouch at the shoreline, coaxing a leopard frog into her palm with the patience of a Buddhist monk. Hugo made a lasso out of twine and attempts to “capture” the turtle who was doing an admirable job ignoring the overzealous little



boy. I was so absorbed in the moment that I forgot, for a second, why we came here.

“Let’s eat,” I said, waving them over. The kids barreled up the grass bank, skidding to a halt at the edge of the blanket.

Etienne finished laying out the picnic and poured the lemonade. They descended on the food like wolves. Which, technically, they were. For several minutes, the only sound was the rabid devouring of peanut butter sandwiches and arguments about who had more cookie crumbs stuck to their face.

After the food, Lisette laid her head in my lap. She was sleepy after filling her belly, but her eyes stayed clear and curious. “Mommy, do you think if I caught a frog big enough, I could ride it?”

I stroked her hair. “Probably not, unless you can get them to eat more protein.”

She frowned, calculating. “What if you used magic?”

“Magic doesn’t work on frogs,” Hugo said with great authority, licking his fingers clean. “Everyone knows that.”

Etienne, to his credit, almost kept a straight face. “That is why witches are still allowed in the Annual Frog Jumping Festival. They can’t rig the games.”

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Lisette accepted this as gospel, then brightened. “Can we go to the festival this year?”

Etienne glanced at me, his eyes asking, is now the time? I nodded, my heart doing gymnastics in my chest.

He put down his lemonade. “Actually, there is something we want to tell you both.”

Hugo immediately tensed. “Is this about last week when we got broke—” He stopped, eyes wide. “Because we didn’t do it. Or if we did, we’ll never do it again.”

“It’s not that,” I assured him, not sure I wanted to know what they had broken. Clearly nothing important if neither Etienne nor I had discovered it yet. “It’s... well, you’re both going to be big siblings. We’re having a baby.”

For a long moment, the only sound was the faint buzz of insects over the water and the gentle plop of the turtle falling off its log. Then Lisette sat up so fast she nearly headbutted me in the chin.

“A baby? Like a real baby?”

“Yes,” Etienne said, reaching for my hand. “A real baby.”

Lisette squealed, then clapped both hands over her mouth. “Can I hold it? Can I dress it in little froggy pajamas?”

I laughed, which makes her laugh, which made Hugo say, “Wait, really?” in a voice that suggests he’s been punked before.

Etienne nodded. “You’ll both be amazing at it. And if you want, you can help us pick the name.”

“Can we name it after a monster?” Hugo’s eyes went starry. “Like Goliath or Dracula?”

I shook my head. “Nice try. But we’ll consider strong names.”

He leaned back, then asked, “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“We don’t know yet,” I said. “It’s too early.”

Hugo frowned as if this is a serious design flaw in the universe. “I hope it’s a boy. That way Lisette doesn’t try to turn it into a princess.”

Lisette stuck out her tongue. “I hope it’s a girl so I can braid its hair. Or if it’s a boy, I’ll braid its hair anyway.”

This devolved into a passionate but ultimately pointless debate about hair accessories, punctuated by Etienne and I trading looks of mutual relief. I didn’t know what I expected. Maybe drama, or a sulk, or a “we hate this idea forever.” Instead, they were already plotting all the fun things they could do with a younger sibling.

When the cookie supply ran out, we wandered down to the dock and watched the kids dangle their feet in the muddy water. Etienne laced his fingers with mine.

“They took it well,” I said.

“I told you. Children are resilient.” He squeezed my hand. “And they have the best parents in the bayou.”

I rolled my eyes, but secretly I wanted to believe him.

For a while, we just lounged in the sun, watching the water ripple and the Spanish moss shift and the kids plotting their next world takeover now that it would be three kids against two parents. It was perfect.

“Can we play hide and seek?” Lisette suddenly asked.

Etienne raised an eyebrow at me, but I was already up and dusting off my shorts. “Count us in.”

The kids exploded up on the dock, tripping over each other to declare “not it.” Etienne agreeably took the role of official seeker, which meant Hugo, Lisette, and I needed to hide.

Etienne raised a hand to stop us before we could sprint away. “But we have to play by the ancient bayou rules of hide and seek.”

“What’s that?” Hugo asked, looking skeptical.

“No magic, no shifting, and if you end up more than ten yards from the dock, you forfeit dessert at dinner tonight.” Etienne said.

Lisette took my hand and tugged me into the green shade at the bayou’s edge. “We’ll hide together,” she whispered, “because you don’t know all the secret places.”

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She was right, and I let her lead anyway. The air was hot and heavy, draped with the scent of murky water and honeysuckle and something a little wilder, a perfume of wet earth and old cypress. The weeds at the shore were taller than Lisette, and she vanished into them without a ripple. I followed, feeling less certain than she was.

“Here,” she said, crouching in a nest of sawgrass and palmetto. “Best spot. You can see the dock, but they can’t see you.”

I settled in, knees in the soft, spongy loam. I peered through the reeds. From here, the world was a haze of sunlight, every leaf glowing a different shade of impossible green. Dragonflies zigzagged past our noses, iridescent and loud, and somewhere a bullfrog rumbled contently.

I heard Etienne counting from the dock, his deep voice bouncing off the water. “Thirty. Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.” He stretched each number to buy time.

I nudged Lisette. “Maybe we should have made Hugo be seeker? Your daddy will be too good at this.”

She shook her head. “Hugo cheats,” she confided. “But I cheat better.”

I stifled a laugh, which comes out as a snort and shakes the reeds around us. For a moment, I forget to worry about babies or pack politics or even what I creepy crawlies I might be kneeling on. All that matters is hiding, waiting, and maybe winning.

Lisette leaned into my shoulder. “When the baby comes, will it have to play with

us?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “But you get to decide if they are on your team or Hugo’s.”

She considered this, then nodded. “Okay. But it has to be born first. Hugo says you can’t play until you’re at least two, because you don’t know any of the rules.”

“Maybe this one will be smart,” I said, and Lisette giggled so hard she nearly falls over.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Etienne’s voice rang out and we fell silent, not wanting to give away our location. I shrunk down smaller.

Lisette tensed, eyes wide as if she was hiding from an orge rather than her own dad.

“He’s close,” she whispered.

I hold still, not daring to even breathe. I could see Etienne’s silhouette moving between the trees, and for a split second, I was five years old again, hiding from Violet in our mother’s flower garden. My heart thumped so hard I think it’ll give me away. Funny how that feeling of dread and excitement never really changed.

He passed our spot, and Lisette let out the tiniest of squeaks. I clamped a hand over her mouth, and she dissolved into silent, hiccupping giggles.

We sat in that little cocoon of grass, safe for now, the whole. Insects buzzed. Water dripped somewhere. Moving away from us, Etienne hummed an old Cajun song, low and comforting.

I closed my eyes for a moment and soaked it all in—the heat, the sweat, the perfect hiding spot and the girl by my side who would soon be someone’s big sister. I hope

I'll be enough for her, for all of them.

Something tugged at my sleeve.

"Don't worry," Lisette whispered, her mouth still half-covered by my hand. "You're good at this."

She meant hiding. But I want to believe she meant everything else, too.

A shadow fell across the reeds. Uh-oh, Etienne was moving closer.

"Found you!" he shouted, popping up from the tall grass, and both of us dissolved into shrieking, gleeful laughter.

But for a split second before he parted the grass, I felt something else. A prickle at the back of my neck. The sense that there was another set of eyes in the weeds with us. Watching, waiting. Something not part of the game at all.

I shook it off. It was just the nervous thrill of the game, making me wary. Still, I glanced over my shoulder as we tumbled out of the grass, just in case.

The dock, the sun, Etienne's laughter. Everything was normal. Everything was fine.

Still, I looked over my shoulder again as we came out of our hiding place.

The novelty of the game was starting to wear off after the fourth round. Not to mention it was getting harder to find better hiding spots. So, this time I moved deeper in the weeds, just out of sight of the dock. I didn't want to get too far away since it was Lisette's turn to be the seeker. But I found a perfect place between the roots of a fallen cypress, where the air was damp and thick with the smell of wet bark.

I crouched low, hugging my knees, and listened. A dragonfly droned by me. Then I heard Lisette call in a sing-song voice, “Huuuu-gooo, I’m coming for you.”

The sun filtered through the trees, green and watery, making my surroundings feel a little surreal. I waited. Then I heard movement. I imagined Lisette getting closer, her little feet smushing the grass with careful, deliberate steps. She sounded as if she was circling around me. Maybe hoping to spring out and give me a start.



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The weeds behind me stir, and I freeze in place. This was it, I thought, and steeled myself for the giggling tackle of a small child.

But what grabbed me was not small.

Something cold and hard locked around my upper arm and yanked. I yelped and tried to jerk away, but whatever got me was strong and determined. The grip burned, like grabbing onto an electric fence. Magical energy shot through me.

Before I could twist around to see who—or what—had me, I was pulled through the reeds with a speed and violence that left the bayou spinning. I crashed through a patch of prickly palmetto and landed flat on my back in the mud, blinking up at a sky now blurred by pain and confusion.

There was no one standing over me. No prankster, no were-child, not even one of the neighborhood nutria Shifters. No one.

Except I could hear them. Two voices, low and whispery, arguing in a hushed tones so that I couldn't understand what they were saying. One was deep and raspy, the other quick and lilting.

I rolled to my feet, covered in muck, and search the reeds. The voices kept up their back-and-forth, clearly bickering, but I saw nothing. Not even the fluttering wing of an insect. I tried to channel my magic, just enough for some basic sight—hoping to conjure a spells for tracking poltergeists or invisible friends—but my magic sparked, then fizzled. As it often did when I was stressed.

I rubbed my arm, still feeling the burn of the harsh grip. I heard the voices still, but they seemed to be getting farther away, receding into the maze of reeds and branches. I tried to focus, tried to memorize the cadence or at least a word or two, but it's like trying to catch smoke in a butterfly net.

I stumbled after them, slipping in the mud, but every step seems to push them farther out of reach. I wanted to call for Etienne, for the kids, but the words died in my throat. My energy felt as if it had been sucked from me. Whoever—or whatever—just tried to snatch me wasn't playing.

As the last of the whispers faded, I caught a single, clear word. It sounds like “prenze,” or maybe “brenze,” hissed out in a long drawl.

Then there was nothing but the sound of my own breathing and the distant “Found you!” in Lisette's gleeful voice from the far side of the bayou.

I took a deep breath, swallowed my panic, and shuffled my way back toward the dock. No sense letting everyone else know I was just manhandled by an invisible force of nature. Not yet.

Lisette found me first, peeking out from behind a clump of cattails. “You are not hiding, Mommy.” She frowned. “And you are all dirty.”

I forced a smile and made to pick her up. But I realized I couldn't. I felt as if I'd run an Iron Man after fasting for a week. I swayed, spots dancing in front of my eyes. No, I couldn't pass out cold in front of my daughter. Now, that would be traumatizing.

Hugo arrived next, panting, with Etienne trailing behind at a much more dignified pace.

“I won,” Hugo declared, as if it's a matter of public record.

Lisette tore her gaze away from me to scowl at her brother. “You did not win. I stopped looking.” Her worried look returned to me. “I stopped because Maman is covered in swamp.”

Now both Hugo and Etienne looked me over, concern flickering in their eyes.

I forced a wan smile. “I just tripped. Over a root. I’m fine.”

Etienne stepped forward, touching his fingers lightly to a spot on my forehead. I winced, not even realizing I had an injury there.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, his eyes roaming over me.

I nodded even though I still felt sore and lightheaded. “I’m right as rain. But I do think I’m a little tired out.” That was an understatement.

Etienne studied me a moment longer, then turned to the kids. “I’m getting a little tired too. Maybe we should head home, and I can turn on the sprinklers so you can run through them and cool off.”

Both of the children cheered as another wave of vertigo and utter exhaustion hit me. I was never more thankful for one of Etienne’s suggestions.

The rest of the day passed in an exhaustive blur for me, but I was determined to shake it off and not let anything ruin what had been a very special day. Etienne had spent much of the time sending me concerned and probing looks, but he didn’t press me.

That is until he joined me on the porch, where I sat curled in one of the wicker rockers with a cup of herbal tea.

He sat down in the chair next to me, a glass of bourbon on the rocks in his hand.

“Okay, so are you finally going to tell me what happened today?”

I wanted to tell him. I wanted to spill everything—the grab, the voices, the icy pain in my arm. The draining of all my energy. But I didn’t want to upset him. Not when everything else had been so perfect. Plus, the more time that passed, the more I wonder if I had just hallucinated the whole thing.

Okay, that didn’t seem likely. But it had been truly surreal—almost dreamlike now. Or nightmarish.

I shrugged. “I think I must have just been so tired that I tripped.”

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He looked thoroughly unconvinced, but he said nothing and just took a swig of his drink.

We sat in silence, listening to the night sounds on the bayou and watching heat lightning flicker on the horizon. I tried to tell myself that I had just created the whole crazy event in my pregnancy brain. I took a sip of my tea, suppressing a wince at the lingering burn in my arm where it had been grabbed today. I obviously didn't hide my reaction well enough, however. Etienne carefully pulled me onto his lap.

“Okay, spill. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I insisted, knowing I was sounding less and less convincing.

But the hot ache in my arm—and the memory of those voices, wouldn't let me forget.

He watched me over the rim of his glass. “Well, something is on your mind. You've been very quiet tonight. Usually by now you would have rehashed the whole day in blow-by-blow details.”

I laughed, but it came out weak. “Did I ever tell you I hate being predictable?”

He set his glass down and his free hand trailed slow circles on my thigh. “You are never predictable, chérie. But you are...distracted. Since the bayou.”

It was a good subtle opening. He waited for me to fill it.

I took a deep breath and looked out into the dark. “Something did grab me,” I said.

“Not an animal. Not a person. I’m not sure what. But it felt—wrong.” The actual word that came to mind was “evil,” but I couldn’t bring myself to be that dramatic.

Still, Etienne went still. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

I shrugged, staring into my tea. “Because the kids were right there, and I didn’t want to freak them out. And you were so...happy, you know? I thought maybe I imagined it, or it was just some bayou spirit playing games. Or maybe I’m just losing it already, from the hormones.”

He lifted my chin with one finger until I looked at him. “You are not losing it. You are the bravest person I know. But if something is out there, you must tell me. I would have chased it down?—”

“I know.” I pressed my lips together. “Which is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you. I couldn’t ruin the day. And I was okay.” I hoped I was okay. I still felt so strange.

He sighed, not angry, just concerned. “I understand. But next time, even if you think it is nothing, tell me. Please. I do not like that you were alone with that.”

I nodded, fighting the burn in my eyes. “I promise.”

He wrapped me tighter in his arms, rocking us both. “Tell me everything,” he says. “How did it feel? Where did it come from?”

I walked him through everything I remembered: the pressure, the cold, the voices arguing, the single word—“prenze”—that stuck in my head. I tried to imitate the sound, the cadence, but it felt silly out loud.

He listened, thoughtful, then says, “I don’t know the word. It is not from any tongue I have heard. But maybe one of the Guard would know. They know many of the

creatures in the bayou. Or maybe someone in your family might know. Could it be a magic word?" He kisses my forehead. "Tomorrow, we will find out."

I leaned into him, letting the porch and the night settle around us. "Why would it focus on me? I feel like whenever anything strange happens, it's because of me."

"You are powerful, Mally." He said it so simply, so matter-of-factly, that I almost believe it. "That's why you are a focus of those who want power. But our family working together is even more powerful. Untouchable."

The words settle in my bones, and I wanted to believe that.

We cuddled like that a long time, sharing the silence and the peace.

Finally, Etienne says, "We should sleep. Tomorrow will be busy."

Tomorrow was going to be very busy. All our families would be here and we'd share our wonderful news—if my mother hadn't already spilled the beans. She might not want to be called, "Granny," but she couldn't want to be a grandmother. I finished my tea and follow him inside, feeling a little calmer. Etienne had that ability. To convince me everything would be fine.

Whatever's coming, we'll face it together.

I just hope it's enough.

## Chapter Six

Today was supposed to be a simple, happy day. Etienne and I had opted to invite our family to the house for a brunch—our family party to share the news about the baby. It wasn't difficult to plan on such short notice, because aside from Victoria having a

regular day job as a doctor, all my other family members had pretty flexible schedules. So, a Tuesday morning gathering was great for everyone. Even Victoria as it turned out. Of course, she already knew the big news, having diagnosed my condition.

Diagnose and condition sounded so ominous when applied to a pregnancy, but there it was.



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I was determined to look stylish and put together. I pinned the last stubborn black lock of hair in place with a cute barrette, then stood back, and surveyed the results. The hairstyle was somewhere between “timeless Parisian waif” and “that girl who gets turned into a bat in the second act of a Tim Burton movie.” Not bad, honestly. I paired it with my favorite sundress—black lace over violet satin, punky but still breezy enough for the bayou heat.

In the mirror, my skin looked marginally less green than yesterday. Maybe pregnancy agreed with me after all. Or maybe it was the rose gold sparkle in my cheeks, a side effect of using magical setting spray made by my little sister, Iris. “Stay bright all night,” the bottle promised. Apparently, it worked in the daytime too.

The house was quiet, which was rare enough to be unnerving. Etienne, Hugo, and Lisette had left at the crack of dawn to pick up the bakery order for today’s event. The only sound now was the distant, plaintive croak of a frog and, faintly, the click-whir of the ancient air conditioning unit struggling against the Louisiana summer.

I padded barefoot to the kitchen, guided by the unyielding, primal urge to eat every fifteen minutes or else die. My mother’s text, sent at 7:01 a.m., blinked on my phone: “Remember to eat something light before the party. No seafood, no MSG, and for the love of God, no pickles.”

I rolled my eyes but opened the fridge. The family would want a proper “New Orleans Sunday brunch,” which meant our kitchen would soon be filled with enough food to host a minor United Nations summit. We’d ordered two shrimp and andouille frittata, three types of quiche—one with mushrooms for Violet, one with only cheese for the kids, and two with a combination of meats for the wolf-y family

members—trays of pastries, several bags of Beignets, and lots of lots of chicory coffee.

But that wasn't what I wanted—a least at the moment. I wanted white bread and peanut butter and maybe a banana on top if I could stomach the smell. This was the only thing that consistently took the edge off the constant queasiness. I turned on the kettle for some tea, then slathered a piece of bread with peanut butter. I perched on a kitchen stool and ate it while scrolling through texts from my sisters.

The sun slanted in through the kitchen windows. I watched the dust motes float and thought about how, by this afternoon, the house would be filled with a stampede of relatives—half of them Dubois, half of them Jourdain, with a smattering of guests from Etienne's pack and the witchy set of New Orleans. I was determined to be the picture of composure, or at least to avoid vomiting on the shoes of any of my guests.

I was so deep in my planning fugue I didn't notice anything wrong at first. It started with little things: the spoon I'd set on the counter was gone. The tea kettle, which I distinctly remembered turning on, was on the wrong burner and the stove top was still cold. My favorite mug, one I used every morning, was nowhere to be found.

I rolled my eyes at my own lack of focus. I'd heard people say that pregnancy brain was real, and apparently, I was discovering this firsthand. I opened the fridge to get out the milk, only to discover my mug in one of the crisper drawers, nestled among the salad fixings.

I pulled out the mug and started at it. "This is going to be a long pregnancy if I'm doing absentminded stuff like this in the first trimester."

I'd spoken to myself, since I was alone in the kitchen, but I could have sworn I heard a whispered response behind me.

I whipped around, expecting Jocko to be out of his fishbowl or perched on the kitchen faucet with a cigar and a rude joke, but he was nowhere to be seen. The kitchen was empty. The hallway beyond was bathed in lazy morning light, but the air suddenly felt loaded, the way it does right before a thunderstorm.

I shook it off and went to the window above the sink. There, on the narrow sill, should have been the little dish I use to hold my wedding rings while I'm cleaning. I'd taken them off last night after scrubbing down the kitchen in anticipation of today's onslaught. But the dish was empty. The rings were gone.

I checked the counter. I checked the dish again. I checked my own hands, even though I knew they weren't there. I made a circuit of the kitchen, then doubled back and checked the sink and the little ledge under the window where weird things always collect, like flower petals and dead bugs. Nothing. The rings were missing, and with them, the tiny, delicate silver thumb ring that Etienne's daughter Lisette gave me for Mother's Day.

I again told myself it was just the baby brain. But something about the empty dish made my skin crawl. I tried to retrace my steps: I'd definitely put them there last night, after dinner, right before going to bed. I could even picture the way they caught the light, how the rose gold of my engagement ring sparkled.

I bent over to check under the windowsill, but my knee crashed into something solid and hard. I yelped and looked down. On the floor, right next to my foot, sat a garden gnome.

A garden gnome.

He wore a pointy red hat and had a beard painted the color of driftwood. His expression was weirdly vacant, and he clutched a tiny, glittery fishing rod with the hook aimed directly at my toes. There was no reason for a garden gnome to be in my

kitchen. Not on the floor. Not at all.

I picked it up, feeling the weight of it. It was solid resin, painted carefully by hand. There was no price tag or shop sticker, but the bottom of the base was slick with dust. I examined it, turning it over in my hands. The hat had a tiny chip near the brim, exposing off-white underneath. The beard was perfectly detailed.

Had the kids brought this in as a prank? I doubted it. Hugo would have stuck it on my pillow or left it somewhere more “hilarious,” like in the toilet. And Lisette would have asked permission first, then written a poem about it. Etienne? Funny fact, he hated gnomes. Something about them being “tricksters of the garden realm.”

I set the gnome on the counter and opened the nearest cupboard, wondering if my rings had rolled or bounced into a cup or bowl. I moved aside three mismatched mugs, a jar of honey, and my secret stash of Halloween candy. No rings. No clues. Just the silent, mocking presence of the gnome, staring up at me with its glazed blue eyes.

I took a step back, trying to get perspective. Maybe I’d grabbed the rings last night and brought them upstairs.

I was about to check when a soft, measured knock came at the back door. I jumped, knocking over a box of baking soda, which detonated all over the black-and-white tile. I brushed the powder off my knees, then peeked around the corner.

Thea Dubois, my mother-in-law, stood on the porch, her smile practiced, but her eyes warm. She had a knack for looking both regal and approachable all at once. She wore a crisp linen dress in pale gray, and her hair was pinned into an elegant knot that looked professionally executed. She carried a cake box in one hand and a mysterious brown paper parcel in the other.

I opened the door, very glad to see her. “Good morning. You’re early.”

Thea’s smile was subtle but sincere. “I prefer to arrive before the chaos.” She swept into the kitchen, immediately clocking the mess of baking soda, the absence of children, and the garden gnome on the counter. “Is that new?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before in my life.”

She set down her boxes and tilted her head at the gnome. “It’s very... quaint.” She brushed a speck of baking soda from her sleeve and looked around. “Where is everyone?”

“Etienne took the kids to pick up the rest of the food. They’ll be back soon.” I hesitated, then decided to just ask: “Have you ever seen a gnome like this before? In the family? I mean, is it...some kind of Dubois tradition?”

Thea smiled, eyeing the figurine again. “Not that I recall. I never cared for them.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Are you alright? You seem a bit... out of sorts.”

I debated telling her about the strange vibes around here this morning, but again, decided it must just be me. “Just a little hungry. Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“Please,” she said, settling onto a stool. “Earl Grey, if you have some.”

I reached for the tea tin, only to find it wasn't there. Thea watched me fumble with a bemused expression. Then I spotted the tin on the other side of the stove. I guess I could have moved it there.

“Is everything ready for the party?” she asked, graciously choosing to ignore my flustered confusion

“Almost,” I said. “I just have to set out plates and make sure there's ice for the drinks.”

She regarded me for a moment, her eyes kind and concerned. “If you need help, just ask.”

I nodded, then tried to focus on making tea, but my eyes kept sliding back to the gnome on the counter. I checked the windowsill again, half-expecting the rings to have magically reappeared, but no luck.

Thea followed my gaze, then said, “Did you lose something?”

I sighed, defeated. “My wedding rings. I took them off to clean last night, and now they’re gone.”

Thea got up and walked over to the windowsill. She peered at the empty dish, then at the gnome. “You’re certain you put them here?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “I remember it. They were right there.”

Thea was quiet for a moment, then reached out and picked up the gnome. She inspected it carefully, then turned to me. “When I was a little girl, my grandmother told me that gnomes sometimes steal shiny things. To add to their treasure hoards.”

I laughed, mostly out of relief that I wasn’t the only one who found this all a little bizarre. “So, you think the gnome took them?”

She shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

That was an understatement in my world. The kettle whistled and I poured hot water into two mugs.

Thea set the gnome back on the counter, then walked over to the sugar bowl, which she opened with a delicate twist. I handed her one of the mugs and a spoon. She started to ladle a dash of sugar into the cup, when she paused, frowning into the sugar bowl. Then very carefully she fished around inside the porcelain container. A moment later, she held up the spoon. My rings sat in the center of the utensil.

She wiped them off on a napkin and handed them over. “Sugar helps keep the shine,” she said, completely deadpan.

I slipped the rings back onto my finger, the metal warm and reassuring against my skin. “Thank you. I’m starting to feel like I’m losing my mind.”

Thea finished preparing her tea—unfazed by my rings being in the sugar, then said, “I’ve done crazier things.”

I appreciated her playing off the situation.

She sipped her tea, then added, “If you’d like, I can take the gnome home with me. Or we can move it outside. Some say it’s bad luck to keep a gnome indoors.”

I looked at the figurine, then at her. “Let’s put it on the porch. Maybe it’ll scare off any other weird magic.”

Thea nodded, her face unreadable. “I think that’s wise.”

Together, we carried the gnome outside and set it on the porch rail, where it could stare balefully at the driveway and whatever else lurked in the bayou beyond.

I closed the door and tried to shake off the sense of being watched, but it lingered, like the memory of a dream you can’t quite remember. I told myself it was just the baby, the stress, the coming storm of family and food and emotion. But as I poured myself another cup of tea, I noticed the faintest trace of sugar dust on the rim of the wedding ring, sparkling in the light.

I washed my hands. I must have done that. Or maybe Hugo or Lisette did it as a joke. Or even Jocko could be the culprit. A drunken joke or something. Any of those explanations made a lot more sense than a prankster gnome.

The doorbell rang for the first time at precisely 10:30, exactly as scheduled on my color-coded digital family calendar. My eldest sister, Violet, never deviated from a plan unless forced at gunpoint, and even then, she’d probably negotiate a five-minute grace period. Her “arriving now” text landed a full sixty seconds before the bell even rang.



“Hey,” Violet said, brushing a kiss across my cheek. “You look amazing. Is that a new dress?”

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I gave her a twirl, risking that the fringe might knock over the umbrella stand. “It’s vintage. Goth-lite for Sunday brunch.”

“I love it. Is Etienne back yet?”

“Nope. Still out with the kids.”

Tristan greeted his mother with a kiss on her cheek.

She touched her son’s cheek, a constant look of mild concern in her eyes. “How are you both?”

Tristan gave her a reassuring smile, which almost made me feel bad. The poor guy had been possessed by a demon only six months ago, courtesy of Etienne’s deranged ex-wife, and the aftershocks lingered. “Can I get you some coffee or tea?”

“I can’t get it,” Tristan told her, moving to pour two cups of coffee.

“Mom’s not here yet?” Violet asked, accepting the coffee from her husband.

“She’ll be fashionably late. Or she is here and in my garden, inspecting my handiwork.”

My mother was a green witch who took her calling very seriously. She couldn’t pass a garden without stopping to take a look.

Violet snorted.

Another knock sounded at the front door, louder this time, as though the visitor had no fear of waking the dead. Iris's voice followed, muffled but unmistakable: "I brought mimosas and also something that's not a mimosa, but is just as dangerous!"

I met her at the door. My second sister was a whirl of lemon-yellow sundress, messy curls, and an aura of barely-suppressed chaos. She carried a carton of eggs under one arm and a suspiciously heavy brown paper bag under the other. Behind her came Marcel, Etienne's brother, looking as though he'd just rolled out of bed but in a way that still managed to be absurdly attractive. He and Iris had been together less than a year, and sometimes I still couldn't believe the universe had brought them together. They seemed like an unlikely couple, but they definitely suited each other.

"Hey,," Iris said, hugging me so tightly she nearly knocked the air from my lungs. "Do you want orange juice or a hair of the dog?"

I hugged her back, then did a double take. "What happened to your wrist?"

Iris shrugged. "I was doing a spell and got bitten by a frog. But you should see the frog."

"Don't let her kid you, Marcel said, carrying several bottles of champagne. He gave me a sly smile. "The frog got away. Good morning, Mally."

Iris nudged him with a shoulder, then assured me, "Only because I let him."

I smiled back. "Come in. Make yourself at home."

I led them to the kitchen, where the air was already perfumed with coffee and the low hum of conversation.

I was halfway through making more drinks when Iris gasped and pointed at the

window above the sink. “Oh my god, how many garden gnomes do you have out there?”

I blinked. “Just the one, I think.” I peered out the window and froze.

Outside, on the side lawn, at least a dozen garden gnomes lined the edge of the bayou’s weedy shoreline like tiny, pointy-hatted sentries. Each one was different: one lounged on a mushroom, another held a lantern, a third was mid-fishing with a line trailing into the birdbath. A few of them had expressions that could charitably be called “mischievous.” One even seemed to be flipping the bird, which was a touch I actually appreciated.

I leaned over the counter to get a better look, certain I hadn’t lost my mind. “I swear those were not there last night.”

Iris giggled. “Did you get gnome-bombed? You know, like when people flock your yard with plastic flamingos, but with gnomes?”

Violet came over and looked. “That’s a lot of gnomes.”

I turned to Thea. “Were there gnomes when you got here?”

I already knew the answer.

She considered. “I only saw the one that we put on the porch. Perhaps they...multiplied?”

“Not funny,” I said, but then started laughing. It was either that or scream.

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Tristan, ever the polite guest, offered, “Maybe it’s a local custom? Good luck for new beginnings?”

I let the suggestion hang in the air, not wanting to be rude. I wiped my hands on my dress, decided to face the situation head-on, and slipped out the front door.

The heat hit me first—already steamy at eleven in the morning. The grass was soft, almost spongy, beneath my bare feet. The gnomes were arranged in two neat rows, facing each other, as though they were about to march in a tiny, terracotta parade.

I stooped and picked up one. It had a sunflower hat and a gap-toothed grin. I inspected it, looking for a tag or note or some clue, but found nothing. There were faint scratches on the base, as though it had lived outdoors for years. I set it back down and surveyed the lineup. There were more gnomes by the mailbox. A few clustered around the roots of a big cypress tree. Another peered out from behind the azaleas with what I could only describe as malice.

I felt the prickling on my skin again—the sensation of being observed. I spun, expecting to see a neighbor or, god forbid, the “Gnome Bomber” in the act, but the lawn was empty. Even the air felt hushed, as though the gnomes themselves were holding their breath.

The driveway gravel crunched behind me. Etienne was back, accompanied by Hugo and Lisette, each balancing boxes of pastry like precious cargo. Guy, the youngest Dubois brother, followed with a tray of deviled eggs and the demeanor of someone who considered pranks to be a form of high art.

“Wow,” Guy said, whistling as he eyed the gnomes. “I didn’t know you had a thing for lawn ornaments, Mally.”

“I do not have a thing for lawn ornaments,” I said, a little too loudly.

Hugo set down his box and inspected the nearest gnome. “Can I have one for my room?”

“We’ll see,” I said vaguely even though I had no intention of keeping any of these creepy things.

Lisette looked at the lineup and wrinkled her nose. “Some of them are staring at each other.”

Etienne’s brow furrowed as he took in the scene. “This is new,” he said, clearly confused too. He turned to me. “Did you order these?”

“No,” I replied. “They just... showed up.”

Guy picked up a particularly lewd gnome, who was mooning the mailbox, and burst out laughing. “This one’s got some attitude. Maybe the pack sent them as a joke?”

Etienne shrugged. “Possible.”

I looked at him, searching for reassurance, but he just looked bemused. “Should we move them?” I asked.

He considered. “Let’s leave them for now. Maybe someone will come claim them after the party. If not, we can compost them.”

Guy howled. “You’re going to turn the gnomes into mulch? That’s cold, even for

you.”

“They’re not real,” Etienne said. “Besides, I’m not a fan.”

“I agree,” I said. “I just find them...unsettling.”

Hugo tugged at my hand. “They’re funny, though. Can I hide one in the guest bathroom?”

I sighed. “Just don’t let it fall in the toilet.”

He grinned, which was always dangerous. “No promises.”

I gathered up the family, steered everyone inside, and tried to refocus on the impending brunch and our announcement. I couldn’t believe our big news was being upstaged by lawn ornaments.

Soon, my mother and JR as well as my stepbrothers, Ghede and Sam, joined the group. The house was suddenly filled with noise and warmth and the yeasty aroma of baked goods, and for a brief moment, I managed to forget about the gnomes entirely.

I was surprised to see that even Sue, my mentor, had come of the brunch. She rarely left the bayou, which was evident by the dirty housedress she wore and the bits of leaves she had clinging to her snared gray hair.

But I truly adored the gruff old lady.

“I’m glad you made it here today,” I said, offering her a cup of coffee.

She ignored it and snagged a mimosa and a beignet off the dining room table. “I wouldn’t miss it. It isn’t every day we get to celebrate a new baby.”

Her loud announcement caused the crowded and noisy dining room to fall utterly silent.



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“A baby?” Thea said, her eyes wide.

“Mommy is having a baby,” Lisette said, clasping my hand, her face alight. I could tell she was thrilled and relieved the secret was out.

Suddenly the room was filled with joyous chatter. I was being repeatedly hugged as was Etienne. Thanks to Sue, it wasn’t announced exactly as Etienne and I had planned, but somehow it was still absolutely perfect.

“I’m going to be an auntie,” Iris beamed.

“And I’m going to be a grandmother again,” Thea said, her eyes wide and suspiciously watery. She hugged Etienne, then hugged me tighter. “I couldn’t be happier.”

“I’ll be happier if it’s a boy,” Hugo said flatly.

Everyone laughed.

The brunch continued, everyone happy and festive. But every now and then, when I glanced out the window, I swore the gnomes’ painted eyes followed me from room to room, as though they were waiting for something.

## Chapter Seven

Everyone had eaten their fill of delicious food and had now moved out to the porch to enjoy the day. Even the weather seemed to be cooperating to create the perfect event.

A lovely breeze wafted through the air and even the humidity seemed to be behaving.

“What a wonderful day,” my mother sighed, leaning her head on JR’s shoulder as they lounged on the wicker settee, taking in the view.

It really was. I glanced at the gnomes, still visible from the porch. Well, except for them.

“Those gnomes are so freaking weird though,” Iris said as if reading my mind.

“It must be a neighbor’s prank,” Etienne said, ever the optimist. “I bet it was a J-Team.”

The J-Team was a group of teenage nutria Shifter brothers, who often helped out Etienne with intel and security. But they were teens and enjoyed playing pranks. It honestly was a good theory. And one I wanted to believe because it made the gnomes sudden appearance much less eerie.

I was about to agree when Jocko piped up from his fishbowl, waving what had to be his seventh mimosa in the air. “They are witches’ gnomes. Look at the hats.”

I squinted again. I didn’t know what witches’ gnomes would be exactly, but the hats did look witchlike.

“Should we... move them?” I suggested, not sure I wanted to touch them.

“Non,” said Jocko. “They’re like tiny bombs. If you move them, they explode in your face.”

Etienne snorted. “You are thinking of grenades.”

Jocko shook his head. “No, I am thinking of gnomes. You have not seen the old country.”

Here we go with this old-world thing again. What was this couyan crustacean even talking about? Although I was pretty sure it was the champagne talking.

I put the gnomes out of my mind, or tried to, as the conversation moved to more pleasant things like baby names and ideas for nursery décor.

“I think I will go with yellows,” I said about the baby’s room.

“Greens are nice too,” my mother said, ever the Green witch.

“I can’t believe you aren’t going to go with black and grays,” Ghede said since he loved to tease me about my pixie-goth aesthetic.

“With pops of red,” Sam added.

“Remember when Mally painted her whole room black,” Iris said with a laugh.

“I was going through some teenage angst,” I said, defending my choices.

“You were the most upbeat goth I ever met,” Violet said in her usual way of defending me.

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Suddenly everyone grew quiet. Something in the air had changed, and we all felt it. The world seemed to shimmer. The sky above the cypress trees began to ripple, then a rip in the air erupted, showering the lawn in a cascade of gold glitter, rainbow confetti, and about a hundred pairs of metallic sunglasses. A motorcycle with a sidecar studded with rhinestones and blaring the theme from “Miami Vice,” shot out of the rift. Four Nosferatu lookalikes were crammed in the sidecar. And driving the bike was Baba Yaga, herself.

She wore a pink leather catsuit, fingerless gloves, and shoulder pads so severe they could have doubled as weaponry. Her hair was teased into a frosted explosion of 80s volume, and her eyes were shielded by diamond-studded Wayfarers. She threw both arms wide as the bike crashed through the line of garden gnomes, scattering them like bowling pins. The minions toppled out of the sidecar, spinning over the lawn like a breakdance circle in the grass, each moving with an angular, unnatural grace.

Baba Yaga dismounted as the motorcycle slid into the bayou, the music dying gurgling, watery death. She clapped her hands as if that was exactly the entrance she’d intended. We all remained silent, stunned. Even the critters of the bayou fell mute, seemingly as shocked as we were.

Baba Yaga scanned the porch, then pointed directly at me. “There she is!” Her voice could have shattered glassware. “The most important witch of the decade! The hope for the future!” She began to walk toward me, somehow making the act of walking feel like a royal procession, every step sequined and deliberate.

I tried to think of something to say, but Baba Yaga’s presence always made my brain seize up. She had a way of making everyone feel like they were being graded.

She stopped in front of me, snapped her sunglasses off with a whip-like flick, and gave me a once-over. “You look... radiant. Like a mortician on vacation, but radiant.”

I stood and curtsied, which I regretted instantly, but she seemed to approve. “Thank you. Welcome to our home.”

“I couldn’t miss this celebration” Baba Yaga declared, then pulled me into a hard, perfumed hug that left my nose full of Chanel No. 5 and Aqua Net. She released me, then gestured for Etienne to come over.

“This,” she said, making a grand sweeping motion, “is the man. The Rougarou Prince who had the foresight to see the importance of a truce between the witches and the Rougarous,” She sized up Etienne, who had the good grace to look a little intimidated. “You keep her happy. If you don’t, I’ll turn you into a poodle.”

He bowed slightly. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The crowd, which had started to unfreeze, murmured approval and a few nervous laughs.

Baba Yaga turned to the assembled witches, Rougarous, and miscellaneous magicals. “Everyone! This is a most sacred union. And now, a new child to unite our people forever! May this baby have the strength of the Rougarou, the wit of the witch, and the charisma of—” she paused, then raised a single manicured eyebrow— “well, myself, obviously.”

Iris and Violet started a slow clap, and even the Dubois brothers barked approval. Baba Yaga held her arms wide, and everyone surged in for a group hug that was more awkward than spiritual, but it did the trick. Suddenly, we were one big, slightly dysfunctional family.

Then Baba Yaga broke the huddle, turned on her spiky heel, and took a out held package from one of her bobbling minions. “A gift!” she bellowed. “For the baby.”

I accepted it with a bow. The wrapping was silver lamé and tied with VHS tape. I peeled it open to reveal a set of miniature leg warmers in neon colors, a pacifier shaped like a microphone, and a tiny “Members Only” jacket.

“It’s for a girl or a boy,” she said. “Gender is so last century.”

I nearly choked up. “Thank you. This is amazing.”

She nodded, deeply satisfied. Then she spotted the garden gnomes, which were still spread all over the yard.

Baba Yaga’s smile vanished. “Who brought those?”

Everyone shrugged, except Jocko, who pointed at the nearest gnome and said, “They brought themselves.”

Baba Yaga snapped her fingers and three minions immediately tackled the the lone, still standing gnome, wrestling it to the ground, which seemed like an unnecessary and ridiculous show of force since it was an inanimate object.

“This is not good,” the bedazzled head witch said. “Not good at all.”

She knelt by the gnome, examining it with professional detachment. “These are surveillance gnomes. They scout for witches, but they never come on their own. They are being controlled. Someone wants to keep an eye on you.”

She looked at me, then at Etienne. “Be careful. There’s trouble brewing.”

Etienne nodded, all humor vanishing from his face. “Is there something we should do?”

Baba Yaga thought for a moment, then barked, “Gather all the gnomes. Now.”

The minions swept through the yard, collecting every last gnome and tossing them into a pile.

“That’s right,” Jocko cheered, waving his mimosa wildly.

When the last gnome was accounted for, Baba Yaga produced a tube of glitter glue, a bag of rock salt, and a bottle of Old Spice.

“Stand back,” she said to her minions. The rest of us were already keeping our distance.

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She poured a ring of salt around the pile, then drizzled glitter glue in a complicated pattern. She uncapped the Old Spice, dabbed a little on each wrist, and then spritzed the gnomes liberally, chanting a spell under her breath that seemed to be sung to the tune of a Journey song.

The gnomes vibrated slightly, then fell totally still. I could suddenly sense they were truly just lifeless ornaments now.

“There,” Baba Yaga said, brushing her hands off. “That should hold them. But after the moon rises, you need to take them out to the bayou and toss them in. Good riddance.”

I wanted to ask what exactly would happen if we didn’t, but she was already corralling her minions clearly preparing for their departure.

She turned once more, fixing me with her electric blue gaze. “You did good, Mally. Never doubt yourself. And if you ever need a babysitter, don’t call me. But do keep in touch.”

I saluted. She returned it, then signaled her minions. She snapped her fingers and they all vanished, leaving behind a trail of sparkle, synthetic hair, and the lingering echo of “Like a Virgin” in the air.

The rest of the party was anticlimactic after Baba Yaga’s exit. There was cake, and Etienne gave a sweet toast that made me snuffle, and the children did a water-balloon relay that ended with Jocko winning by sheer, vicious cunning. The sun set, the bug zappers hummed, and for a few hours, everything was as it should be.



I stood at the edge of the yard, holding Etienne's hand and looking out over the bayou.

"Ready to face whatever comes next?" Etienne asked.

"With you?" I grinned. "Bring it on."

The garden gnomes sat silent. But I didn't feel watched anymore. Just a little bit... protected.

Inside the house, I heard the clink of plates and the whir of the dishwasher. Violet, Iris, and Etienne's mother Thea had refused to leave, claiming they wanted to "help tidy up" but in reality just wanted to keep a close eye on me. I appreciated their concern. The gnomes were no longer a threat, but Baba Yaga had confirmed someone was out there, watching us.

Etienne and his brothers left as soon as the moon was high in the sky. The four of them, plus half the Rougarou Guard, had fanned out through the bayou, both to get rid of the gnomes, but also to look for the one who sent them. Whether it was witches, rougarous, or some third, unspeakable thing, no one could say.

Jocko, who had partaken from any liquor that was available. was in a bloated, drunken stupor. "They are not just gnomes, you know," he slurred, eye stalks swiveling toward me. "They are spies. They listen."

"Thanks, buddy," I said. "Sleep it off."

I rocked in my rocker, the rhythmic sway making me sleepy. Inside, I could hear my sisters and Thea talking and laughing. I let my head fall back against the back of my chair. I closed my eyes, drifting a little.

That's when I heard it—the whispers.

At first I thought it was just the wind, or maybe a neighbor's TV. But it was close, right by my ear, and it said: "Prenze. Brenze." The syllables stung the air, sharp as a wasp.

I tried to shake it off, but my body refused to move. It wasn't just sleep paralysis—it was as if invisible hands had wrapped my arms and legs, cinching tighter and tighter. I tried to call out for help, but my mouth filled with the taste of potting soil and sugar.

Somewhere below me, Jocko was thrashing, his claws scrabbling at the side of his bowl. He managed a low, strangled, "Merde," before he passed out—I hope he only passed out and bobbed on the top of the water.

I tried to turn my head, desperate to see what was happening, but my body wouldn't obey. Only my eyes darted, frantic, searching for rescue.

Through the front window, I glimpsed of Violet, Iris, and Thea clearing the dining room table, their faces haloed by the yellow warmth of the chandelier. None of them looked my way. None of them noticed the shadow gliding silently across the floor behind them.

My rocker jerked violently, slamming me back into awareness. A shape was standing over me. For a moment I thought it was Etienne, but the shape was wrong—shorter, stubbier, with a beard like a sopping mop and a hat the color of old bubble gum.

A gnome. Not a ceramic statue, but a living, breathing, evil-eyed gnome.

He bared his teeth, which were tiny and perfectly white, and pressed a pudgy finger to his lips: "Shhh."

The world spun. I was off the rocker, dragged across the porch and into the dark. I tried to fight, to thrash, but my body only shuddered weakly. Every muscle was jellied, every nerve screaming.

The gnome rolled me onto my back and leaned over my face. His eyes glowed pink and cold. I could smell the synthetic resin, even though he moved like a living being.

He pressed a pudgy finger to his lips.

I tried to scream again, but the gnome clamped my mouth shut with a palm as soft as velvet and as strong as a bench vise.

“You will be fine, my girl,” he said. His accent was pure New Orleans, the kind of twang you get from a lifetime of chicory and mischief.

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A shadow detached itself from the darkness, sliding up next to the gnome. It was human-shaped, but wrong—made of the same stuff as the shadows from my earlier dream. It hissed and whispered to the gnome, the two voices clashing in my head, the words overlapping in a blur of pain.

They said: “Take her.”

I tried to fight, to reach for my magic, but my body was locked in a vise of pure electricity. My magic sparked, then fizzled, as if every conduit in me had been unplugged.

“Sorry,” the gnome said, its smile suddenly kind. “It is not personal. You must sleep.”

A cold hand pressed to my forehead. A thousand memories flashed behind my eyes—my sisters, my mother, Etienne’s laugh, the promise of the baby growing inside me. Then all the colors bled out, and the world went white.

The last thing I saw, as I slid into the void, was Jocko’s tiny black eyes fixed on me, wide and scared, and the word “Prenze” echoing through my head like a curse.

Then nothing.

### Chapter Eight

When I came to, it was not with the gentle return of consciousness that a heroine deserves, but with the sensation of my brain being pressure-washed from the inside

by a firehose of seltzer. I blinked, and the room swam around me, every edge wriggling in and out of focus.

For a brief, hopeful moment, I thought maybe I was dead, and this was a particularly trashy version of heaven. Every surface in the room was aggressively gold—golden wallpaper, golden bedspread, even the faint sunlight leaking in through heavy, brocade curtains looked jaundiced. The air was thick with the scent of something powdery and overly fragrant. I tried to move, but the best I could manage was a feeble twitch of my pinky.

I catalogued my bodily sensations. Arms and legs: attached, but uncooperative. Stomach: sour, clenched. Baby: hopefully safe and sound. I felt a shudder in my gut and, for a moment, worried I was about to throw up in a stranger's four-poster bed, but the sensation passed. I wiggled my toes experimentally. They worked. Promising.

Memory returned in a slow, sickening drip: the brunch, the gnomes, Baba Yaga's show stopping entrance, the abduction. The last thing I remembered was the garden gnome pressing a hand over my mouth and the words "Prenze. Brenze." crackling in my ear like static. Now I was here, somewhere, presumably still alive but demoted to the role of unwilling damsel.

A man sat in the chair beside the bed, watching me with a smile that split the difference between used car salesman and gameshow host. At first, I thought maybe I'd been rescued, and I prayed this distorted image next to me was just Etienne in a bad light. Then my vision sharpened enough to confirm it was Linden Lowell, the guy who'd wanted to date me since fifth grade, now all grown up and uglier than ever.

He had never been attractive—unless your type was orc-homely warlock hybrid with an overbite you could dock a steamboat on. But he currently wore it with smug confidence. His hair was slicked back into a helmet of brown, and his big, slightly

pointed ears stuck out like sails.

“Mally Jordain,” he said, and I shuddered at hearing my maiden name said out loud. “You’re awake. That’s excellent. I was getting worried you’d miss your own wedding.”

I attempted to roll my eyes, but they felt as if someone had lined the sockets with sandpaper. I made a sound, halfway between a groan and an accusation.

He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and regarded me with the patience of a man waiting for a soufflé to rise. “You might be disoriented. Oonagh said you would be. She’s a miracle worker, that one.” He shook his head admiringly. “But it should all come back to you soon.”

I moved my mouth, trying to tell him to eat my shorts, but my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth like a stamp.

“Water,” I croaked.

He produced a bottle from the side table—sparkling, because of course—and unscrewed the cap with an exaggerated flourish. He held it to my lips. “Small sips. You don’t want to choke.”

The water tasted like actual heaven—and I didn’t even like sparkling water. I drank greedily, even as the humiliation of being bottle-fed by this jackass burned hotter than my thirst.

He wiped my chin, using his sleeve. “That’s better. Now, you’re probably wondering where you are, and why.”

He waited, clearly enjoying the moment. I gave him my best death stare, which

usually was pretty good, but in this position, I wasn't sure."

He smiled wider. "We're at Oonagh and Silver's estate."

Estate? I wanted to shout that this house was directly across the street from my parents' house. And while a nice house, it was not an estate. But it did make me feel less frightened to realize I was so close to my family. Of course, that would do me little good if I couldn't move.

"And most importantly, impregnable to scrying and magical detection." He reached out and tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. I recoiled, or tried to, but my head just lolled toward him like a malfunctioning marionette.

"Don't touch me," I slurred—sort of.

He ignored the warning, if he even understood it, and patted my shoulder, letting his hand linger a shade too long. "There's no point in fighting it. The spell will wear off soon, but you're safe here. No one can hurt you."

I snorted, which made my head pound.

He gave me a look of profound disappointment, as if I'd let him down personally. "I know you are upset right now, but you'll see I'm doing you a favor. I'm saving you from all those brutes and monsters and—" He paused. "Well, your 'husband.'" He made air quotes with his fingers, which was impressive considering he still wore three rings per hand.

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I tried to look down at my body, willing myself to move. It don't work, and I groaned in pure frustration.

Linden sighed, theatrically. "We're going to be married, Mally. You, me, and the baby will have every advantage. You don't know what the others have planned for you. For your child." He shook his head, then leaned in closer. "Oonagh is preparing the memory adjustment as we speak. By tomorrow morning, you'll remember nothing except how much you love me. And you'll be free of all that unpleasantness."

Something inside me snapped. Words came out, albeit sounding like a drunk hopped up on Novocain. "You're telling me you kidnapped a pregnant woman to marry her? That's a new level of desperation, even for you, Linden."

He frowned, then seemed to understand what I'd slurred out. He laughed, delighted. "You always did have a sharp tongue. I love that about you." His eyes softened.

Gross.

I tried to sit up, but my arms buckled beneath me. "You can't do this. Etienne will kill you."

Linden's smile faded, replaced by a look of pity. "That's where you're wrong, Mally. There is no Etienne. Not for you. You'll forget him, and everyone else. And we will move away to start our life together."

He leaned in, lowering his voice. "Oonagh is a master. She's done this a thousand times. You'll be the perfect wife."



Thousands of times. That seemed unlikely. But once would be one time too many.

I felt my pulse thud in my neck. The thought of forgetting Etienne—my whole life, my children, my family—made me want to scream. Instead, I gritted my teeth and forced a smile. “You’re forgetting something, Linden.”

He cocked his head. “What’s that?”

“Witches are very, very hard to reprogram. We are all different.”

He blinked. “Oonagh has accounted for that.”

I looked around the room, taking inventory of my possible weapons. The only sharp object was a crystal vase filled with lilies. The curtains were too heavy to strangle anyone with, and the only other exit was blocked by a wall of spell work so dense I could practically taste the ozone. It didn’t leave me with a lot of options.

“Why me?” I asked, trying to buy time. “You could have had any woman. Why bother with all this?”

He frowned, as if this had never occurred to him. “Because you’re special. You’re the only witch I’ve ever loved.”

Was he serious?

“And this baby—” He gestured to my belly. “This baby is the most magical child—probably ever. Imagine what it will be, with the right parents.”

I laughed, which turned into a coughing fit. “You’re not the right parent, Linden. You’re not even the right species.”

He bristled. “I’m a warlock. A powerful warlock. I’m more than enough. And I’m doing you a favor. Once you forget Etienne and the rest of your so-called family, you’ll thank me.”

I doubted that very much, but I kept it to myself.

He reached out and took my hand, squeezing it with a tenderness that would have made my skin crawl if my nerve endings hadn’t all gone on strike. “Rest up,” he said. “I’ll see you at the altar.”

He stood and straightened his robes, then paused in the doorway, turning back to look at me. “You always look beautiful in candlelight. I asked them to set the ceremony for midnight. Very dramatic.”

He left, and the door clicked shut behind him.

I stared at the ceiling, trying not to panic. I focused on my breath, on saving my baby, on the slow return of feeling to my fingers and toes. Linden might think he had won, but I still had my wits. And maybe, just maybe, my magic.

The lilies trembled in their vase, and a single petal dropped to the floor as I tried to focus my magic. Pitifully as usual.

I didn’t have much time to wallow in self-pity, though. There was a click at the door, and a sliver of light painted the silhouette of Oonagh Licorne—a true b-word of a witch. She glided in, all silver and stiletto, carrying a lacquered tray topped with an ornate teapot and two delicate cups.

“Awake already? Oonagh said, her voice like sugary sweet arsenic. “Good. We like our brides lively.”

She set the tray on the nightstand and poured tea, her motions precise and terrifyingly maternal. Her white blonde hair was swept into an updo so complicated it looked like a wig. Maybe it was. Her dress—no, gown—was black and shimmered with tiny mirrors, throwing flecks of light across the room every time she moved.

She pressed a cup to my lips. “Drink. You’ll need your strength for tonight.”

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I tried to twist my head away, but some of the liquid spilled on my tongue. I tasted floral notes that were laced with a heavy dose of something stronger—maybe belladonna, maybe just sedatives for fun. My mouth tingled as she set the cup aside.

“Really going all out, aren’t you?” I said, glad my speech was coming back. “If this is the bachelorette party, I can’t wait for the honeymoon.”

Scratch that. I did not want to think about that.

She grinned, showing sharp, perfect teeth. “You’ll enjoy it. Linden is very attentive. Once the memory work is done, you’ll hardly remember your previous... attachments.” Her eyes sparkled, and she sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing out a non-existent wrinkle in the coverlet. “The Licorne family is delighted by this union. Your child will be the jewel of our family.”

I glared at her. “What do you mean?”

“Once I reprogram you, you will think Silver and I are your family.”

So gross.

I tried to flex my magic. I focused on my fingertips, willing them to produce even a flicker of rose-gold sparks. At first, nothing. Then, a faint warmth, a shimmer of color—just enough for me to know my power was still in there somewhere, even if it was locked away under a few layers of hostile magic.

“Don’t bother,” Oonagh said, patting my knee. “This suite has held everything from

vampire lords to demons. Your brand of girl power won't crack it."

"Worth a try," I said, managing something between a smirk and a sneer.

The door opened again. Linden breezed in, all cologne and swagger. He shot Oonagh a grateful look, then loomed over me, hands in the deep, billowing sleeves of his robe.

"I hope my bride is feeling better." He tilted his head, surveying me. "You've looked better, but we'll get you fixed up before the ceremony."

Seriously, he was criticizing me when he was wandering around looking like Shrek's less attractive brother in one of Hugh Hefner's smoking jackets. I really wanted to hurt this idiot—and I considered myself pretty nonviolent.

I scanned the room for weapons again. There was a heavy crystal perfume bottle on the nightstand, a book and a unicorn statue. That horn might hurt if I could get my hands on it.

"I'm not marrying you," I croaked.

"I don't think you are in any position to argue," Linden pointed out.

Pretty valid at the moment, but it wasn't going to stop me. If I could buy some time, I was feeling more confident that I could get my magic to work. It had to. "And what did you do to Jocko?"

Linden waved a hand. "Your familiar is fine. A little shaken, maybe, but he'll get over it. As for you...Oonagh is prepping for the wedding as we speak."

"My husband is going to kill you," I said again, with more bravado than I feel.

“Your husband won’t find you,” Oonagh said with a sweet smile. “He’s about to be very busy fighting a war.”

“A war?” I managed to lift my head.

Both Oonagh and Linden nodded, pleased with themselves.

So, I did the only thing I could at that moment, I feigned passing out.

## Chapter Nine

Laying totally motionless and listening to Oonagh and Linden discuss the wedding and their evil genius was nearly impossible. But I managed it, and if I could do that then I should easily be able to get control of my magic.

Finally, they left the room, and I struggled upright on the bed. My body was coming back under my control. Slowly, but surely.

I flung my legs over the edge of the bed and carefully stood. My toes and feet tingled, but it wasn’t too bad. I shuffled around the room, looking for Jocko and also a way to escape.

Finding my familiar proved to be much easier than finding an escape route. Jocko was in the en suite bathroom, still floating unconscious in his bowl. I poked him a few times, and eventually his beady eye blinked open.

“Merde, where am I?” he asked after a few more blinks and a burp.

“We’re at Oonagh and Silver’s.”

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He popped up from his back float. “Why don’t we leave?”

I laughed humorlessly. “Believe me, I’d love to, but we are trapped here.” I explained the whole situation to him.

“Marry Linden?” Jocko said, gagging slightly. “Doesn’t he understand polygamy laws?”

“Apparently not.”

“You have to do some of your magic and get us out of here,” Jocko stated.

“I agree, and I’m trying, but whatever magic Oonagh cast on me is affecting my already wonky magic.” I showed him. My hands sparkled, rosy and gold, then sputtered and died.

“Great,” he muttered.

I nodded in frustrated agreement.

“Maybe you can squeeze me under a door or through a vent or something, and I can make it to Etienne,” Jocko said, rising up on the edge of his bowl, looking around for a place to sneak out.

“You’re a crawfish,” I said, giving him a dubious grimace. “How long do you think it would take you to crawl your way back to St. James Bayou?”

He made a face. “I could just go across the street to your parents.”

“How long would that take?” And he couldn’t exactly dodge traffic with any sort of agility.

“Awhile,” he admitted begrudgingly.

“It’s a possibility,” I said, feeling the need to bolster his ego. He couldn’t help that he was a small crustacean. “But I think we can find a way out.”

“Ah, our little bride is awake.”

I spun to see Silver, Oonagh’s handsome and obedient husband leaning in the doorway. “Just in time for the beautiful ceremony we have arranged for you and your new love.”

“You know he’s not my new, old, or ever love,” I spat at him.

Silver grinned, the curve of his mouth more evil than amused. “But he will be.”

I looked around, spotting a metal nail file in a basket on the bathroom counter. The file would have been more useful to jimmy the bedroom door lock than fight off a unicorn Shifter. But beggars couldn’t be choosers.

I grabbed and waved the small nail tool out in front of me. “Get back. And let us go.”

Silver laughed. “Oh please.” He waved his hand, and his magic darted out of his fingers and swirled around me. My last thought before I passed out yet again, was that unicorn magic smelled just like cotton candy.

When I came to again, I was propped up on a velvet chaise, and, to my utter horror,



wearing a wedding dress. A hideous one. If Tim Burton had a garage sale of rejected costume pieces, and those were then dipped in white paint and sprinkled with dead lilies, you'd have this gown. There were at least three crinolines involved, not to mention tulle sleeves so stiff my arms were lifted out at the sides of my body.

Oonagh herself whirled around the room in a floor-length silver caftan, barking orders at invisible minions and gesturing at linen-wrapped chairs. Linden, meanwhile, floated through the room with the prideful swagger of a man who was convinced he was the main character at his own wedding. Even though the bride was, in this case, a heavily cursed, unwilling participant.

The only person not in motion was Silver, who stood sentry at the door. He wore a suit that looked custom-tailored for a Bond villain. His eyes, the strange licorice-black of the Licorne family line, watched me constantly, unblinking.

“Good, you’re awake!” Oonagh called out, clapping her hands. The sound was sharp as a gunshot. “Let’s see how you look with the veil.”

I struggled upright, limbs slow and shaky from whatever spell had been force on me earlier.

Linden appeared at my side, smiling down with all the smugness of a cat who’d eaten not just the canary but the entire bird store. “Mally, you look beautiful.”

“I look like a ghost that haunts JoAnn Fabrics,” I muttered.

His smile twitched, but did not fade. He took my hand in his, ignoring the fact that I instantly tried to pull away. “You’ll learn to love me.”

“Statistically, that seems unlikely,” I said, trying to focus my thoughts. My head throbbed in time to the fake wedding march playing over the mansion’s sound

system. I was going to vomit, or punch something, or both.

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Oonagh, oblivious, had approached with a bouquet the size of a basketball. She thrust it under my nose. The smell was so sweet it was like huffing straight-up funeral home. “Now, let’s try some makeup. We want you glowing for the wedding photos.”

“I think I’m glowing from rage,” I said, but she was already rummaging through a tackle box filled with lipsticks and eyeshadows in colors not found in nature.

Linden patted my hand, as if I needed comfort. “You’ll thank me for this someday,” he said. “I know how you get. You need direction. A strong hand.”

“Is that what you’ve been telling yourself since our days on the playground? Because that is a long time to be deluding yourself,” I said, and for the first time since waking up, I saw his smile slip.

Silver watched the exchange, his eyes sharp. I wondered why unicorns were always portrayed as whimsical and majestic. He was downright creepy right now. I ignored his intense look.

Instead, I started to focus on my magic. I could feel it, just under my skin. It was sluggish, but it was there. If I could just muster a little more, maybe I could get off one spell—just enough to get out a message to my sisters or mother. I tried a simple beacon spell to alert my mom. She was so close.

My fingers began to tingle, then they sparked with faint, rose-gold light. Oonagh’s head whipped around, a sixth sense for magical misbehavior. Silver was faster. He flicked his wrist and cast a counter-spell so sharp I felt it slap my hand away. The spark snuffed instantly, leaving my nerves raw and aching.

“Nice try, little witch,” Silver said, his voice cold. “But your magic won’t work here.”

“And I always thought you were the nice one,” I muttered at him.

“Power corrupts,” he said simply and eyed my belly. So, he’d bought into the idea that my unborn baby would make them the most powerful witches in our realm. Silver stepped closer, folding his arms. “Try again and I’ll break your fingers,” he said, totally without malice. Just a casual statement of fact.

I nodded, like I understood the rules of this game, and for now I would play along. But I wouldn’t stop looking for loopholes. Or weak points.

“So much for unicorns being all happiness and rainbows,” I grumbled.

That’s when I felt it. The faintest movement, a twitch against my hip. I thought maybe it was a muscle spasm—until the sensation repeated, sharper, like a tiny pinch.

I glanced down and saw a bump wriggling beneath the crinolines of my dress. For a split second, I wondered if Oonagh had sewn a tracker or a bomb or a magical chastity device into the outfit. But then I recognized the telltale pattern of the lump. It was moving up, carefully, expertly. A crustacean’s approach. Jocko.

He must have hitched a ride during the newest abduction, burrowing into the folds of my dress like a tiny, alcoholicstowaway. He had probably played dead, or at least inebriated, while they were moving me here. I was not sure whether to feel grateful or deeply, deeply alarmed.

I angled my body, careful not to draw Silver’s attention, and stuck my hand into the depths of the skirt. Jocko latched onto my finger with both claws, then released and scurried up to the crook of my arm.

“Mon dieu, what kind of mess have you gotten us into now?” he hissed, keeping his antennae low.

I almost cried with relief. “Keep your voice down,” I whispered.

“You look like the corpse bride?”

I glanced over my shoulder at Silver, who was distracted for the moment by Oonagh being unhappy about the placement of the floral arrangements. “We need a distraction. Can you do something?”

Jocko’s eyes narrowed, the black beads gleaming. “You want distraction, I give you distraction. But you owe me three bottles of whiskey and one bag of Zapp’s.”

“Deal. But be careful. They are straight up crazy.”

Jocko clung tighter to my arm, then with a practiced move, shimmied down the sleeve and back into the tulle. “Count to ten. Then be ready to run.”

I nodded, heart hammering. Oonagh returned to me to apply an entire tube of lipstick to my mouth, and now she and Linden were squabbling over where to position the flower arch. Oonagh favored the end of the room, where the morning sun would stream in through the bay window. Linden thought it should be closer to the cake. Silver, meanwhile, was now pacing by the fireplace, eyes darting between me and the other two.

I waited, willing my body to stay still. Nine. Ten.

There was a sharp clatter. The sound of an expensive vase toppling, then the skitter of glass against marble tile.

Oonagh shrieked, “Who did that?!” and both she and Linden ran to see the damage.

Silver turned toward the commotion, just for a second. It was enough. Jocko shot out from under the table and made a beeline for the corner, where he vanished behind the tangle of electrical cords powering the ceremonial archway. I saw a spray of sparks and a puff of smoke as he wreaked havoc with his small claws.

The room’s lights flickered, then all the wedding music stopped at once, replaced by the eerie sound of power failing.

I tried to make a run for the door, but Silver was already at my side, gripping my arm with supernatural strength. “You don’t get another warning,” he said and twisted my wrist just enough to send fire up my nerves.

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I gasped, but didn't cry out. I needed to play this carefully. The element of surprise was gone, but maybe, just maybe, Jocko could do enough damage to buy me a second window.

The lights flickered back on, and the wedding music resumed. Oonagh joined us, face red with rage, and barked, "Don't move until you're called. We'll be starting in five minutes."

Linden came back, fixing his hair in a mirror and blowing me a kiss. "I can't wait, darling."

I shot him a look that would have melted tungsten.

Jocko was gone from view, but I could feel him, somewhere close. Waiting for another opportunity to create chaos.

I waited, my wrists throbbing, dress itching, but my mind clearer than it had been since this nightmare began.

The ceremony was about to start.

And I wasn't going to let it finish.

## Chapter Ten

The next five minutes were a flurry of activity and escalating chaos. Oonagh was running the show with the iron will and creative vision of an evil Martha Stewart. She

arranged and rearranged the silver aisle runner, fussed over flower placement, and checked the lighting. Linden, meanwhile, kept sneaking peeks at his reflection in the polished cake knife, slicking back his hair with a nervous energy that made me want to see how he'd look bald.

I counted the seconds, waiting for Jocko's next move.

"If you are going to reprogram me, why not do it before this fiasco of a wedding?" I asked, hoping to give Jocko some time to formulate a new plan.

Linden strolled over to me. "That was my request. I wanted the Mally Jourdain I have known so long to be full aware that you are finally mine."

Gross. So gross.

"But don't worry, I will reprogram you as soon as you say, 'I do,'" Oonagh said sweetly.

"Small blessing, I guess," I said wryly.

Then I saw Jocko make his move. With the grace of a seasoned saboteur, he scuttled from beneath the credenza, pincers gleaming. He aimed straight for a decorative flowerpot the size of a toddler and began to wedge himself underneath, preparing to topple the whole thing. He'd chosen well: if the pot hit the floor, it would roll directly into the path of the cake table, taking down the seven-tier monstrosity in one glorious domino effect.

He got halfway there before Oonagh spotted him.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," she said. With a flick of her wrist, she sent a bolt of magic straight at the flowerpot. A shimmer enveloped the ceramic, and, to my



horror, Jocko was sucked inside. The entire pot trembled, then stilled, and the only evidence of his presence was the faint clatter of a single, desperate claw tapping against the inside.

“A crawfish familiar?” Oonagh smirked. “How quaint. Reminds me of my own wedding to Silver. That one had a leech for a ring bearer.”

“That seems very appropriate,” I said, glaring at them all.

Silver strong armed me over the the archway, clearly tired of waiting for this wedding to begin.

“No,” I shouted and tried to summon my magic again. But this time, I didn’t go for the witch power. I reached deep for the Fue Follet in my blood—the mischievous, will-o’-the-wisp magic I’d inherited from my dad. It was wilder, less predictable, and almost never worked indoors, but it was all I had left. The others wouldn’t see it.

I pictured blue flames, trickster light, the dizzying pulse of swamp air in August. For a moment, the world shimmered and a thin ribbon of blue fire flickered through my body, unseen to them, but overwhelming to me. Almost so overwhelming, my knees nearly buckled. The magic pooled low in my belly—and I realized the fey magic growing in my baby was joining mine, making it more powerful. Amazing.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” I heard Silver say.

I just focused on the fey magic more, even as Linden pulled me to face him.

The flowerpot rattled in the corner. Jocko was alive, but going nowhere.

That’s when Linden decided it was the perfect time for another round of mansplaining, which was fine with me. He was giving my more time to call to my

father.

“Soon, you’ll forget all about that mongrel husband and the little monsters you called family. You and I—this baby—” He patted my stomach, which made me want to bite him. “We’ll be so much more. Our child will be the most powerful magical being ever born.”

“Funny,” I said, shoving his hand away, “because you seem to think the best way to raise a kid is to murder their personality and gaslight the hell out of their mother. Good luck with that.”

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He scowled. “It’s not about you, Mally. It’s about us. Our child will rule?—”

“No. Our child will hate you,” I shot back, “and if you don’t let me go, so will the rest of the magical world. My family will find me. Etienne will find me. And when they do, you won’t even be a greasy spot on the sidewalk.”

Silver snorted, unimpressed. Oonagh turned away, barking last-minute instructions to the musicians who had suddenly appeared out of nowhere—an assemble of what looked like a jazz band made entirely of enchanted skeletons.

Linden knelt beside me, eyes desperate. “Don’t do this. I am giving you a place in history. We could rule the South. You and me—witches married as we should be.”

“You are not a true witch. You are half orc—and everyone knows it” I said, voice gone low and bitter.

He slapped me. Not hard, but with enough force to leave a sting. The pain cleared the fog in my brain and brought my vision into sudden, painful focus.

“You’re not a victim here,” he whispered, voice shaking. “I’m doing you are favor. You’re the one holding up progress.”

“Go to hell, Linden.” I spat in his face.

He wiped his cheek, trembling, and then nodded to Silver, who seized me by the arm and held me in place.

The flowerpot was still rattling, harder now. I caught Jocko's eye as I passed, and he flashed his claws in a tiny, defiant salute.

I blinked, willing my tired brain to focus. The glow inside me intensified, blossoming into an inferno. Then I saw it. A bouncing light in the corner of the room.

My heart stuttered. Papa?

The Fue Follet flame wobbled, then stabilized, I could see him, my tiny dad in his magical ball of light. His eyes burned bright with concern and love.

"Ma petite," he whispered, the words floating on a breathless current only I could hear. "I found you. Etienne comes. You must endure a little more. You are never alone."

A tremor ran through me, the shock of hope so fierce, it nearly undid my carefully constructed wall of outward rage.

I was distracted from the small ball of light to the pastor who had just appeared like the jazz ensemble. The pastor was a skeleton, too, in full robes.

"Hurry," I whispered back, feeling the tears prick at the edges of my vision.

The blue fire winked, a gentle parental nudge. "We are closer than you think. Be brave, my darling."

Before I could reply, the apparition blinked out, leaving only the faint smell of burnt sugar and the echo of his voice warming my soul.

Oonagh, busy spritzing perfume around the suite like it was a bug bomb, did not notice my brief emotional breakdown. But someone else had.

Linden studied me, his face pale and tight. He fixed me with a look somewhere between suspicion and anger. “Who were you talking to?”

I met his gaze, all bravado. “Just telling myself this is the worst wedding I’ve ever been to.”

He scowled, but before he could press the point, Oonagh seized the moment. “Everything is ready! Places, everyone!”

The next five minutes blurred into a nightmare montage. Silver dragging me down a silver-carpeted hallway. Oonagh arranging the train of my skirt, her hands sharp and impersonal. Linden gliding down the aisle to stand beneath the wedding arch, every inch the deranged prince. The skeleton jazz band struck up a tune so off-key and mournful I almost felt bad for the dead. Almost.

The altar was set at the far end of a ballroom, its walls draped with more silver tulle, the ceiling a mess of mirrored globes and chandeliers.

As I approached the altar, I caught sight of the flowerpot in the corner. It was rattling so violently it threatened to roll off its pedestal. Jocko’s desperate attempts at freedom were growing wilder by the second.

I willed him to hold on, just a little longer.

They positioned me beside Linden, and I nearly collapsed. Only Silver’s vice grip kept me upright.

The bony pastor began the ceremony, his voice monotone and gravelly, “We are gathered here to unite Mally Jourdain and Linden Lowell?—”

“That’s not my name anymore,” I said, just loud enough for everyone to hear. “It’s

Dubois.”

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The pastor ignored me and continued, “—in the sight of all magical beings, for the betterment of our kind.”

The words stung, not because I cared about the ceremony, but because for the first time, I realized just how much I missed my own weird, dysfunctional, loving family. I pictured Etienne’s face—angry, desperate, beautiful—and my resolve solidified into something diamond-hard.

Linden squeezed my hand, hard, as if he could force the future into being through sheer willpower. I returned the favor, digging my nails into his palm until I felt the skin break.

He yelped, but Oonagh gestured for the pastor to plow on. “Do you, Linden Lowell, take Mally to be your?—”

A crash sounded from the flowerpot. A long, blue flame exploded out, rocketing straight up to the chandelier and ricocheting around the room like a drunken firework. In the confusion, Silver let go of my arm, casting his hands toward the flowerpot.

I seized my chance.

Fueled by the last dregs of adrenaline and whatever hope my fey father had left me, I lunged for the cake knife. The world tilted, time slowed, and for a split second, I thought I might just make it.

But Silver tackled me, sending both of us tumbling into the wedding cake. The tiers collapsed in a slow-motion avalanche of fondant and sugar, burying me up to my

neck in edible rubble.

For a moment, the only sound was the jazz band, valiantly playing on.

Then the ballroom windows shattered. A torrent of glass and fur and the earthy smell of bayou water flooded the room, carrying with it the unmistakable howl of my husband.

Etienne.

They'd come.

I laughed, spluttering out frosting. "Told you," I said to nobody and everybody at once. "My family always finds me."

The cake tasted like victory.

The chaos that ensued was a total blur. The room was filled with huge and angry Rougarous—Etienne, his brothers and some of the guards, huge and in full wolf form. Joined by the darting and irritating swirl of Fue Follet in their balls of lights, creating more commotion, all set to the sound of the fairies' favorite soundtrack, 90s club tunes. It might be a strange rescue squad, but it was more than enough to unnerve the ill-prepared Oonagh, Silver and Linden.

I noticed that Etienne focused his giant Rougarou rage on the now blubbering Linden. Etienne lifted the screaming, crying warlock up into the air, Etienne's deadly claws clutching the lapels of his Linden's tuxedo lapels. My actual husband growled menacing right my pathetic wannabe husband's face, bearing all his pointed teeth.

I almost felt bad as I saw the warlock soil himself in fear. Almost, but not really.



But the whole attack slowed to a halt as soon as the room exploded with glitter and confetti. The Fue Follet's 90's hits shifted to 80's music as soon as Baba Yaga and her minions crashed through the ceiling of Oonagh's house and into the room.

The Rougarous stepped back to let Baba Yaga approach the villainous witch and warlocks. Etienne even dropped Linden, who fell heavily in his damp butt.

"Well, isn't this a sad little group," Baba Yaga said, casting a disapproving stare to each of them. "Did you really believe this ridiculous plan would work?"

Oonagh had the good grace to look ashamed, but for once she said nothing.

"You do know this will not go unpunished," Baba Yaga said, brushing glitter off her tutu skirt and casually straightening her dozens of jelly bracelets.

That prompted the very guilty threesome to start defending themselves, all talking over each other with feeble attempts to give excuses and blame each other.

Baba Yaga snapped her fingers, and they all fell silent.

"I don't want to hear it," she stated, pinning them with a furious scowl. They were silent again. In fact, the only sound in the room was Boy George's plaintive crooning of "do you really want to hurt me?"

I'd like to say I was better than that, but yes, I did kind of want to hurt them.

"I don't want to hear it, but the witch council absolutely will. Off to the witch pokey, with you all," Baba Yaga said, and before the threesome could react, she snapped her fingers again, and they disappeared. The Fue Follet bounced merrily around the room, changing the music to Celebration by Kool and the Gang. Baba Yaga's minions instantly bobbed their heads to the beat.

Etienne moved to me, pulling against him, dwarfing me with his Rougarou form, but being so gentle with his monster strength and careful with his vicious claws.

“I knew you’d come,” I said against his furry chest.

He growled deep in his chest.

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“We are fine,” I assured him. “The baby and I are just fine.”

He howled, a sound of relieved joy.

We parted and I took in the scene around me. Baba Yaga had rescued Jocko and he was perched on her padded shoulder as they danced with the skeleton musicians that Oonagh had materialized. The Fue Follet created their usual light show and excellent tunes. Even the Rougarous shuffled around to the beat. Well, mainly Guy, who was always up for a good party.

A few moments later, my side of the family dashed into the room, stumbling to a halt at the sight of a destroyed wedding, dancing skeletons, 80s music, and rainbow glitter everywhere.

I laughed and ran a hand over my belly. I smiled up at my giant wolf of a husband.

“This baby is about to be born into the craziest family ever.”

Etienne howled again, this time joined by the other wolves. My family saw I was safe and sound and with my husband, so they joined in on the dancing.

I shook my head, feeling utterly loved and utterly happy. I started dancing too.

### Epilogue

I curled up in bed beside Etienne. His strong arms held me safe and warm. The last couple months had been blessedly peaceful, doing normal things like decorating the

nursery and assembling baby furniture. No gnomes, no crazy exes, no stalkerish wannabe husbands.

“You didn’t have to do the celebration, you know,” he said softly into my hair.

I pulled back to smile at him. “Yes, I did. That was important to your people, and to the witches too.” I rolled onto my back, my now showing belly poking up under the sheet. “And this is going to be a most unusual little baby.”

He smiled and placed a hand over the protruding mount. “Yes, he or she will be.”

The baby kicked, and we both grinned madly, still always fascinated by every movement of our little loved one.

Today’s celebration had been beautiful and the pack and the witches—and the fey had all celebrated together. It gave me huge hope for the future.

“Besides, I did virtually nothing to prepare for the event. I just showed up and looked pregnant.”

Etienne shook his head. “You were the pack’s princess. And you were amazing.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but it was nearly as overwhelming as I imagined it would be.

“I still wonder about the gnomes calling the baby, ‘Prenze.’” We had discovered that prenze meant prince in Italian. So, that was probably what I’d heard when they were whispering to each other.

“Maybe the gnomes were made in Italy.”

I nodded, but that word did still nag at me.

“Baba Yaga told me that the Licornes and that creep Lowell are going to be in the pokey for quite some time. But it will never be long enough for me,” Etienne said, kissing my hair.

“I’m just glad they are gone now. I don’t think they will bother us again.”

He made a noise that said he wasn’t quite as sure. But I wasn’t going to let myself worry about it. I knew my family would always be here and keep me and my children safe.

“So, have we agreed on the name?” Etienne asked suddenly.

This was the biggest issue we were currently contending with at the moment.

“I’m digging my heels in with Wolfgang if it’s a boy,” I said.

“We are not naming a Rougarou Wolfgang,” he insisted. Not for the first time.

“Come on, Wolfie, is so cute.”

“No.”

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“Well, I don’t like Maverick. That doesn’t sound royal.”

He slowly nodded. “Yeah, you are right.”

“Thank Goodness.”

I yawned, suddenly very, very tired from all the events of the celebration.

He hugged me closer to him. “We can talk about this tomorrow. You need your rest.”

“I do,” I agreed. “Good night. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

We curled together.

I rubbed my hand over the swell of my belly. “Good night, Wolfgang.”

Beside me, Etienne groaned, but didn’t argue.

I smiled into the dark. Wolfie, it is.