







# Accidentally Engaged (And Other Hazards of Being a Banshee #20)

**Author:** S.C. Principale

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** There are so many hazards of being a banshee living among humans like accidentally betrothing yourself to the guy next door

When Jared rents out an apartment in paranormal-friendly Pine Ridge, the average human research assistant thinks the little New York town is a perfect fit for him. That might change when Jared discovers he's a "sensitive," a non-supernatural being who can occasionally sense the otherworldly.

Chloe O'Neill, a half-banshee who owns Chloe's Curiosities, doesn't mind living surrounded by humans, but she's thrilled when her new next-door neighbor plans to be away over Spring Break. It's not often a banshee can really let go without endangering mortals, so of course she takes the chance to use the glorious singing voice she has to keep hidden.

Imagine her surprise when her traditional banshee betrothal song is overheard—but not by the handsome fae husband she hopes to one day enchant—but by a very confused Jared who had his plans cancelled at the last minute!

Once a banshee is betrothed, there are only two options to break off the engagement: death or denial. Since Chloe won't be swinging a blade anytime soon, she's counting on Jared to reject her mistaken offer.

Too bad Jared thinks his life is finally turning around. New job, new city, new life...and maybe a new wife?

Accidentally Engaged (And Other Hazards of Being a Banshee) is a short, steamy standalone in the Pine Ridge Universe.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Hazards of Being A Banshee:

Issues with Neighbors

“ T his is a perfect anniversary gift. Wrap it up, Chloe.”

Alban Wymark puts a little jade statuette down on my counter at Chloe’s Curiosities.

I stare at it for a moment. I’m single. Far be it from me, a single half-banshee who can never even utilize her powers, to critique a happily married man who also happens to be the most powerful warlock in town. Not that Alban would ever “pull rank” on me.

“Stop thinking so hard; you’re going to set me on fire,” Alban chuckles. “No, this isn’t the only thing I’m getting her. I’m getting my mom to watch the kids, and I’m taking her to Vermont this weekend.”

“That’s what I’m talking about! Hey, what about the new guy? Any word about him... I don’t know. Finding a house?”

Alban immediately knows I mean the neighbor who lives in the apartment he rents out next door.

I live on one of the three main “downtown” streets of Pine Ridge.

All the houses on my block are old red brick three-story jobs separated by tiny brick lanes, so they’re not joined together like row homes.

Mad Hatter Music is underneath my second-hand store.

The shop is on the second floor, and my tiny attic apartment is above.

From the attic, I look down on Alban's rental property.

Oh, he doesn't own the whole building, but he owns an apartment and sublets it—usually to humans.

No, it's always humans.

Don't get me wrong, I'm one-quarter human on my dad's side, but living and working so close to humans is hard on a banshee.

Alban sighs. "Look, I can't only rent to supernatural types. What am I supposed to do? 'Only apply if you aren't human' would get me a lot of wacky emails, not to mention investigated by the Better Business Bureau."

"I know!"

"What about you? Why don't you buy a house? You're successful. I bet there's something you could—"

"I know, I know." I don't want to move out of my attic apartment and buy a house on my own. Sure, it's small, but it's full of plants, and my cat, Marmalade, has every sunny spot in the place memorized. It's perfect for one cat and one person.

And some little part of me says buying a house with two or three bedrooms just to fill it up with more junk is wasteful. I might deprive some family who needs space for a growing family. I'd feel selfish, damn it.

“I did see Jared at the store the other day, and he was excited about being part of the biology team going to a conference in Denver—I think it was Denver—during Spring Break. So, no, I don’t think he’ll be moving out anytime soon, but you’ll have a couple of weeks without him.”

I hand Alban his purchase, now wrapped in tissue paper and put in a cute brown bag with my logo stamped on it.

“Is Jared bothering you? He seemed like a good risk. He’s nice and quiet.

.. but I mean, so were notorious serial killers.

” Alban suddenly goes pale—almost as pale as me, and I’m a rather delicate shade of almost green, or as I like to think of it, where cream and green meet.

“I always put out protective charms and wards on the apartment; I would know if someone evil—”

“It’s nothing like that.” I lean forward. “I’d like to be able to sing without worrying I’ll put someone in a coma or bespell them. It’s nice weather, and he always has his windows open—even in the middle of February, he has his windows open.”

“He pays the heating bill, so...”

“It’s nothing, Alban. Here. Have a happy anniversary weekend!”

Alban leaves, and I close up shop. I water the ferns in the window—and there he is. Jared Lochenko, tall, broad, bespectacled, and continually carrying his laptop around.

But not today. Today, he’s got a suitcase. A suitcase that he packs as I take a very long time to water my ferns and the stubborn African violet that will never produce

its trademark purple flowers, even when I push my magic onto it.

Jared's going away for at least a week or two.

The other apartments in the red brick building that almost kiss mine are currently vacant, and work crews have been in and out, painting, replastering, and carrying in new bathroom fixtures, but only during the day.

Mad Hatter Music will be closed at night. ..

I can't wait until I see him load up his car and pull away. It'll be nice to stop putting a cork in my true source of power.

But tonight... Tonight is not that night. I usually run a stall at the Night Market, the town's open-air market that sets up just down the street from me.

I can't go tonight. The pull of spring and night air and mountain breezes is just too strong for a banshee-fae-human mutt like me to resist. I hop in my car and head out of town, up into the mountains.

One of the hazards of being a banshee is that your voice, something most people take for granted, is a powerful tool—whether used for good or evil. But a banshee's song? That's always dangerous.

Living above a music store means I'm always hearing songs but can never sing.

Tonight, the stars and the peaks will be my audience. I have to let something out of me, or I'll go mad.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Greetings, Dr. Hudson, Dr. Hull, and Professor Camwiddie,

Imagine my surprise when, upon arriving to meet the flight at the Binghamton Airport, I found out that the chartered flight for Cancun was already fully booked and not a single research or graduate assistant was in sight (although I observed a great many members of your extended families disembarking from the airport shuttle).

My pre-purchased ticket (see meeting notes) was nonexistent.

I was forced to return home. I assume this was just some oversight, and all the other assistants were notified in a timely manner via email, while I, being a recent addition to the department, must have been left off of the distribution list. If, in the future, you change your plans about research trips and my presence on them, please make sure to communicate this clearly with at least a week's notice.

Have a wonderful trip. See you after Spring Break.

Warmly,

Jared Lochenko

M.S. Bio

M.S. Chem

M.S. Geothermal Engineering



Seething, I hit send after making sure Dean Whitaker is CC'd on this email. Hull, Hudson, and Camwiddie wouldn't seriously try to fake a research trip on the university's dime, would they?

I slam my laptop shut.

The hell they wouldn't. Dean Whitaker can sort them out.

"Don't get discouraged, Jared," I tell myself, looking around my dark apartment at the suitcases I threw back inside in a fit of anger.

It's a new job—and Hull, Hudson, and Camwiddie might not be the greatest, but I love everything else about Pine Ridge.

I love the campus that bustles on one side of the little river that is so narrow in one or two places that you can cross by footbridge.

You cross the river, head into town, and.

.. you step back in time. There are little stores and people who wave.

There are rents you can afford and only one big grocery store in town.

There's an open-air market every night, and I just feel. .. Happy when I'm here.

Not lonely.

Okay. A little lonely.

I sigh and slowly open my window, letting the fresh mountain air in.

Patsy never liked the windows open at night.

Patsy never liked anything I did once we were married. Not my weight or my glasses or when I tried to grow a beard...

God damn it, Patsy, why would you marry a chunky boy who could repair your VCR and diagnose your pet parakeet's fungal infection if you didn't want a sexy science nerd?

That's right. I've embraced what I am. I pack a six-pack... of twenty-sided dice. I'm thick—in the middle. I don't have pecs... I have specs.

This is why I'm alone, in a little one-bedroom apartment, without the dog I brought her for Christmas that I thought would be our "practice baby," without the good china my parents bought us for a wedding present, and without everything I put into our joint savings account for the last four years.

Patsy was always after me to take an elaborate Spring Break vacation.

As a research assistant in a college department, I was always supposed to get a week or two off.

Annnnd like most research assistants at a certain well-established university, I was always asked to work on some big project for half of it.

Like a pushover, I always said yes.

Well, not this time. I believed I was needed on that trip.

I didn't realize they were just covering their asses in the staff meeting, knowing they were talking about a phony trip and having to say the right thing in front of the dean,

all while hazing the new guy, making him think he's going on some cool research trip when they're all laughing up their sleeves.

No more. I called them out.

Jared Lochenko is done being pushed around by life.

From now on, I'm in control of my own destiny!

I look at the clock, the digital numbers on the cable box, the only light in my dark apartment.

Almost midnight, and I only just got back, thanks to those saps.

They'd better treat me like a prince when they come back.

Research assistants can make or break a team.

Publish or perish? Yeah, and your research assistant is the one who makes that possible—in either case.

With a sudden stomp, I stand. I don't care if it's midnight. I don't care if I'm always in bed by eleven and up at seven, without fail.

I'm making microwave popcorn—I don't have to go to work tomorrow!

I'm watching an old John Candy movie—I don't have to get up early!

I'm scrolling through my phone to look at all the adoptable dogs and cats at the animal shelters in the tri-county area because Patsy is in my past, and a cute four-legged friend is in my future.

This is the new, in-charge Jared Lochenko.

I may even install a dating app on my phone.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Hazards of Being a Banshee:

Losing Yourself and Lawn Care

I 'm convinced that one of the girls from Fleetwood Mac is part-banshee. The soulful, pulsing songs get in my head, and I scream them through my sunroof on the way back from my trek to Fenny Peak, the highest part of the mountain range that goes through Pine Ridge.

My screams turn to throbbing, pulsing waves of sound that I can see bouncing off the steering wheel and flexing the half-opened windows as I turn onto the road into town.

Time to roll the windows up. The sunroof must be shut.

Time to go home and haul in my latest find—a collection of gorgeous old picture frames left out for the trashman.

One positive side effect of being a night owl—I snag the stuff worth saving before the trash trucks come through in the morning.

As I turn onto Pine Crest Avenue, a little jolt runs through me. I'm on my own tonight.

Well, I'm on my own every night, but tonight, my shop and the surrounding buildings stand empty. I saw Jared leave for the airport hours ago. The businesses beside me are shuttered, and no one will be there until well after the morning—when I'm sleeping in.

For once... It's nice to have no one but Marmalade to come home to.

As I lug the picture frames from my backseat, I feel a little twinge of guilt. I could be working tonight at the Night Market. I have more business there than in my store most days. I could see more of my friends, especially the ones who work all day or who prefer to come out at night.

My mind flickers to Jared, the neighbor I wish would move out.

That's kind of dumb. He seems like such a gentle giant, a guy who defines "husky" and who has glasses that perch above his rounded cheeks. He always smiles at me.

Sometimes I forget to smile back.

I feel mean-spirited for wishing he would leave when he only got here a couple of months ago—especially because he has this quiet, cheerful determination in his aura that I haven't been able to find in myself lately.

Silently sliding into my shop, I put the heavy frames down and pat Marmalade, who runs down from the attic, mew-purring on every step, a little hiccup of adorability as she winds through my legs and then jumps on the counter.

"At least you missed me, girl," I whisper, bowing my head to hers, the inexplicable feeling of joy at being unfettered for the night—and for the next week or so—wars with a sudden loneliness. "You're free, but you like having someone around, don't you, love?"

I feel the pull in my throat and the way my hair starts to lift from my shoulders, long blonde-white tendrils rising without a breath of wind.

"Dá mbeadh mo chroí uaigneach riamh ... Dá mbeadh mo chroí saor riamh... Thiocfá

agus aimsigh mé, chuirfeá i gcuimhne dom i gcónaí an áit a bhfuil mé i gceist a bheith...”

If ever my heart was lonely... If ever my heart was free... You'd come and find me, you'd always remind me of just where I'm meant to be...

The plants on my windowsill start to grow, spooling out shoots and popping out leaves. I sing the verse again, louder this time, feeling my aching heart bursting inside, happy to be able to belt it out and sinking under a sudden crushing desperation.

This is a betrothal song. A mating cry. Every banshee has one, a single song that doesn't bring bad news but binds her to her lover.

Which I don't have, and which I'm not going to find by singing in my shop as it rapidly begins to look like something from an “Is your lawn unsightly and overgrown?” lawn care commercial.

There are no fae who live in the town itself, although some might be in the woods or out on the outskirts.

They stay hidden, and they're probably wise to do so.

Fae and humans have a checkered past, and there is blame on both sides.

Anyway, the song goes on, verse after verse spilling from my soul without any way to pump the brakes.

At least I know no one can hear me here .

.. And even if they could— no one would submit to my request, either.

A banshee's call can always be rejected if you strike the right bargain, and I know the fae in Pine Ridge would know just what to do and say.

Stop torturing yourself, I manage to think as I steal a breath.

But I can't. The tall, moon-white visage of willowy manhood taunts my inner eyes. Pointed ears. Slightly pointed canines. A wicked, knowing smile. Glistening wings like a dragonfly's and golden rings on every finger, not to mention a silver cuff on his ear.

God, yes, I want that piece of faelord yumminess. Don't I?

That image of... whoever he is, is like the fae version of a male model, a pinup for banshee girls across the British Isles and beyond.

Why? Why, when I've never even seen anyone who looks remotely like that?

Because marrying a regular human would probably lead to divorce, permanent injury, or even death to the groom, that's why.

"Yowwwwwl!"

I stop singing abruptly as Marmalade is pushed off the counter by a now six-foot fern with an attitude, snapping fiddleheads out of its soil like whips.

I groan and start humming something dark and threatening, making the leaves and vines that are now running across my floor shrink and shimmy back into their pots. It stops the new growth—but doesn't really fix the fact that my small shop now looks like a jungle.

Except for that damn African violet. It sits, small and complacent, gloating at me.



Maybe someone cursed that pot. I'll have to replant it.

Can most banshees do this? Well, yes and no. We all have some power that aligns with our elemental sign. Mine is earth. My mother's is water.

Every time I backtalked her growing up, the spigots in the house exploded on me.

"I'm going to be up until dawn pruning my own little shop of horrors," I laugh and let Marmalade go to work shredding and boxing an overgrown frond with her back feet.

"At least I can sleep in."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Popcorn scatters all over the floor as I stand up, wide awake and shaking my head to get rid of the beautiful dream.

Except the dream is still going. My heart is still pounding. I, somewhat of a neat freak, walk headlong through popcorn, smashing it into the carpet as I gasp like an asthmatic jogger.

That could be it. I'm having an asthma attack.

Except I don't have asthma.

I could have had a sleep apnea episode—but... I don't know what sleep apnea has to do with a racing heart and feeling like I'll never be lonely again—like the princess is in the tower just out of sight, and I'm finally the knight who can save her!

I sit down hard on the dining room chair and put a hand to my chest. Fast, but in perfect rhythm.

Should I call 911? Seriously, should I? I feel...

There's no word for this feeling. Blessed, happy, ecstatic, tingly, and confused.

Oh no. Someone laced your popcorn.

No, they didn't, idiot. It was a fresh bag, sealed in a box, wrapped in plastic, and popped by your own microwave. There is no such thing as popcorn euphoria. Probably.

“Come here. Come to me, my love. My one. My only.”

“Arh!” I leap back up and look around for the voice, my heart speeding up all over again.

I’m going insane.

No, I’m not. My name is Jared Lochenko, I’m thirty-eight, I live on Pine Crest Avenue, I drive a battered old Subaru SUV, my parents’ names are Susan and Mikhail, and I can recite every president in order. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Quincy again, Jackson, Van Buren...

Wait, that’s how they tell if you’ve had a stroke, not a mental breakdown.

“My love? I’m right here. Can’t you hear my soul’s song?”

“Yes! I can, but I don’t know where you are. Or who this is. Or if I need a straitjacket.” I put my hands in my hair and pace, ignoring the popcorn I’m grinding into the carpet.

Like a whip crack in my brain, I suddenly turn and look out the window, and there she is.

My beloved. My betrothed.

The beautiful blonde, willowy woman who owns Chloe’s Curiosities is in the window of her shop—even though it’s way too late to be open—throwing some green clippings out of the window and humming over her plants.

Her humming sets the beat of my heart. When her head lifts, her eyes meet mine across the tiny alley, and her mouth forms a frozen O of panic.

“Oh, no,” she gasps, but I can hear her plainly.

“My... My love?” I hazard, feeling giddy and shy all at once.

I never called Patsy “my love.” I never called her anything.

She would have laughed in my face. What if she laughs in my face?

Why am I calling my random neighbor, whom I’ve only talked to on trash day, “my love”?

This is clear proof that I’ve come unglued.

“Chloe?” I hazard. Her name is probably Chloe. Unless the original owner of the shop was Chloe, and she’s not Chloe. I put a hand over my heart and wish it would slow down. I’m not very athletic. I’m going to be all flushed and sweaty when I meet my bride.

Bride? Bride??

“Yes, my love. Bride. You heard my call, and you’ve come to claim me.” The little voice in my head lilts along, answering my question. That voice is not my own.

“Signs of psychosis. Schizophrenia? Auditory hallucination?”

“You’re okay?” The terrified-looking woman asks, a trembling hand pointing at me.

“I’m not sure,” I confess.

“You’re not in a coma.”

“No. I’m not.” I blink and look down at my body, my outstretched arms. “I didn’t consider that as an option,” I muse. I flex my fingers and wriggle my toes in their thick white socks. “Um. I am definitely not in a coma.”

“Oh, my God. You’re a sensitive,” Chloe claps both hands to her mouth and backs away from the window.

“I guess? I mean, I’ve always been bigger, even as a kid, so I got teased about my weight, and then when I got glasses in sixth grade, that sucked for a while, but I would say I’m over it.

Mostly. So... A little sensitive about some things?

Is that bad?” I’m so lost. Why is this woman making me spill my guts like a fisherman with a fresh catch?

Does she like a sensitive man? Do they turn her off? Why is she telling me this?

“No, no, no. Not that kind. I... It’s all a misunderstanding. Just say no, and it’s over.”

“No to what?” I demand, wishing whoever drugged my popcorn or zapped my brain had left some kind of tutorial or owner’s manual, something like “Your Handy, Dandy Guide to Losing Your Marbles.” That would have been nice.

“Wh-what do you think I want?” Chloe demands, head cocked, eyes wide.

She’s so beautiful like that. What’s more, I can feel what she wants.

To be happy. Loved. Not alone. Content.

She wants her other half, and she doesn’t think she can find it.

Same here, my sweet green angel.

Hold on, green??

“Why are you green now?” I yelp. “Not like grassy green, but pale, soft buttermint green? Not like I mind! On you, it looks good. Beautiful. Gorgeous!”

Oh, God. Even when I’m dreaming—if I’m dreaming—I can’t flirt. Or date. Definitely can’t get married.

“But your heart is already mine, my love.” The little voice insists.

“Stay there. I’m coming over.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Hazards of Being a Banshee:

Accidentally Engaged

I 'm going to kill Alban. It's a good thing he's in Vermont, or he'd be sprouting beets out of his eyebrows or turnips out of his nose. He rented an apartment to a sensitive and didn't tell me!

Telling myself that Alban probably didn't know doesn't soothe my rage.

I let out a shaky breath as I close the window and wipe my potting soil-covered hands on my jean skirt. I could have killed my neighbor.

For those of you who didn't grow up in a paranormally conversant household, a sensitive is someone human who can sometimes sense the otherworldly.

For months, I'd had Jared pegged as a perfectly ordinary (if kind of cute) human guy.

His little comment about "Why are you green now?" tells me he thought the same thing.

Sometimes, a very powerful event—like a banshee's betrothal song, can awaken a latent awareness and bring it to the front.

Which brings me to the front—the front door of Jared's apartment, that is.

Jared flings the door open, a vacuum cleaner in hand. "Sorry," he says breathlessly, "I

didn't want you to think you were marrying a slob. I spilled popcorn when I... When I heard you singing? Were you singing to me?"

"Not on purpose. At least you're not in a coma." A regular human would have been in a coma. Or dead. Or insane. I'm going to ignore that little remark about marrying a slob. "Don't worry. Whatever you're experiencing will go away soon."

"Oh. It will?" Jared's bearded face falls into a frown, underscoring the deep, crestfallen sadness in his eyes. "Why?"

"Because I didn't know you were home!"

Now confusion adds itself to the heartbreaking mix of emotions on his face.

Dear God, why is he even cuter up close? My thighs do a fully unexpected and completely illegal clench when I think about how his big arms could wrap me up and cradle me like a kitten on his wide, slightly protruding middle.

The way I can suddenly imagine his bulk smothering me as he gently kisses my face has me on the verge of purring like a kitten, too.

"I wasn't planning to be home. Some of my colleagues pranked me.

Or maybe it was just bad timing. I don't know.

I thought I was going on a research trip with the college department I work for, and no one told me I wasn't until I paid for long-term parking," Jared says with a hint of bitterness.

"But it's okay." His face breaks into a sunny smile that warms my soul.



“If I had gone with them, I wouldn’t have heard you singing. ”

“Um. Uh.” I swallow a lump of heat in my throat. “You weren’t supposed to hear me singing,” I whisper. “I’m a... Can I come in?”

“Of course, of course!” Jared opens the door wide and ushers me in.

“Let me put some lights on. I’m a creature of habit, but tonight, I was pretty steamed.

I thought, screw it, I’m staying up late, eating some popcorn, and watching something to cheer me up.

Then I fell asleep, and when I woke up.. .”

Jared’s face lights up in awe, his eyes shining with joy and magic, like when a child sees the ocean for the first time or the first time a hummingbird holds still, and you realize how stunning the little blurs really are, like jewels come to life.

I feel like the monster some people claim I am for crushing it, stealing that sparkle. “I’m sorry, but that song wasn’t meant for you.”

“Oh. There’s someone else?”

“No! No, there’s no one else. No one at all.” Seriously, no one at all. “But you’re what we call a sensitive. A person who is sometimes aware of magic and magical creatures. Like me.”

“Like you?”

“A banshee.” I wait, holding my breath, waiting for the disbelief, the mocking, the fear... Something. Anything.

Anything but calm realization and a hearty sigh. “Oh, thank God. I’m not going crazy. You’re just a different species.”

“What?!” I screech.

“An undiscovered or cryptid species. You’re scientifically possible, just previously undocumented. Don’t worry, I won’t be documenting this. We’d both end up in confinement—me in a padded cell and you in some lab.” He reaches for my hands and squeezes.

Waves of comfort roll over me at his touch. He’s so warm. His hands wrap securely around mine, and the instant knowledge that I would be safe with this person embeds itself in my brain.

Which is really inconvenient because I want it to leave.

It has to leave. I have to leave. “Thank you. I don’t know if anyone would believe you.

Most humans can’t see things that are right in front of them, and even sensitives can only see certain things at certain times,” I point out.

“You heard my song. Did it... Did it mean anything?”

The huge figure sways and pivots, his hands still grasping mine. “You said I’m your love. Your betrothed. That means we’re engaged, right?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. I’m not a full banshee or a full fae.

I’m able to make bargains, but they’re not entirely binding.

All you have to do is say you don't want to marry me, reject the offer, and this is all a bad dream.

We'll never mention it again." I give Jared my biggest winning smile and wait.

"But I don't want to say no. I want to get to know you and marry you. You're my soulmate."

"I'm not. That's just the magic talking."

"Oh, believe me, I've been married before. I know what I'm looking for—and it's this. It's you. This feeling of immediate peace and joy. Of being found."

I bite my lip and swallow. "Yeah," I murmur with a shaking voice. "That's how it feels. But it's not real."

"Why not? How do you know?"

"I—"

I don't know. I've never gotten myself into this particular mess before. "Look, you have to say you reject me."

"I don't want to do that! I love you!"

"No, you don't!"

"I might! You don't know," Jared counters, an obstinate look in his eye as he defiantly raises his chin.

"I know that a banshee's betrothal only has two endings, buddy, death or denial.

Deny my offer!" I hiss, magic pumping into my voice, my hair floating up, and my eyes turning into shining emerald flints.

Most men would be terrified. I look positively evil right now.

But Jared just smiles, and that little-kid-lost-in-wonder expression cements itself on his face. "You're so powerful, aren't you? Wow. My wife is a superhero."

"Argh!" I let out a single piercing yell that should send him to his knees.

He just smiles and gently releases one of my hands so he can pat the other. "It's okay. We don't have to rush."

"I'm not your wife!" I spit.

"I meant my future wife. Sorry, honey."

"Oh... Oh, why are you so nice?" I wail, and my magic poofs away like dandelion fluff in a windstorm.

"Just who I am, I guess." He shrugs. A trace of worry crosses his face, a handsome face with a bit of extra padding and a soft brown beard that reminds me of my childhood teddy bear. All of him reminds me of a teddy bear.

A big, gentle bear that might show me his strength once he knows it's safe...

I have to stop thinking like that in case he picks up on that, too.

"You said death or denial. If I don't call this off, what happens? Do I die?"

"No, you don't die," I sigh, crossing my arms.

“Death, denial, or... Is there a third option?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the third option?”

“Marriage.” I glare.

“Ooh. I pick that one.”

“I don’t.”

It’s his turn to look stern. He crosses his arms.

Big, burly arms.

Arghhh, I need a man—but not this one!

Why not this one? A nagging little voice whines, and I tell it to leave me alone.

“So, refuse me, then,” he challenges.

“Okay, I—” I can’t do anything. I offered. He accepted. By fae laws, this engagement is binding.

A slow smile crosses his face. “Once you make the offer, you can’t take it back, can you? Is it a banshee thing?”

“Yes,” I seethe.

He smiles. “Then I accept.”

Out of nowhere, a slithering green mist swirls and turns gold, wrapping my body to his, lifting me up a few inches so I'm at eye level with my new husband-to-be. It feels like the best kind of magic is flowing directly into my soul, and I don't want to fight it.

The green fades completely, leaving nothing but a golden swirl that holds us together before dropping us in a heap on the carpet.

The golden hue means the spell rings true; that's what my mother always taught me.

"You okay?" Jared asks, reaching for my shoulder and helping me sit up.

"Not exactly," I groan, flopping back with my eyes closed.

I don't believe this. We're accidentally engaged.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

My bride-to-be is lying on my floor, looking spent. Gorgeous and spent.

I immediately have feelings that I thought Patsy neutered out of me, along with my share of the house and my collection of vinyl records.

But acting on them would be disastrous. I don't know why, but Chloe wants to fight this engagement, even though her magic has already made up its mind.

And while there isn't some scientific text or scholarly article I can turn to figure out how to soothe an irate banshee bride, I can turn to my other passion—no, not tabletop gaming. History.

“You know, there have been many arranged marriages over the course of human history,” I say in my most calming voice.

Chloe picks up her head, slitting one eye open from under her fanned fingers. “What?”

“Many have resulted in long, happy marriages.”

“Dude, this isn't like I'm the princess of Bansheena and you're the prince of Normalsville.

No one is forcing us together to save a kingdom or stop a war.

This is because I'm a doofus who broke the cardinal rule—never sing in front of humans and always check your surroundings.

Also, you were supposed to be in Denver!

” She sits up long enough to point an accusing finger at me.

“It was Mexico, actually. And I just meant that some people... some people get thrown together, but they learn to like each other. They even learn to lo—”

Chloe suddenly sits up, fury on her face, skin shimmering, and eyes raking over me with a malevolent glare.

“Stop. Talking. You don’t understand anything.

You don’t know what it would be like being stuck with someone like me, someone who could kill you or put you in a coma by humming their favorite commercial jingle. ”

“But... I didn’t die. I feel fine.” I put my hand over my chest, clutching the spot where my heart is racing. It’s skipping—but not like that time I had heat stroke. No, there’s this bounding, joyful feeling, but it’s sinking.

She doesn’t want you, idiot. She doesn’t want you . You’re... I’m not hideous, but I’m not handsome. And I’m overweight. Fat. I have glasses. I’m not anything like what this gorgeous woman deserves or wants, even if her magic did something.

I finally accept myself the way I am, but that doesn’t mean Chloe will.

Someone like her will never want someone like me.

Even if it feels... so real .

We can learn a lot from history.



I picture all the times Patsy's eyes flickered over me in disgust. All the subtle nudges. All the not-so-subtle shaming, posting her Thirst Trap Thursdays with ripped bodybuilders on her social media—and tagging me in the comments.

Learn from history, Jared.

The women you feel drawn towards aren't drawn towards you. Be a gentleman, and just let her go.

“Hey. Chloe? You can stop glaring now. I get it. I was just so caught up. I... I uh, I'm sorry.

It's lame, but for a second, I felt like I was connected to you.

I believed what you wanted was the same thing I wanted.

So stupid. For a guy with glasses, I sure can't see what's right in front of me, huh?

I didn't stop to think that what we both want—that love, that companionship, that loneliness we're fighting.

.. You don't want that with me .” I clear my throat.

“Man, talk about a romantic sap, huh?” I pull my glasses off, ashamed of how they're starting to fog up.

Well. No. It's my eyes. They're blurring with tears, which is proof that I'm so desperate and stupid that I believe in things like magic and enchanted songs... And true love that happens in a flash.

Patsy would tell me that's red flag behavior. That sudden feelings like this are just

manipulative, or maybe love bombing. I don't know. But I know what comes next.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Hazards of Being a Banshee:

You know when the s\*\*\* is about to hit the fan.

Banshees who are really in tune with their powers, who spend a lot of time alone, or at least in areas where there are more fae than humans, who really love being the harbingers of death and destruction, will totally kill a party.

They can see every bad thing that's about to happen.

I don't mean little things, like stubbing your toe or spilling your wine.

I mean like how you can't take my mother to a party for anyone over seventy, or she's going to go nuts with impending deaths, falls down the stairs, and cardiac arrests.

When the fae used to isolate themselves from humans, it was horrible.

As soon as we'd get near humans—boom. We'd see someone's death, and then, without any control, our instincts would take over, announcing it with our mystical, keening wails.

Humans didn't want to live near us. (I mean, it's bad enough when your neighbor tells you spoilers for the reality show you're both watching.

No way do you want them to suddenly be like, "Guess what, Ginny, you're dying on Tuesday!" With screeching wails, no less.)

But the truth is, the more banshees are around humans, the duller our senses become.

The mass of humanity swells around us, and there's just a nebulous feeling of life and death, impending joy, impending loss.

It fades into a cosmic hum, most of the time.

I probably shouldn't generalize. I imagine it's not that way for all banshees, but it's that way for me, maybe because I'm part human.

The point of this train of thought?

I can feel impending disaster coming at me like a charging train, and I'm tied to the tracks.

Jared's going to tell me he got caught up in the whimsy, that this was all just illusion and delusion, and gracefully decline my accidental offer.

And his heart is breaking over it. Years of trapped and buried pain are seeping up, swallowing him. It's like watching someone trapped at the bottom of a deep, dark well as the ocean starts to flood the land.

What's worse? I feel the same way. Each little criticism he lobbs at himself, each twitch of the gentle smile he's trying to keep in place, is like a tear in my soul.

Is it because he's going to break the vows we just made? What'll that do to my magic? To my powers? To my existence?

And why does he hurt so badly? Most guys don't believe in true love at first sight. They don't want to get married.

Your magic is strong, and it's accurate. You didn't bet on the wrong horse.

But he looks nothing like the faelord of my fantasies!

And that doesn't matter at all, because I'm very, very happy with what I'm looking at—or I would be if Jared weren't still trying to hide his red-rimmed eyes and the way his smile is falling apart.

“Stop!” I gasp, hand out like I can halt the tide of pain.

Miraculously, I do. The soul-crushing feeling ebbs, retreating enough that I can still feel it pulsing at the edges of my mind, but not tearing through it.

“You don't have to humor me. I was stupid to think that a gorgeous woman like you—”

“I'm green,” I remind him softly, just in case he forgot.

“The prettiest shade of green I've ever seen—like where cream and green meet, there's a whole new color—that's you.”

I try not to fall on the ground again, but the fact that he described my skin like I think of it? Shivers are racing up my spine.

Keep calm.

“You were saying?”

“I was stupid to think a beauty like you would want to instantly get hitched with someone like me.” He laughs sadly and waves a hand over his teddy bear build.

His giant, tall, broad, barrel-chested-but-soft-looking, teddy bear, bearded build.

Sweet mother of humidity, is it just me, or are things unusually hot and wet in here right now?

“You wouldn’t want to spend your life married to someone like me, so I—”

“Wait!” I shout again, this time actually doubling over from the amplified pain that careens off of him in waves, combining with my own. “Please stop. Wh-why do you think I wouldn’t like the way you look?”

“Uhhh... I’m kind of a bigger guy? Husky? No, fat is the word for it. It’s the word my ex-wife used.”

Oooh, it’s a good thing I’m a nice person.

I don’t even know this woman, but I suddenly see her running, screaming, from her house while I chase after her, clumps of dyed red hair in my hands.

“Is she a redhead?” I demand because, of course, that’s completely relevant to the rib-crushing aches rattling my chest.

“Uh. Yes. Geez, how did you know that?”

“Skip that,” I wave the question away, praying I’m not digging myself a deeper hole.

Deep holes. Wells. Freud would have a field day, probably something about the missing love in my life.

Or that I have a hole I want filled deeply, and I want an ocean of cum to—

I almost smack myself, not caring if it would freak Jared out. I shake my head again and force the words out. “Whatever you were going to say, stop. Don’t say it. If you think someone like me wouldn’t like someone like you, you’re wrong.”

It’s Jared’s turn to wave his hands, wiping that idea away.

“Oh, no. No, I’m not saying you’re shallow, like you would never date someone who was heavier.

I mean, if people get to know each other, you love a person for who they are, not what they look like.

But, c’mon. You sing a little song—a beautiful song, that left this sweet voice in my head, whispering that I had to find my bride, my one love, who was waiting for me.

..” He trails off for a minute, a dopey, lovestruck look on his face, and then he coughs and recovers.

“You were just singing to yourself, and all of a sudden, you end up with your random neighbor as your betrothed? No, I wouldn’t want to force someone who wasn’t into me to marry me, or even date me.

I guess I got swept up in the moment. It felt so real. ”

It was probably real.

Golden mist. Golden hue, spell rings true.

Fuck it, it was real. Say something, put the poor man at ease!

“So I’ll do what you said. I’ll—”

“I’m very attracted to you!” I screech, the verbal equivalent of hurling myself off a cliff.

But I know he’ll catch me.

This sweet, sensitive, honest, thoughtful guy who can stand my singing, who tears up at the thought of losing me, and who sounds like he could use an appreciative woman—he’ll catch me. And God... I’d like to appreciate the pants off of him.

The humidity cranked up another ten notches or so as I picture myself falling into his arms and being carried like some princess by her big, burly knight.

Jared cocks his head while I try not to burst into hormone-driven song. It would probably go something like, “Please, please, please, let me ride you, stud muffin. My sexy teddy bear, let me fall asleep and snuggle on you when my thighs give out, my hunk of burning love.”

Yeah, not one of my greatest hits, I know.

“You are?” The skepticism rolls off of him.

I nod. “Yes.”

“You said very.”

“Very is accurate,” I admit, knitting my fingers together and squeezing them tightly so I don’t go and grab his shoulders and start to climb him.

“Okay, let’s say that I believe you, that I think you’re not just trying to spare my feelings—”



“All I want to do is hug you and get wrapped in your arms. You look like the perfect blend of soft and strong, and gentle but—” I stop before I can say hungry.

I have a feeling this man is hungry in the best ways.

Hungry for love. Hungry for me. But he might think I’m digging him about his weight, and I don’t care about that.

If he lost pounds, I don’t think he’d lose the sweet, serious nature he has or the sensitive understanding he radiates.

“Gentle but what?”

Jared steps closer to me.

“Like you... you’d take good care of me,” I whisper.

He steps closer and takes my hand again.

“Jared...” My whisper turns into a whimper, a needy whine I didn’t know I could make.

“If you want me to let you go, I will. But if you want what I want, and you like me, and you even like the way I look... Why don’t we at least try being engaged? You could teach me how your magical abilities work, like if they’re ever wrong.”

I nod, trying not to stare at how big his hand is underneath mine.

Do not think about big hands, big feet, big...

Think about the rest of the sentence. “Why don’t we at least try?” You could, what

would it hurt? If you broke things off right now, I think your ribs would break. His heart would break.

Focus!

Is your magic ever wrong?

No. Not really.

I can't figure out if that's something I want to admit just now.

He's still talking, a nervous, eager babbling that's utterly adorable.

Call me crazy, or maybe a little bit of a wuss myself, but I couldn't do what he's doing with a total stranger, magic or not.

I know a lot of strong men. They're lovely.

They're nice guys. Maybe they're super vulnerable at home, but not with me.

This open-book view of Jared and the fact that he's willing to put it all on the line. ..

"Can I maybe get a glass of water?" I cut him off with a croak, fanning myself.

"Of course! Are you okay?" Jared rushes forward, thinks for a minute, and scoops me up, so gently, like he worries he shouldn't, or he worries I'll break, and puts me on the couch. "Water coming up."

"Thank you."

He leaves the room, and I get to see his profile for a few seconds as he dashes off.

From the front, he's cute and cuddly. From the side—I can see the harder angles under their padding.

He's handsome. And cute. Obviously smart.

Didn't die. Didn't even pass out. You gotta put that in the plus column.

I'm sure there are negatives, but right now, the more I think, the faster the positives are stacking up, the harder my heart pounds, and the louder my libido screams in the background, reminding me that I haven't had sex in so long.

Why don't you let your magic take control? It's a pain in your butt most of the time. This is one of the few times it's done something wonderful—probably.

Because it was an accident. Against either person's will. So this is wrong.

“Here, honey. Do you need something to eat, too? The fridge is empty because I thought I'd be gone for Spring Break, but I think a couple of stalls at the Night Market are still open. I could go get you something? I could make something with what I have in the cupboards, like... spaghetti?”

I take the water and stare up at him.

“Did you just offer to make me spaghetti at like... one in the morning?” I ask, tears springing to my eyes.

No one has cooked for me in years, not since the last time I managed a visit home to my parents.

I didn't expect Mr. Sexy Faelord to get his wings dirty in the kitchen, but I always dreamed of finding a man who would cook for me.

“Yeah. I mean, it wouldn’t be my fresh homemade marinara sauce, but I have some emergency stuff in jars.

Pretty good, made locally and bought at the Onyx Farm’s little market.

.. I’m babbling. I babble when I’m worried.

Or nervous. And I shouldn’t. I told myself that I was going to start taking charge more in my life after being pushed around a lot by my ex.

” He shrugs and rocks side to side, hands shoved in his pockets.

Fuck, why is that so cute?

Is this what it’s like when you’re bespelled? Or just in love? That everything they do is cute?

“Chloe?”

“You cook?” I blurt out.

He gestures to his middle. “You didn’t think I built this figure on diet sodas and salads, did you?

I love to cook. Pampushka, pierogies, pasta.

.. Too many carbs. Way too many carbs, but.

.. Carbs make me happy. And my family is Ukrainian, Siberian, and Italian.

Both of my grandmothers equated love with cooking—and eating.

” He takes his glasses off and fiddles with the stems for a second.

“My dad is built a lot like me. He says we’re insulated. Cold weather ready.”

“You don’t have to sell me on you anymore. I’m trying to resist,” I groan, closing my eyes and trying to erase the mental images flying through my brain like a video on triple speed.

Cozy nights in a little townhouse here in Pine Ridge. Homemade spaghetti on the table. Candles. Wine. Talking and laughing, simply being, as Marmalade snoozes under the table, napping between our feet.

County Sligo, where my parents still live, is one of the coldest places in Ireland.

The damp and the cold and the mist around the rural spot where my parents live.

.. They’re great for atmosphere, not great if you feel lonely.

But now I’m picturing Jared and I spooning in front of their fire, my head resting on his arm as his hand strokes my hair, my sides, down to my hips, and then onto my—

“Why are you trying to resist?” Jared asks, still standing in front of me, like he’s afraid to sit on the couch and get in my space.

“Because I didn’t mean to bind you to me.

Us to each other. Consent is important, and free will is important.

The words tumble out, and my accent flies along with them.

I wince a little, knowing that when I’m agitated, my Irish “lilt” turns into an Irish

slap, as angry as an old Galway fishwife who's just caught someone trying to shortchange her.

“Because this was an accident, and accidents usually have a bad connotation.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

She's trying to resist. She's attracted to me. She used the word very .

Well, I'm in shock, but it's a happy kind of shock.

“You're right. Free will is very important.

Accidents are often bad things—but not always.

Insulin, penicillin, the pacemaker, and even superglue were all discovered by accident.

The first three have saved millions of lives.

There are happy accidents, and if this feeling that you give me is real, and the voice I hear singing in my head is true—this is the happiest accident I've ever had,” I laugh.

Chloe's eyes glow with a hint of gold for a second, and I understand, without knowing how I understand, that that golden glow means happiness. “You're so smart,” she whispers, a little note of awe in her voice.

I shrug. “I'm more academic than athletic.”

“Me, too,” she says, a sudden smile bursting to life.

It melts my heart, and I store it away, so happy that we've found our first non-magical thing in common.

“Some of the world's greatest discoveries have been made by accident. Life-changing discoveries. This could be one of them.” I shrug off the insecure voice that says to play it cool, because I’ve already played it so uncool that you could roast a chicken on my level of weak-for-this-goddess, heart-on-my-sleeve mess.

“Maybe it could save our lives. Y’know? Make them better. More worth living?”

Chloe nods, slowly, hesitantly. Her fingers are around the sweating glass of ice water I brought her.

Her nails tap, and I notice the housewarming plant from my landlord that rests on the coffee table in front of her knees is pulsing in time to her taps.

The leaves beat up and down, like breathing lungs.

Oooo-kay. We’ll store that up as well. Plants respond to my wife.

Future wife.

Possible future wife.

“Of my own free will, and with all intention, and no accidents, I’d like to ask you out on a date tomorrow night. Would you like to come over? I’ll cook you the best meal you’ve had in recent memory.” Way to brag, idiot. What if she’s like Julia Child, Banshee Edition?

But before I can go down the familiar path of second-guessing and berating, Chloe exclaims, “Yes! I would... I would love that.”

“Good! And if you like it, I’d like to take you out again.



I have the whole week off, so..." I spread my hands.

"I could take you on a tour of the new Botanical Center and Research Lab at PR NYU? It's closed right now, and the campus is deserted because of Spring Break, but I have a pass to all the buildings.

It could be just the two of us, in a garden wonderland. "

Chloe breathes out, a little moan under the exhalation, and all of the sudden, all I can imagine is lifting her up onto the stainless steel tables in the back of the botanical lab, wrapping her legs around my waist, and—

"And on another day, we could go antiquing. Thrifting?"

She rises, and my plant rises.

Not in the air, but the center of the philodendron plant shoots up like six inches, with baby green and white leaves unfurling and sprouting all around it.

Okay, I need to ask about how that happens.

"You like thrifting and antiquing?" Her hands are on her hips now, and there's a tremble in her voice that makes my temples ache.

I think that might be the banshee version of "tell me the truth, or I'll give you a migraine."

"Well, yeah, but only for nerd stuff," I admit. "Old vinyl records, action figures from the series I watched when I was a kid but couldn't afford to get back then, stuff for my D&D campaigns."

Chloe is flushed. Breathing hard. The pain in my head leaves, and pressure asserts itself in my groin.

Is she doing that, or am I doing that because I'm imagining her panting, flushed, and on top of me? Or under me. Or sitting ever so strategically above my face so I can... "Whoa." I bite my lip to try to focus somewhere else. Anywhere else.

"I have a lot of vinyl records. And so does Mad Hatter Music underneath me. Have you ever been there?"

"I keep meaning to, but I've never found the time. I thought maybe it was more like modern music stuff, headphones, earbuds, that sort of stuff. We could go this week? Make a day of it? Oh, you probably have to work."

"I do. But not all day, every day. I do that too much because I don't have anyone or anything else in my life right now except Marmalade and book club."

"I love to read. Big, big fan of Terry Pratchett and R.A. Salvatore. I gotta be honest, though—I never liked marmalade. It's too bitter. I prefer strawberry jam. Or raspberry. The raspberry jam you get in Ukraine is like, on another level from American jam. Do I sound like a snob?"

"No. A foodie."

She says foodie in a way that could melt lead. The heat and the admiration in her voice are just...

"I need to go get some water," I choke out. I also need to turn on the ice maker and direct it directly into the front of my pants.

"Marmalade is my cat," she calls as I turn.

“You have a cat? I love cats! Look what I just did.” Thoughts of water are temporarily forgotten, and I whip out my phone to show her the Adopt-A-Pet app I just put on it.

“I’m looking for a cat or dog. I had a dog—but my ex kept him.

And the house. Said it wouldn’t be fair to take him away from the big yard and make him live in a little apartment while I’m at work all day. ”

Chloe nods, and with a cautious, lingering side-eyed look, she says, “You know what I like about owning my own shop?”

“Hm?”

“I can bring my cat with me to work every day. I could probably bring a dog, too. A well-behaved one.”

Is she hinting like I think she’s hinting?

The rosy future fantasy of us heading out to work every morning snaps into place so hard my glasses fall off.

The dog and cat trot out to her car and hop in the back.

He looks like an Irish setter, just tiny.

The cat’s an orange tabby. We kiss at the car doors, her with the pets on her way to work, me with—

A little girl on my hip and a diaper bag on my shoulder. Taking the baby to daycare. She doesn’t go every day, but she goes a couple times a week. Sometimes she’s with

Chloe at the store, or I work from home. Sometimes my parents babysit.

How do I know that?

I feel lightheaded in the best way possible. What the heck is happening? Was that a daydream? Sleep deprivation? Can banshees see the future or something, and if they can, do they project little bits of it onto their spouses?

“Jen Chambers, the vet tech at the university’s vet program?

She was telling me that there’s this older lady out on Ridge View Way, all the way down, almost out of town—and she does fostering and rescues from puppy mills.

Lots of pure breeds that are underweight or not quite good enough with their markings to make show dogs? I bet she’d have something for you.”

“I want an Irish setter,” I announce firmly.

Chloe laughs. “To match your Irish banshee bride?”

“Um. Well, no, but... But do you ever get a picture in your head of something, and it seems so real?”

She nods vigorously, pale hair flying around her blushing cheeks. “Yeah. That’s been happening to me a lot tonight.”

“Me, too. If that lady has an Irish setter puppy... I’m calling it—your song was fate, and I approve. At that point, I’m afraid we’ll have no choice but to accept the scientific validity of the betrothal song.”

“What if there isn’t an Irish setter?” Her lips purse into a Puckish grin.

“That’s okay, too. We’ll say that it was a variant of the experiment.”

Chloe and I nod at each other. Her arms are crossed over her middle. Mine shift nervously from the back of my neck, to jamming in my pockets, to adjusting my glasses.

I have no chill, man. None.

“I should have just gotten to know my neighbors. Maybe then we could have gotten to this point naturally, like over six months,” she mumbles, looking guilty.

“Isn’t your magic a natural part of you? It’s not like you take magic vitamins or get your magic added in at the magic salon... is it?” I ask, suddenly nervous, because what if that is how she does things, and that’s what’s perfectly expected for banshees?

“No,” she chuckles. “Okay, it is natural, but we could have taken our time.”

Hoo boy. Cards on the table time? “I’m fine with a fast track to happiness—if this really does make us happy, Chloe.

I’m serious. I’m thirty-eight, I’ve already had one broken heart, a lot of bounces from university to university, research team to research team.

.. I’m ready for the best part of my life to begin, and I’d like it even more if my gorgeous, magical neighbor was the cause of it. ”

The philodendron on my table sprouts a flower, a waxy, cone-shaped beauty that’s coral pink and wrapped around a long, cylindrical pistil.

Blushing petals. Erect tubes.

Is she flirting with me through my houseplants?

I look at her, one eyebrow arched.

“I h-hope so, too. Okay. Um. Dinner tomorrow night?”

“Dinner tomorrow. Six-thirty?”

“I’ll bring the wine.”

“Perfect.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Hazards of Being A Banshee:

Sucky Sex Life

I leave Jared's place. I'm floating. Not literally, but I could be if I were singing.

Singing got me into this...mess? Does this qualify as a mess?

Marmalade is chest-deep in ferns, fronds, and vines when I reach my shop, pouncing happily hither and thither, purring and meowing at every rustle. I guess my magic was strong enough to affect things, even from across the alley.

"Marmalade, wanna hear a story?" I sigh, snapping my fingers and slapping the air around the plants to quell them as I collect my cat and head to the small staircase that leads to the attic apartment. "I was singing, accidentally enchanted a human, and now I'm engaged. Sort of."

"Mrp?"

I swear, my cat purrs and meows with punctuation. Her green eyes are questioning, and her ears lean forward, curious.

"Yeah, I know, I've been complaining about my dating life a little bit, but this is extreme.

" I put the cat down when we reach the third floor, and she scurries right to her favorite perch, the windowsill that faces the alley.

Tonight, I join her and look across the way.

Jared's there, looking up at me, a lovestruck, wistful smile on his face.

I bite my lip and tuck my hair behind my ear before I wave and draw the blinds.  
"That's him," I whisper to my cat.

"Rrrrrrr," Marmalade lets out a gentle, contented hum and settles into her cat-loaf shape, all of her little paws tucked under her, eyes closed.

"Wait, is that all you wanna hear? I'm accidentally engaged. Don't you want the details?" I tease her, prodding her little fluffy hip.

One eye opens, and then her head curls, tucking down to her chest.

In Marmalade speak, that must be, "Nope. Happy ending accepted. Beauty sleep now."

"Well, I'll tell you about him, anyway. He's big and tall.

He'd easily make two, if not three, of me.

I could cuddle up on him like he was my personal beanbag chair.

He looks... nothing like the cold, arrogant, fae boys I've met.

All of him speaks of warmth, gentleness, and something else.

Like he's smart, but not arrogant? At least not to me.

Oh my gosh, and he's so ready for this. I wouldn't have to wait around for years,



Marmalade.

I wouldn't have to 'talk him into' a commitment or worry that he'd run if he thought I was serious.

He wants to be serious. Maybe that's not a bad thing, right?

I mean, I'm thirty-two. My biological clock is ticking right now, if not outright ringing. ”

I turn away as Marmalade lets out a soft snore. She's pooped from playing with all the plants, I guess.

I am anything but tired. I'm on an adrenaline high that makes me want to sing—but I don't. I can't.

Not that singing would relieve the particular urge I have to go lie down and pick up where I left off on any one of the dozen fantasies that sprouted since I went over to Jared's house to end things—and came home besotted and as horny as a succubus in a nunnery.

See, that's something no one tells you about banshees. It's all, “Ooh, scary screechy lady, she'll sing of your death, and then you'll bite the dust!” as if the people weren't already going to die, and it's all our fault because we just had to go tell them about it.

Bad press.

But bad press has consequences. No one talks about how our reputations completely torpedo our love lives.

Most humans can't tell a banshee from a banjo, but our voices still impact them.

When do most people lose control of their focus, noises, and emotions?

During any really stressful, passionate, or exciting event.

Like during sex. So we can't just go pick up some random human and have a roll in the hay.

That leaves paranormal types. "Pure fae," what people call fairies, look down on us banshees because of how we were initiated into the fae family tree—long story.

There's a lot of bad blood between banshees and water-dwelling beings like kelpies and selkies—longer story.

And other types of magical beings? Still able to be knocked out cold by a single scream at the wrong pitch.

That wouldn't happen with Jared. He's mine. The bond is true. Can't hurt my "mate." And he's already a sensitive who can tolerate my singing...

He's not only husband material, he's prime lonely-lady-bits material.

Cold shower time.

THE COLD SHOWER DOES nothing. Noth. Ing. In fact, I'm back to that cozy night in Sligo, imagining a cold, dreary fog outside, winds howling—and inside, Jared and I are in front of a fire, spooning in a nest of thick blankets.

Shivering from my cold shower, I throw on some pajamas and tell myself to let the fantasy go.

I meant go away, but my brain (traitor) thought I meant "go on."

When I close my eyes, it's like I can feel him against me, his thick arm around my slender middle, naked bodies pressed together... His hand plays over my hips. Dips between them.

His lips are on my neck, and his soft voice asks if I feel good as he slowly teases my wetness around my entrance and up to my clit.

He's a scientist. A researcher. He's going to learn my body to perfection.

My fingers slide between my thighs as I lie on my back, eyes closed, mimicking the motions I want to feel. Gentle, tender, helpful... until I tell him otherwise. I feel like he's a person who wants to please.

My fingers begin to increase in tempo, pounding and rocking against my mound as I grind my hips against my hand. I want him. I want to please him, too. Unwrap him like the gift he is...

If he's really meant for me, that is.

Your magic may wreck a lot of things, but this is one place where it might have helped. Come on. Come on and believe that this might work.

"Come on" turns to come . Turns to "Come for me, Jared". Turns from little whispers in my head to full-throated cries that I wonder if he can hear across the alleyway—and I'm too lost in lust and dreams to care.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

I hear Chloe moaning like she is next to me. Right. Next. To. Me. I was in bed when I heard it, and I looked over, expecting to see her lying on the empty pillow beside me. Nope. She's across the street, but somehow still in my head.

I'm kind of glad she isn't next to me at the moment, because I'm going to burst. I'm as hard and thick as a log of hard soppressata .

I tried to cool off after she left. I even tried a cold shower.

It did nothing but make me think insanely inappropriate thoughts about the woman who sang one song and promptly took over my heart and life.

Thoughts about her warm pussy wrapping around me, about our bodies rubbing together until the sweat builds, about us bursting together. ..

My hand starts pumping, and I'm feeling ways I haven't felt since my honeymoon, and I can hear her sweet, heartrending song in my mind—and then I hear her moaning again.

Soft, at first, then louder. It becomes a shout of “Come for me, Jared!” and I obey, shaking and stunned at how fast and hard it happens.

Did she really say that? Did she scream that into the night, or inside my head?

Doesn't matter, because it's not like I can go rush across the street and show her that I'm a good listener. Not until tonight.

“I’D LIKE A DOZEN ROSES , please. And a vase to put them in.

” The floral counter in the Fresh Mart is my last stop for the morning.

I have a dozen eggs, three kinds of cheese, seventy dollars worth of charcuterie board assemblage, flour, fennel, onion, garlic, tomatoes, basil, oregano, and two pounds of ground beef.

My Nana’s recipe (scanned into the family shared drive from the mess of handwritten recipes on scraps of paper, backs of envelopes, and clipped, faded magazine pages) is already up on my tablet, waiting for me to get to work.

I’m glad I have the day off. I’m making homemade pasta from scratch.

“Someone has a romantic night ahead of him,” says the little lady who works the balloons and flowers counter in the corner.

“I hope so,” I say with a nervous smile. What about a dessert? We need a dessert. And a salad. “Can you have that ready in a couple of minutes? I forgot something.”

“Oh, ho. Better not forget anything important,” she smiles, unspooling white and purple paper to wrap the roses in.

Anything important. I nod and head towards the bakery, but stop at the healthcare aisle. Do I get condoms?

No. I swerve away, back to the produce. That would be ungentlemanly and super presumptuous.

Come for me, Jared!

Chloe's screams of delight echo in my head and dance down my spine. "Shoot. Nope, nope, nope."

I have to separate dreams from reality.

Why? asks my inner wiseass. Banshees and magic spells don't belong in reality either, but—

"Excuse me, sorry."

I turn and almost bite off my tongue. There's a huge, greenish-gray man towering over me—and I'm already tall. His skin is a net of fine scars and stitches. His dark hair is long enough to almost cover circular burns at the juncture of his head and throat. "I— I..."

"It's Manny! Manny Finkelstein, the mechanic who helped you change that tire two weeks ago? You dropped your garlic!" he says and uncurls the long fingers to reveal a bulb of garlic in the center of his palm.

"I dropped my... I dropped my garlic. Thank you," I manage to croak.

"You okay, Jared?"

"I think so." I look around frantically, but everyone else in the big store seems normal. "Do you know Chloe?" I ask, just because my brain is making connections, my mouth is on autopilot, and my manners are lost in the shuffle.

"From Chloe's Curiosities? Sure do! Lovely girl."

"Yeah. I... I'm making her dinner." That's not what I wanted to say. I wanted to say, "What are you?" If there are real banshees, and there is this man, who looks like he's

not quite human...

“Really? A little romance?” Manny looks thrilled. “Good luck. She’s an absolute doll.”

I smile, nerves temporarily vanishing. “I’m trying to impress her. I think she’s pretty special, too.”

“Well, take a little advice from one of the old-timers in town. The bakery here is fine, but nothing special. Go to The Pine Loft and ask if Georgie will make you his famous Guinness Chocolate Cake. Tell him it’s for Chloe, and he’ll probably have it ready for tonight.”

“Oh! Wow, thank you. That’s a great idea.”

Manny winks at me. “You strike me as the marrying kind, Jared. We marrying kinds have to stick together. Chloe hasn’t dated in donkey’s years. If she likes you... Lucky fella.”

He talks like an old man. Looks like Frankenstein’s monster, fixes flats, and gives dating advice.

You know what? Chloe and I have to end up together, because if we don’t, I’ll have to leave town... And even if she’s not in love with me, I think I just fell in love with Pine Ridge.

“Thanks, Manny! I’m going to head over to The Pine Loft now—ooh, as soon as I pick up the flowers.”

“Flowers?” Manny’s voice develops the tiniest hint of alarm.

“A dozen red roses? They’re the symbol of love and romance, right?” I try not to sound like a gawky freshman asking for advice from one of the cool older kids, but that’s the way I feel next to Manny.

“Chloe sure does love plants,” Manny nods slowly. “Uh... You know, just thinking ahead here, it might be a good idea to take the thorns off before you give them to her. So she doesn’t hurt her hands.”

I think of how my philodendron shot up and sprouted leaves in seconds when Chloe was happy last night.

“I don’t want thorns the size of shark fins if she gets upset, got it,” I mumble.

Manny gasps. “You know?”

“I know,” I wink, and suddenly, I’m back to cool kid status. I know the secret—and Manny’s scarred, stitched hand reaches out to give me a fist bump.

“Good luck,” he repeats, winks, and walks off.

I WORRY ALL DAY ABOUT what to wear, about what wine to bring, about how I’m going to be able to get to know someone when I’ve already broadcast clear signals that I’m lonely and aching for love.

A green sundress with spaghetti straps and adorable green sandals that show off the pedicure I got at lunchtime will work, right?

I hope all of this works.

If it doesn’t, I don’t think I can stay here. Or he can’t stay here. He’ll have to move, or I’ll feel his heartbreak all the time, layered on top of mine.



“Especially not if he keeps cooking like that,” I tell Marmalade as I fasten on my earrings and inhale the mouth-watering aromas that are coming across the street. Fresh bread... Garlic and tomatoes... Meat and onions, and something sweet and savory, and...

Home. He feels like home and home cooking.

I totally do not skip down the stairs, giggling to myself in excitement that I’m about to rush into the big, cuddly arms of a man who is cooking just for me. I’m a powerful businesswoman. In my thirties. I do not giggle and skip.

Oh, the hell with it, yes, I do. I try to compose myself enough to knock on his door, but before I can even raise my hand, Jared is there, smelling like Italian heaven and holding roses in a white vase that looks like it’s an antique.

“Hi!” he says breathlessly.

“Hi!” I answer back.

He holds out the roses, and I hold up the bottle of wine, both of us saying, “This is for you.”

We’re adorable, aren’t we? The skipping is smaller now, confined to my little banshee teenager who was convinced she’d never find real love with a side of happy paranormal life.

“It smells amazing in here.”

“I left the windows open all day to tempt you with my love letter in sauce.” Jared sweeps one arm forward. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“I’m starving. I skipped lunch to go get a pedicure.” I stick out my sandaled foot and love the way his eyes linger on my leg, but not too long, before he smiles into my eyes.

“Then the bread and salad await. I made the pasta fresh, so I’m not going to cook it until just before we’re ready.”

“You made pasta?”

“Mmhm. It’s not that hard. Plus, I have the attachment to roll it and cut it on my stand mixer—something Patsy didn’t fight for in the split.”

“My instant dislike of this woman is growing every time you talk about her.”

“I’m sorry. It’s probably bad form to talk about exes on a first date.”

“Maybe, but I don’t care. My God, is the bread homemade, too?”

“Oh, yeah, but it’s easy to make. Two hours from bowl to oven. I’ll give you the recipe.”

“I’d love that.”

Conversation flows like the currents in the ocean, endless and easy, natural, knowing just where we’re going.

I tell him the last time I had a home-cooked meal was two years ago, that I’m a sucker for Italian-American food, something my parents never made when I was growing up, and I admire the vase and the roses.

“They came in a cheap glass vase, but I thought... Chloe wants something with more

character. I went over to my office today and got this from my desk. It was my nana's, but she sent it to me when I moved here, along with some flowers. Housewarming-slash-congrats on a new job."

It's something from his family—and he's just giving it to me? "I can't accept it."

"Oh, that's okay. You can give it back if it's not your style."

"Everything is my style," I admit. "I'm like a magpie. I love all the junk that people keep, because it's not really junk. It's treasure. The stories that objects hold... That's the fae side of me. My dad is half-human, half-fae."

"Fae?"

"Like fae folk? Fairies? Not the tiny kind with wings. The tricksters who like to make deals with humans. My dad's a good one."

He never liked to trade for anything big, just people's junk.

He only wanted things that carried value to the person, not monetary value—and often as not, he'd lose whatever he bartered for during his weekly poker game anyway.

"I turn the vase that sits on the edge of the table, looking at the white-on-white roses.

"I think this might be Parian ware. Valuable."

"Then it's a good gift to bring to my pretty magpie," Jared says easily, and I can tell he means it.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Generosity is its own kind of warmth, and it washes over him in waves, reaching me.

It's so easy to reach for his hand and just soak into his heat.

His scent.

Looking across at him, I can see how short I am in comparison. With some men, that's intimidating, and they like to use their size as such. With Jared, I just feel safe.

Like I'm with family, someone who is there to comfort me and be with me, just in my corner.

I haven't felt that way in so long, probably not since college, when I told my mother I wanted to come to a paranormal-friendly community, and she wanted me to come back home and live with her and dad, avoiding the fragile humans in the world that I could accidentally hurt.

"You went to a sad place, far away." Jared strokes my hand with his thumb. "Is it the vase?"

"No. I love the vase. I love the food. I love being here with you." Why fight the best thing I've felt in years?

"I was wishing I had my family closer, but my mother... my mother doesn't even think I should be here.

She had some bad run-ins with humans, and so did I when I was in college.

She just doesn't want me to hurt anyone, or have me get in trouble, get blamed for something I can't control. "

"I get it." He nods, and then... He's silent. Beautifully, compassionately silent.

I wait for him to talk it out, to bring up his own sad tale, to jump in with some solution or some mansplaining... Nothing.

"You're a good listener," I praise.

"You have a beautiful voice to listen to."

"I love singing, but I..."

"I have three records. Used to have three hundred."

"Patsy?" I hiss, even though he mentioned it last night.

"Mhm. Here, it's not exactly fine dining music, but you can sing along if you want."

He puts on a collection of Doo-Wop hits. They're all familiar, easy to sing along with. And... And just to test out my theory, I whisper-sing a single line of one verse.

Jared doesn't clutch his head. Or scream. Or faint. He sings the next verse to me.

I sing back, and suddenly, we're singing together.

I can't stop smiling.

It's not until the third verse that I notice the roses are now gigantic, and the beautiful white vase topples onto the table under their weight, sending water all over the white

tablecloth and the carpet underneath, sloshing into our empty salad plates.

“We’re gonna need a bigger vase,” he says, absolutely deadpan.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll help you mop up. Are you okay?” I start scooping up plates, wadding up the tablecloth as Jared moves the wine and bread.

“I’m sorry I didn’t buy a bigger vase.”

“No! Do you feel funny?”

“I’ve been told I’m sort of witty.”

I lightly smack his arm. “My voice doesn’t affect you?”

“Oh, it does. I hear it like a beautiful dream. I even heard it last night when I was falling asleep. I heard—” Jared stops suddenly, like he was so comfortable talking that he forgot he had an audience.

“What? What did my voice say? What did you hear?”

“Nothing. I mean, I heard something, but I can’t repeat it.”

He blushes. I blush.

“Did you hear me calling your name?” I ask, preparing for my immediate death by embarrassment. That’s the politest way to put it.

He nods and mops up the table.

My appetite plummets, probably a side effect of that whole impending death thing.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? That’s something every man dreams of hearing! Especially said by someone he loves, some gorgeous woman who sweeps him off his feet.” He puts down the towel he’s using, stepping closer to me as I put the wine and bread back on the now-dry table. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, I shouldn’t have called out last night.”

His eyebrows fly high. “That was you calling out? Out loud ? I thought maybe you were just projecting it in my brain somehow, like your love song.”

“Might’ve been both,” I mumble, realizing I’m just digging my grave deeper every second. I could have let him think it was a dream, but no. Now he knows I’m a horny screamer who was begging him to come.

“It worked out well. Sweetest dreams I’ve had for a long time,” he admits, so close now that I can bump into him if I lean to my right.

I lean. I sigh. A wall of sturdy warmth supports me as I manage a weak chuckle. “I guess I’m not dying of embarrassment today .”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about. I just want you to consider something.”

“Soundproofing my apartment? It’s a rental. I can’t.”

“No. Next time, maybe we could make those sounds together?” he whispers, and I hear him hold his breath, as if he’s fearing his turn on the death-by-mortification wheel is up next.

“Together?” I mouth, almost soundless.

“I could make you call much louder. Oh, I know I’m not fancy fae,” he hurries on when I open my mouth, “but I’m a nerd.

A geek. A guy who once played one game of chess-by-email for fourteen weeks.

A guy who has been on the same D&D quest for three years and is planning to continue until the DM dies.

I will complete any mission my lady gives me.

” He bows low, one hand flung out, the other across his broad middle.

“And yes, that was corny as hell, and if you want to join me in that dying of embarrassment thing, we can go together.”

“I’d rather we come together instead,” I say—because I’m relaxed, and my filter is stuck in my second glass of wine.

“Okay, but you come first. I insist,” Jared says, and before I know it, I’m scooped up, into his arms and out of the room.

I LEAVE THE LIGHTS out. I’m shy.

Doesn’t matter, because my Chloe glows, a faint candlelight glow as we kiss, long and sweet, sitting on the bed in my room. “We don’t have to do anything. I didn’t invite you here to—”

“I know. And I want my dinner—after dessert.”

“I got Georgie to make me a Guinness Chocolate Cake for you,” I whisper. “So we can have a three-course dinner and a two-course dessert.”



We giggle together in the dark. My nerves melt away—and then my clothes seem to melt, too. First it's her hand on my leg, then my chest, then my collar.

“Jared,” she breathes between kisses, the hungriest, tiniest voice you can imagine, as if she's afraid to speak.

I'm afraid to touch her, but she snuggles into me, arms wrapping around me. Clinging to me.

“You're perfect. So perfect,” she moans, and I hate that I tear up, but I do. No one has ever loved me like that, or believed that.

“You're perfect,” I return. My hands get bolder. I find the bare back under her long, flowing hair. Find the straps of her dress under my fingers as they slide down. As one, we lift my shirt and drop her dress, clinging to each other to capture the maximum amount of skin-on-skin.

Under the tiny straps, she wasn't wearing a bra, so her soft, full breasts fall into my hands, and I make sure that I use them as tools for her pleasure, not for my selfish, giddy-with-disbelief pleasure.

I massage my way around the whole breast, not just targeting the nipple, listening for her responses.

When her hand connects with my crotch, I almost jump off the bed. Somehow, I don't know why, I never thought she'd want to touch me as much as I want to touch her.

“I didn't get any condoms,” I suddenly realize. “I thought it would be too soon, too presumptuous.”

Chloe nods, fiddling my belt free and working my zipper down. “I don’t take the pill, either. No point in my situation.”

“Oh. You can’t—”

“I don’t have any lovers. Haven’t for years.”

That doesn’t solve the problem. In fact, as we’ve been talking, she’s unzipped me completely, and now her hands slide smoothly into my boxers, cupping and stroking my erection, somehow making it longer and thicker than it’s ever been.

Is she working magic on me like I’m some plant—or am I just so turned on by her?

“I really want to feel you in me. Nothing between us,” she whispers, nibbling my ear.

I can pull out before?”

Chloe nods eagerly, lying back, motioning me to come with her.

“I wished you were on my pillow last night,” I admit, just staring at her, drinking in her beauty.

“I dreamed we were spooning in front of a fire. Your hands were on my hips.”

As we lay face to face, I make that part of her dream come true, rubbing her outer hip and thigh. Nothing is between us now but thin pink panties and navy blue boxers—and they’re useless, since she pushed the waistband down to stroke me.

I keep waiting for the barbed words to come, for the comments that make me feel ugly to start.

They don't. Instead, she guides my hand from her hip to her pussy. I hear her audible swallow before she says, "Then you touched me here. And that's when I called for you."

My fingers don't delay in massaging her, finding her pleasure center in the soaking valley between her legs.

She's wet for me. This isn't an act. When I touch her, she moans and arches into me, desperate and loud.

Without even trying, she sheathes me in her slippery paradise and welds our mouths together, burning me with her kisses.

"Can I taste you?" I whisper.

She just nods and lets me continue my exploration, lying still.

I roll to my back and shake my head. "It's probably better if you ride."

"I want to ride you until my thighs break," she grunts, sitting up and clawing her way over to me.

"I meant my face—at least my face, first . Then my cock."

"My God. You are so perfect. I'm going to keep saying it because I can't believe it's true," Chloe exclaims.

"It's not true. I'm so far from perfect."

"I get to be the judge of that, and I say that you feel perfect. You act perfect. You are proof of my magic being right, even when I fight it." Her voice is hard, but not mean.

But I know not to mess with her, and so I will let this little lie go. She can believe I'm perfect if it makes her happy.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

HE WAS SERIOUS. IN moments, my panties are on the floor, and my pussy is over his mouth.

I'm wetter than six bushels of overripe peaches, and Jared loves it.

With one hand, he's stroking himself, and the other digs into my thigh as I grind myself to heaven and back on his hungry tongue and sucking lips.

"Stay, baby. Let me suck you," he pants when I'm almost there, and both of his strong hands suddenly clamp around my waist, keeping me right where he wants me, right where I'm grinding, my hands clamped on his wrists. He sucks my clit the way I would suck a cock, hot, hard, and messy.

No one has ever done that. I didn't even know someone could do that.

I especially didn't know I would start bucking so hard, I would worry about Jared needing a neck brace afterwards. I scream and dig my nails into his skin, letting go for the first time in my life without fearing the consequences.

They're beautiful. I glow. Jared glows.

With a shove of my hips, I slide down over the round, firm middle that makes up his chest and stomach and leads me to his cock.

There's a tiny thought in my head that I should suck him first—and my mouth waters with want, but my pussy is the wetness winner at the moment.

I sink myself down, going slow because it's been so long.

I wait for pain, but there isn't any. Just deep, satisfying fullness in my slippery heat.

And now it's my turn to worship this man who wiped out all my insecurities so fast and so completely that I feel like a new person.

No, like the person I always hoped I'd get to be. Sexy. Confident.

"That was amazing," I purr, my hands on his shoulders, gyrating my hips with extra swivel, shaking my ass like his cock is my personal stripper pole.

"This is amazing," Jared gasps, eyes wide, watching me.

"The first night we met, I imagined this. I wanted to ride your cock. Then I wanted you on top of me. I wanted to feel you over me, warming me up, smothering me—gently."

"You did?" he sounds so awed—and it's so adorable.

My confidence rockets up. My ego will be the size of a skyscraper if I marry this man.

Maybe that's okay? I'm sure I'll have enough screw-ups during my daily life to keep me humble.

"I did. You made me come, and now it's your turn."

"It's not going to take long. You taste so good. Feel so good." He strokes my cheek, and his hips rise to meet mine.

“Hear how wet you made me?”

“Feel how hard I am for you?” he challenges in reply.

I sit down on him and squeeze all those muscles you’re supposed to flex to enhance pleasure, and it works. I see stars, and he curses softly.

“You have to stop soon. I’m going to come in a couple of minutes,” he warns, lips thin. “We’ll do more later.”

“I came fast, too,” I soothe. I love how he’s worried about that, but at the same time, I’m not.

I have a feeling that my pent-up pussy is going to be the perfect match for his love-starved cock.

I want him behind me. I want him pounding into me while his hands grip my cheeks, pulling my hair—I jump when I realize how turned on I am just by any thought of him, and that all my “taboo” thoughts turn into perfectly acceptable thoughts around him.

I even picture him popping my one remaining cherry, and there’s no worry or fear involved.

He’s yours. You claimed him now, a lilting, fluttering voice warns me as my hips go crazy, drumming an erratic rhythm on his cock.

I’m startled when he suddenly sits up, crushing me to his chest—but sliding his cock out of me.

I feel him shudder and spurt, his cum all over my belly, and his two thick fingers

deep inside of me as a replacement.

I bite Jared's lip as I come on his hand, so tempted to rub his essence into my hot, wet tunnel.

"I want you," I whisper between nibbles of his lips.

"I love you," he whispers.

It doesn't feel rushed. It feels right... but I don't say it back.

I want to, but... But bodies are easier than words. "I feel the best with you. Like we can do anything, because I'm supposed to be with you. Does it feel that way with you, too?" I ask, and I pray that it does.

"Yes! Chloe, I... I had so many rough experiences with Patsy towards the end, and some stupid, awkward experiences before I met her... You make me feel like I'm the best version of myself. Like I'm—"

"Completely confident? A sex god? You are. That mouth." I twitch, still having aftershocks.

"Want more?" he whispers, gently stroking my arms.

I nod, silent, wide-eyed. "Don't you need a rest?"

"I want to rest while I hold my beautiful banshee bride-to-be." He nuzzles his lips to my temple, and I melt. He could tell me he wants us to go skydiving, and I'd suit up and write my will. "And I have a feeling I'll be ready in no time."

THIS INCREDIBLE PIN -up worthy hottie curls up and kisses me. Snuggles with



me, touching me all over, including the parts of my body that I always believed were ugly. Not to her. Chloe sighs in contentment and kisses me with dreamy eyes.

At some point, she turns over.

Her bottom is the most adorable thing. Perfect and pert and so round, I just want to bite each cheek.

Speaking of cheeks... She wriggles back into me while my arm is draped around her. I lift her thigh and slowly start to stroke her soft, pink parts. With her, I feel confident. I can do this. I can be the lover she deserves.

“I like when you’re behind me,” she breathes out as I start to stroke soft circles around her clit.

“Mm?”

“And in front of me, of course. I... I was wondering—”

I roll us over, briefly pushing her into the mattress with most of my weight on top of her.

“God, yes!” she whimpers, but I’m not done. I sit on my knees, and she automatically gets to hers. “I think this would be a perfect angle.”

“Mm, yes, please.”

“But first,” I pause and duck my head, burying it between her parted thighs to pay a quick hello to her pussy, finding her soft, pouting inner lips and swirling my tongue over her clit before I stand behind her.

Chloe scoots back to the edge of the bed, and we click, perfectly, my cock sliding home into her pussy without hesitation, feeling the welcoming grip of her walls like they were made for me.

“Play with my ass?” she whispers, voice tight and nervous.

I almost shoot my load that second. “Of course, baby,” I whisper, and stroke that silky soft bottom. Squeezing. Lightly slapping my hands down as I cup and grip the fullest part.

She moans at that.

I’m not sure what she meant with her request. Old Jared would ask. New Jared should probably ask, too, but instead, I run my fingers down the cleft of her cheeks and stop when I find her tight pink ring. “Does that feel good, honey?” I ask, rubbing her in soft circles.

“I’ve never done things there. With anyone. But I want to do that with you.”

“I’ve never done that, either. We can have that be our special first.”

“Oh, God, yes. I love that idea, but for now... I like when you touch me there.”

“I’ll touch any part of you. You feel like you were made for me.” I bend down, resting my weight against her smaller back, my forearm easily resting beside hers, my hand covering hers as we press into the mattress together. “You fit with me like two—”

“Pieces of a puzzle.”

“Exactly.” Or a perfect hole for a particular peg, I think, as her walls begin to twitch

and pump around me more steadily, quickening the pace as I stay deep inside of her.

I'm buried to the hilt, my face resting against the cloud of long, silky hair that fans over her back and falls over her shoulder.

"My beautiful rose." I'm not good at poetry, but that's how I suddenly see her, a creamy white rose that still has that tinge of green—so wild and beautiful, so perfect.

Chloe tilts her head and pants against my not-so-muscular bicep, dragging her teeth against it before she bites down softly. "My bear," she moans.

The bear and the rose. We're a fairy tale. The simple, lonely man and the beautiful princess, or maybe the forest enchantress.

"I don't want this to end," I whisper.

"It's hard not to come when I'm so full and you feel so good inside of me," Chloe whimpers.

"Not that. Okay, yes, that, but I meant this. You and me."

"It can't unless you deny my offer. Or one of us dies."

Mental note to start eating more vegetables and watch my cholesterol. I think about the benefits of having Chloe in my life and realize I have a new way to work out, hopefully several times a week, so that's good.

"You don't want me to let you go?" I ask, bringing my free hand around to smooth down from her swaying breasts, over her soft belly, and on between her thighs. She's soaking still, wetter than before. I can feel her throbbing, feeling her stretching around me.

“No. I want to stay.”

Maybe it’s not the most erotic phrase, but it sets off all my bells and whistles. She wants to stay. With me. She wants me after all. I barely pull free before I erupt like a geyser.

To my delight (and kind of horror), Chloe screeches and pushes herself back onto my still-hard cock moving frantically on me to capture her final orgasm.

“Chloe!” I gasp, feeling one last spurt empty inside of her.

She just looks back over her shoulder at me and smirks. “That escalated quickly.”

I hasten to reassure her. “I’m not complaining.”

“Me, either. But I am starving.”

“Showers and spaghetti?”

Chloe sighs and collapses, curling up in my bed.

“Yes, please.” I look at her, all flushed and naked, pink spaces on her shoulders marked by beard burn and reddened thighs where our skin rubbed together, and the hint of white between her deep pink folds that shows I was inside of her—and that a little part of me still is.

“You’re beautiful. You shower first,” I say, fumbling for my never-used blue terry cloth bathrobe.

Chloe slowly sits up, a dimly glowing goddess in the dark. “We’re still going to have spaghetti and chocolate cake, right?”

“Of course! And tomorrow we can go thrifting. I bet you know the hot spots. Or we could go visit the campus botanical center.”

She stares at me. “We had sex.”

My stomach chills. “W-what’s that matter? I want to do a million things with you, not just that. I’m not like that. I didn’t make the fancy dinner to get you into bed. I... I made it to impress you. So you’d want to—”

Chloe flies from the bed—maybe literally—and plants her mouth on mine, her legs and arms wrapping around me. “You spoil me. I’m glad you heard my song after all.”

Hazards of Being a Banshee:

Fae Issues

“ I ’ll see you for lunch.” I kiss Jared goodbye for the tenth time. This is our second attempt at leaving each other—for all of five hours.

“Mm. Lunch. We can drive around and find a place.”

“How far do you want to go?”

“All the way,” he whispers, hands rubbing my back.

How can such a tender, soothing touch make me feel like someone spiked my lady bits with aphrodisiac lube? “I find the best things in random places. I have a sixth sense.”

“You found me right next door.”

We giggle, and there’s another kiss in the doorway as I inch away one second, then cling to him the next. I tell myself I’m only going across the alley, but it feels like one of my organs is being ripped out at the thought of putting distance between us.

“I know you probably want space, otherwise, I’d offer to come over and meet the cat. Dust the shelves. Water the plants,” he offers. I know he’s trying to joke—while being dead serious. After last night, I’d offer to rearrange my schedule to be near him, too.

Be smart. You need space. I'm sure it always feels like this the morning after.

I check my past experiences.

Nope. Never.

Shit.

"I'll see you at one, and then we'll drive out into the little towns up and down the Endless Mountain, into Pennsylvania, and search a couple of junk shops I love between here and Antonia. We'll find a place to eat out on the way."

Jared nods, but his eyes are glazed. When I look right into them, I see flashes, little hints, like I did last night, of the woman with the red hair.

Now I see us pulled over on a deserted, winding road, me in the backseat, legs hanging out the open door, and Jared kneeling over me, mouth fastened to my swollen pussy, his fingers stroking in and out of me.

I squeak. "Jared!"

"What?" He jumps guiltily.

"Were you just thinking about..." I pause. "Us pulled over on the side of the road?"

He's so adorable when he looks guilty. He even ducks his head. "I like that it makes you feel so good. You're so powerful, and when I make you feel good, I feel... worthy of you."

The hell with it. The shop can wait another hour. I do a full-on swoon, the kind where I collapse into his big, burly arms like a damsel with her corsets laced too tight. "You

are worthy. So worthy. You don't have to do that just to please me."

"I also think it's so hot, being so close. And you glow in the dark—in a gentle way, not like a glowstick way, and I can see everything up close and... Is that a pervy thing to think it's hot to see you, taste you, and touch you all at once? Down there? Patsy said—"

I let out a little shriek that would probably put Patsy on the floor. "I don't care what she said. It's hot as fuck. Now, take your robe back off."

"Honey, you said you had to—"

"I wanna suck your cock like you've been sucking on me.

Do it, or the roses die." I threaten, one eyebrow arched high as I channel my inner sinister banshee bitch.

I whisper, "I'm only kidding. I wouldn't hurt my bouquet.

I love my bouquet." I love him, too. I want to be close to him like he's close to me.

And by the sudden hardness I feel against my rear, he doesn't mind.

"The shop can wait," he agrees, and kicks the door shut.

THE SHOP HAS BEEN PRETTY dead, and I'm glad.

I've been humming and dancing around between my apartment and the register, showering (again), playing with Marmalade, getting ready, texting my best friends in town—Georgia and Gloria, who have both recently gotten married, and ask if they felt like their hearts were superglued together after just one time.



And after the squealing, Georgia says yes, and Gloria says sort of, and I have to remember that Gloria is a ghost, and she died before superglue was even a thing.

It's time to face the ultimate test.

"Hi, Mum."

"Hello, love! If you want your father, he's out with Ewan looking at a tractor."

"No, Mum, I don't want Dad. I want you. When you... When you met Dad at that festival—"

"It was a Druidian Festival at Stonehenge."

That was basically the same thing. My mother's perfectionistic streak is probably the direct reason I love clutter, and treasures, and little bits of life and nature scattered about me at all times.

"How did you sing your betrothal song if there were all those humans around?"

"I didn't sing it then, silly. We dated for a while, then your father asked me to marry him, and I gave him my song. That's how a proper young lady should do it."

"But... But you told me when I sang the song, it would bind the man who heard it to me, make him my soulmate."

"Of course, so you don't go singing it to just anybody! You'd end up with—Chloe O'Neill. What have you done?"

There's ice in her tone, and even across the ocean, I feel the power throbbing in my temples. I'm glad my parents' house isn't in a development, or their neighbors would

have all lost their fillings.

“I met a nice guy. A wonderful man. I sang—”

“What is he?”

“A research scientist.” I think.

“No, no. What is he? Pure fae? Elf, sprite, pooka? Tell me he’s not a Leprechaun. They make terrible husbands.”

“He’s not.”

“That’s something. Well? Oh, for pity’s sake, not an Orc? Saints preserve us, not a vampire? Or a proper monster?”

I draw myself up. “Stop that bigoted talk, Mother.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it’s just... Well, go on. Tell me.”

“He’s a human. All human, and considering I’m part-human, you’d better mind what you say.”

“Don’t tell me how to talk, my girl! There’s a very big difference between a halfling and a human, as you well know!”

“Not in Pine Ridge!”

“Town is a madhouse,” she mutters, but I ignore her, worry growing in my stomach.

“Mom, you’ve been after me to get married forever! I’m going to. I think.”

“You think? Did you ask him, or did he ask you?”

“Well, I sang to him, so—”

“Mary and the wee donkey! That’s an accidental engagement, Chloe! Easy to break, you silly wee thing. Have him deny your offer, and then you come home for a proper visit. There’s another Druidian Festival in June. The perfect time to meet yourself a fine young fae.”

“I don’t want—” I don’t want them. I want Jared. But I feel like now might not be the best time to tell her that. “Mum, I told him how to exit the bargain, and he refused.”

“What did you offer? Maybe your price wasn’t high enough.”

“Price? Offer?”

“Oh, when your father gets in! He taught you nothing about his side of the family other than to pick up every bit of rubbish you see! You’re part-fae!

But you know as much about the Fair Folk as some stupid American on a week-long trip to Knocknashee!

You must offer him something to release you from the bargain.

Otherwise, his choices are you, a beautiful young banshee bride—though not so young as you could be—or nothing.

Of course any man would pick you! Lookin’ to get his leg over, more than likely! ”

“I... I don’t even know what I could offer that he’d...”

“Think. You’ll know. The Fair Folk always know.”

“Well, I don’t!” I shout.

But I do.

We talked for hours last night. It was the most perfect first, second, and third date rolled into one, from dinner until breakfast, and then several encores.

He told me about his parents, about his being the first-born grandson and his grandmothers fighting over who could steal him for more hours in the kitchen, about warring Slavic and Italian cuisine, about his love of science and history, and about his life before moving here.

About Patsy. About Kep, the little Australian Shepherd he bought for them last Christmas, their “practice baby.” Kep is short for Kepler, like the scientist Kepler. And Patsy kept the dog.

He loved it. It was his little buddy, his best friend. Patsy kept it out of spite more than love.

And I know I can get it back.

A dog over me? No way.

Unless everything between us, everything last night and this morning, is just the banshee’s power dominating a sensitive.

“If he’s only enslaved by your song, the offer will open his ears, pet, and he’ll be free. Problem solved. Thank goodness you called. You should really call more often, Chloe.”

“Yeah. Okay, Mom. Gotta go.”

THE NEXT HOURS ARE a hollow mockery of the joy I had. I fight between elation and hope, then misery and shame. I’ve never opened up like that with a guy, physically or emotionally. It felt so right.

Magic is so stupid sometimes.

There are customers to distract me, but only a few. I do better business at the Night Market and when the college students are around. They always come in to find something quirky or vintage to take away the sterility of their dorms or furnish their first apartments for cheap.

When Jared arrives as I’m showing the last customers out, he is beaming and dressed for the day in khakis and a light blue sweater.

I use this word all the time when I see him, but I can’t help it. He genuinely is adorable, the kind of man you’d want to run to immediately and hug.

“Hey, gorgeous!” He opens his arms wide, and I run to them, unable to stop myself in time.

One last hug before I break the spell.

One last kiss...

He handles that, slow and sweet, but hungry. Hinting.

“How sturdy are those counters?” he asks, and suddenly, all I can picture are my bare bottom marks being scrubbed off the glass top counter by the register.

No. That's too far. "Not very sturdy," I fib and back away, looking down.

I looked so cute today, too. My favorite chunky brown suede boots, and my denim skirt with the big pockets, and my white shirt that flows and billows like some old-timey poet's... and now it won't matter. "I forgot to do something the other night. See, I'm not all banshee."

"I know. Your dad was half human, half... Fae folk? Or do I say fairy?" he asks, face serious. He wants to get this right. He's a scientist, learning about new (new to him, anyway) beings.

It melts my heart how eager and open he is, to anything, to everything.

For a pretty girl who can make herself truly terrifying, you'd be surprised how a simple lack of fear is a big turn-on.

"You can deny my offer if I offer you a trade. Instead of marrying me, I can do something for you. Fame. Fortune." I bite my lip. I can't really do that, not exactly, not without some dark magic, and I won't touch that.

But I know Jared. He won't say yes.

He doesn't disappoint. He laughs, then his smile dies. "You're serious? No! No, honey, that's crazy. Chloe, I'd never pick money or fame over you. I want you. Come on, lunch at the first greasy spoon over the state border?" he asks, tugging my hand.

I stay firm, trying not to smile, not to let tears fall. Trying to be a statue.

Broken-hearted Banshee, they could call it.

"What about Kep?" I whisper. "If I could get Kep back for you?"

Jared jerks away from me, head cocked in surprise. But then his face squishes up in a frown that I can't read. Disgust? Disbelief?

"I love animals, Chloe. I loved my dog. But I'm sure he's happy enough with Patsy, and I just have this little apartment. Sometimes you have to do what's best for your family, four-legged or two-legged." The frown fades. "Did you... Do you want me to break this off?"

"No!" I burst out, a shaking, gasping sob in a voice I barely recognize.

"But my mother told me it wasn't real unless I'd offered you an out, and out you couldn't resist. What lonely, single man would say no if the choice was a beautiful woman or nothing?"

Her words!" I wipe at my eyes, shaking my head.

"This man says yes. Yes, to you, or nothing. You can't buy me off. Doesn't your mom know love is a choice? You have to make it every day. Even if it starts with a spell, it keeps going with the people who choose to love each other every day after." Jared frowns. "Jesus, are all fae moms like that?"

I have to laugh, but it comes out like a goose's hiccup. "Not all of them. Just mine, maybe."

"I don't want to deny this. And hey, if I have a super hot, super powerful wife like you, wouldn't that mean I could get all those things I want anyway?" He arches an eyebrow, challenging my logic, and by extension, my mother.

Brave man.

"It depends on what you want?"

“Wife. Kids. Happy home. Cat. Dog.”

It’s a simple list. One I could share. As if on cue, Marmalade comes out of hiding and winds herself around Jared’s ankles. He scoops her and pets her, and she rubs her jaw along his shoulder, buzzsaw purr starting up.

“This cat seems like a keeper. Just like her owner,” he hints.

“That sounds good,” I whisper. “She’s a friendly cat, but she really seems to like you.”

“Is she a good judge of character? They say animals are.”

I think back, and even though Marmalade isn’t the most aloof cat, she isn’t usually curling up on strangers. (Then again, neither am I, and I was ten kinds of curled up on my hunky teddy bear hubby-to-be last night.) “She’s a really good judge of character today,” I decide.

“And snuggly.”

“I think that might just be you.” I lean myself against him and close my arms. “I want to do this all day.”

“I’ll drive, and you can do that. All day. In fact, I assist.”

I grab my purse, pry Marmalade off, and lock up. As we head down the stairs, I ask, “Did you say kids?”

“One to start. Why?”

“Not everyone wants kids, that’s all.”



“Oh.” Jared’s face is still, his eyes on the steps. “Well—”

“But I do. At least a couple.”

“Okay. Not to rush you or anything,” Jared crosses his arms at the bottom of the steps and gives me what I can best describe as a sassy grin, “I’m not getting any younger. I’m thirty-eight.”

“That’s my line!” I laugh. “My biological clock rings every five minutes, and I can’t find the snooze button.”

“Hm.” Jared kisses my neck as I sashay past him. “Maybe I could help with that?”

My mother’s words slowly vanish from my brain. Peace and happy excitement start to recover territory. “Maybe.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

I thought nothing could be better than last night, but today is just as good, in a different way.

I'm starting to wonder if I'm dreaming. The car ride is one of the best two hours of my life as we drive to the edge of nowhere, Golden Oldies on the radio in the background of a conversation that never stops.

"What are we looking for today?" I ask as we pull into the first stop, a huge brown barn that has more rusty machinery and old gas station signs outside than grass.

"What I call object d'junk. Not really junk, but little cute things, unusual things.

Things I can buy for five and sell for ten.

Picture frames, mirrors, crystals, little statues, vases, and bowls.

.. A lot of that sells to college kids looking to dress up their dorm rooms with something unique.

And then vintage dishes, vases, cookie jars, milk jugs, sugar bowls—those things sell well in Pine Ridge.

I blame Gloria White-Creighton for that.

Her parties at White Pines always combine that Roaring Twenties atmosphere and elegance with modern conveniences.

I mean, she was decorating the house in the latest style back then—”

“Who was?”

“Gloria.”

“The lady at White Pines?”

“Yes. Anyway, so many of the local events are held at White Pines, and I think everyone wants a little of that Great Gatsby elegance, you know?”

“Wait, Gloria lives there now? Or was she the lady decorating it in the 1920s?”

“Both! Oh, she’s a ghost.”

I’m so glad I just parked the car. “Oh, really?” It sounds like I just ate helium.

“Sorry, did I freak you out?”

“Just a little. And she hosts parties?”

“Not everyone knows she’s there. Or some people see her and don’t realize she’s a ghost. It’s complicated.”

“I bet it is.” I open the door and pause as I get out. “Wait, White Pines. That’s near the campus on the north side of town.”

“That’s right.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

“It’s where a lot of my friends have gotten married.” She gives me a long, sweet smile and wanders away, and I follow after her like a lovesick puppy.

“Where do you want to get married?” I ask. Nothing is off-limits with her, at least not so far. We stroll into the barn-slash-antique dealer’s holding hands, our sides pressed together.

“I’m not sure. Not in Ireland, oddly enough. My mother will want that, but I don’t. I don’t feel like my life is there as much as it once was. And your family? Are they local?”

“Scattered all over the East Coast from Connecticut to Virginia.”

“And your friends from college? That research team you mentioned? I’m sure they’d appreciate not having to travel too far. I—”

“I don’t know if I’d invite most of them. There are a handful I would invite, but not the jerks who pranked me out of my vacation.”

I feel Chloe’s grip tighten, and pressure shoots through my arm. Her hair lifts in the drafty barn, but there’s no breeze.

“They did what?”

So, I tell her about what happened. That maybe it was a joke, but maybe it wasn’t.

Maybe it was an accidental miscommunication, but maybe it wasn’t.

I’m about to tell her that a lot of professors and researchers can be like that when my phone rings.

“Speak of the devil.” My phone buzzes, and when I check it, it’s none other than Dr. Hull.

“Who is it?”

“Dr. Hull, of the Not-So-Mighty-Trio of Hudson, Hull, and Camwiddie, douchebags at large,” I grumble. “They’re on vacation, and so am I. I’m not answering. I’m with my girl.”

Chloe beams up at me. “You know how to treat a lady.”

“You make me want to treat you the best I can.” I ignore the call, but the phone buzzes again.

“Why?” I hiss and hit the decline button on my screen, but the pushover part of my brain is squirming.

It could be something important, a little nagging voice tells me.

Something important that they discovered in Mexico.

Some file they’ve sent you. Or an apology after the email you sent two nights ago. ..

“Take it,” Chloe urges when the buzzing starts for the third time. “I hope it’s a nice, groveling apology.” She squeezes my hands and smiles.

“An apology, maybe, but no groveling. Guys like this don’t always treat their assistants like equals.

Or it could be because I’m new. Or they see me as a loser.

” When I think about it, maybe all of those things are true.

I’m the new guy, divorced, no kids, plays games, collects old vinyl and action figures. ..

“Whatever you’re thinking, you should stop,” Chloe hisses, and I feel a shudder run through me.

When I look at her, her eyes are wide and dark, and the green of her skin is deeper. The glow is so bright around her head and torso that I wonder why no one else is staring.

No one else is in here. In the distance, I can hear what sounds like an auction going on for one of the old rusty pieces out front.

“Answer,” Chloe intones, and I feel the word like a shove on my arm.

“Hello?” I pick up and already feel my stress level soaring. Hull’s such a snot. I walk a few steps away and count to ten as I do so.

“Lochenko, Dean Whitacker has been up my ass because you can’t take a joke! He’s threatening to come out here to see what kind of research we’re doing—turns out he’s not too far away, in Cozumel.”

“Huh. How about that?” My voice is even. “Well, I’m just out doing a little shopping. I’ll discuss any findings you’d like me to look over when I—”

“Baby, pleeease come back to bed.”

I about drop my phone in the sawdust covered floor, whipping my head around to find Chloe sauntering up to me, the most seductive tone in her voice, her hips gliding

like a swan across a still lake, and her hands—her hands connect with my chest and move down, desperately tugging on me like she intends to have me right here in this barn.

“Chloe!” I hiss.

“Well. That’s a shocker. Hey! Hudson, Lochenko’s got a girl.”

“Shame. If she’s not careful, she’ll get crushed.”

Oh. Fuck.

The phone is whipped out of my hand, and Chloe hisses into it. “Don’t talk that way about my man!” Her words end with the faintest screech.

There’s a thud on the other end of the line, and then running footsteps. “Hull! Hull?”

“Oh, God,” I mouth. Chloe doesn’t seem too bothered. She’s seething, nostrils flared as she hands me back the phone.

“Lochenko? We’ll call you back. Hull fainted.”

“Oh no! Hope he’s okay.”

Chloe interjects, “He’ll be okay. But people should keep a civil tongue in their heads, hmmm?”

A second thud.

“What are you doing?” I ask, hanging up and sliding the phone into my pocket.

“Just a little reminder to behave. They’ll wake up in about twenty minutes—but the headache might last for days.

” Her smirk is impish, and for a second, I see the bewitching elf princess from the fairytales my grandmother used to read me.

“That’ll keep them off the beaches for a day or two, the selfish, lying windbags. ”

“Chloe, you just... You zapped those guys?”

She looks a little guilty now. “I wanted them to know they were interrupting your vacation and that they shouldn’t be walking all over you. That’s not so bad, is it?”

“No. No, not at all.”

“I shouldn’t use my powers like that, but... I don’t know. I was going to keep quiet until I heard him say that—that awful thing he said.”

I shrug. “I am a lot bigger than you.”

“I’m a lot stronger than an average human, but even if I wasn’t.

..” Chloe licks her lips, “When I feel you pressing into me, covering all of me at once, I just go mad. It feels like I’m safe.

Whole. Lost in you, with you.” Her hands dig into my arms again.

“There’s a back room behind the old horse stalls,” she whispers.

“Chloe!”



“I’m already close, just thinking about you sliding into me from behind.

” She looks over her shoulder and then back at me.

She turns and pulls up the long denim skirt, showing me the pale lilac underwear she has on.

With a panting breath, she pulls it to the side and lets me see her slick, swollen lips.

Well, shit. I’m already close now, too. “I still didn’t get protection. I should have. I can’t just pull out here, in some guy’s business.”

Chloe turns back around, seizing my hand to pull me along, down into the dark shadows of the barn that smells like old, warm hay and rusty metal. “Just put every drop inside of me, then.”

“Does using your powers make you horny?” I have to ask it. I regret it the second I say it, but it’s too late now.

“No, but imagining their faces when they realize that you’re twice the man they’ll ever be and that you don’t have to wine and dine me in the tropics to make me crazy about you lights my fire.”

In seconds, we’re in an old stall, hidden away behind tons of boxes, and I’m holding Chloe’s hips. Before I can even rub her, she thrusts her hips backwards, and I’m sinking into her, trying not to moan at the silken paradise now gripping my cock.

“When we’re done, want me to call Jerk Number Three?” she laughs as she rocks against me.

“God, I love you... and in case you were wondering, believe me, I know not to piss a

banshee off.”

And after she calls Camwiddie, I’m turning off my phone for the rest of the best second date ever.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Eric Clapton, Cream, The Doors, Chopin, Shostakovich, Paganini... That’s just the first six!”

I smile and lick my peach swirl ice cream cone as Jared crows over the box of records in their creased jackets with faded corners. “Eclectic collection.”

“Yeah, but I like them all. I wonder who had all these beauties, and in such good condition, too.”

I pass my fingers lightly over the old cardboard box. I get images. Vague. Fuzzy.

“College professor. Music department, here at Antonia College. Big collection. Donated when he died.”

Jared stares at me.

Was that too spooky? “I can’t do it all the time,” I squeak.

“Sometimes not at all. Only if the object had one owner for years, or it was a very personal item. I’m also wrong sometimes.

” It’s true, sometimes I’m wrong, sometimes I miss things, some things I just don’t connect to, like there’s something blocking me from tapping in even if I wanted to.

But there’s no fear on his face. Just awe. When he puts the box down on the roof of the car to retrieve his keys from his pocket, the records tilt forward in the box, and there’s a little sticker on the back of each record’s cover. “Dr. John Rothenstein.

Chair of the Department of Music Education.”

“I didn’t read it. I wasn’t playing a prank,” I say quickly, suddenly worried he’ll think that I’m somehow... fake.

Brains are so stupid. First, I worried about him thinking I was really supernatural, and now I’m afraid he’ll think I’m not.

“No, honey, I know. That’s cool. But it must be annoying. Does it happen with everything you pick up?”

I shake my head. “I have to try. I usually don’t. It would be too much to search for the history of every item I encounter, but I often get little glimpses of things that have sentimental value, you know?”

“Amazing. You’re like a supernatural historian. Anthropologist, even.” Jared puts the records in the car along with everything else we’ve acquired that afternoon from the four stops we’ve made. They’ve all been fun—one more fun than the others.

“It’s getting dark.” I look up at the sky over Antonia. It’s darkening, with the first stars in the east and sunset in the west.

“Are you chilly?” Jared snuggles up behind me, and I’m instantly lost in a blanket of his warmth.

“Not now. But I think I’m ready to head home. Do you... Do you want to come over for a late-night snack?”

“I’d love to! I could get to know Marmalade better, too.”

“That’s right. And um... you could run next door and get your things if you wanted to

spend the night,” I add, fingers shyly tracing around his watch.

“I’d love to.”

When we’re driving back, he tells me, “I’m not in this just because you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and you’re way out of my league, and the sex is amazing.

Those are... I mean, those are good reasons.

Amazing reasons! But I just...” He swallows.

“I feel happy with you. Safe with you. I know that sounds weird when someone looks like they could knock a door down just by walking into it, but when you grow up being the heaviest, smartest kid in your class, there’s always someone who thinks they have to say something to make you smaller—physically or mentally.

I never feel like you’re going to do that.

From the second I heard your song in my head, I knew that.

So, um. I was going somewhere with this,” Jared hums to himself, jaw tight as he drives us along windy roads.

“You never have to think that I ‘expect’ us to sleep together. Or that I expect us to spend the night together until we’re married.

I mean, if!” He grunts, shaking his head as if he’s so irritated with himself.

“This is a lot, right? Me clinging to you like moss on a tree all the time?”

Firstly, I'm moved by what a sweet man he is, to reassure me like that, and to also open up about why he feels like he feels.

Secondly, he's wrong. "I like this. I know my first impression wouldn't have convinced anyone of that, but.

.. Look, in the magical community, you grow up with things like fated mates, destined lovers, soul bonds, and yes, betrothal songs.

I'm almost the last one of my friend group to find that.

I've been alone in this country for twelve years, and well—no.

I don't think it's too much. I can't wait to go home with you and listen to your records, and to have you come over.

"I put my hand on his thigh and reach across it, delving down.

"I definitely want you to spend the night."

Jared gulps, then gasps as my hand tightens on the semi-hard bulge forming. "I'm driving."

"I'm just warming up."

WE'RE IN PINE RIDGE when I feel it in my stomach. My stomach is grumbling again, even though we stopped and ate a late dinner at a cute pub in Binghamton, but this isn't a hungry pain. It's a premonition pain.

My pulse spikes. My hands sweat. Jared's singing along to something on the radio, and his pleasant voice easily spans the range between tenor and baritone, but it's

suddenly white noise to me.

Something is wrong. Something is bad.

I feel the banshee's deathly howl welling up in my chest, and I'm relieved when we reach the stop sign on Pine Crest Avenue. "I have to get out," I screech.

"Huh? Chloe?"

I bolt out of the car and run toward my apartment, hands over my mouth like I can hold in vomit.

I'm running blindly when I smack into something—a white Prius trying to free itself from where it's jammed nose-first into the alley.

"What the fuck are you thinking, bitch?" the driver leans out of the window and shouts.

The bad feeling in my gut resolves in a way I've never felt before. When I look at the car and hear the voice, I just see pain. Agonizing heartbreak. It's not death or misfortune for her, it's like... she causes it.

"This isn't a throughway. This is an alley for residential use," I gasp, rubbing my hip and glad the lady was only going five miles an hour in a fairly small car.

"I don't care, I'm reversing in the dark with my lights on! Pedestrians don't have the right-of-way when cars are reversing! It's in the New York penal code! Look it up!"

I don't think it is. I also don't think it's worth arguing about. As I try to walk around her, I notice that she's got one of my recycling bins jammed under her car, and she's dragging it down the alley with its lid under her front tire. "Go slowly. You've got

my bin there.” I point.

“You obstructed the alley and ruined the right of way for a private vehicle! That’s a misdemeanor. If my car even has a scratch on it, you’re looking at a hefty fine—maybe jail time! It’s in the New York penal code!”

“Lady, are you out of your mind?” I finally burst.

She glares and swings the car door open directly into the red brick of Mad Hatter Music.

If she tells me that putting a building this close to the alley is a violation of the bloody New York penal code, I will consider performing an entire aria, enough to leave her limp as a dishrag for weeks.

Jared’s car eases to a stop along the street even though there’s parking behind the buildings. “Chloe, are you okay?” he demands, jumping from the car.

“I’m fine, I just—”

“Jared. There you are. Don’t you ever answer your phone?”

My head whips around between the woman in the white car and Jared. His face is ashen, and the spike in my gut is back, a beacon for all of my betrothed’s pain.

“Patsy.” Jared nods jerkily, confirming what I’d already realized.

Patsy wears a chic black dress, too much eyeliner, and has her hair done in deep, vibrant red curls. But the face is hard, and the lips always sneer. I don’t know why she married a soft, lovable man like Jared—I’d be tempted to fix her up with a block of concrete.



“I called you for hours. Thought you might have kicked the bucket. I should be so lucky,” she laughs, her voice as snide as her smirk.

“Witch,” I whisper. Sorry Farrah. Madge. Tessa. I know I just offended everyone in the Pine Ridge Coven, but I hope none of them heard it. This woman makes me think of heartlessness and evil, just in the way she talks and moves, like a poisonous spider spotting a tasty fly.

“Shut up, lady. You’ll get your trashcan back as soon as my dumbass ex signs the papers I’ve tried to fax him three times !”

Jared steps up, and I run to him, putting my arms around him possessively, sighing inside when I feel his arm wrap across my shoulders.

“You tried to fax me three times? To what number?”

“The one you’ve always had!”

“Patsy. That’s the fax machine in the printer, right?”

“Right!”

“The one you kept? The one I said I should have because I actually might use it for looking at field data and reports from remote places, but you said you had to keep it because your uncle gave it to us as a wedding present? That one?” His voice grows stronger the tighter I cling.

Caught in her stupidity, Patsy swallows, then takes in the sight in front of her.  
“Who’s this?”

“My—”

“I’m Chloe. Jared’s fiancéé.”

Her knees actually buckle in shock. Her mouth hangs open like a rusty gate, and the sounds she’s making match, a scratchy squeal of disbelief that comes from the back of her throat.

It’s delicious, and the stab of pain in my middle unspools, some of it dissolving. I paw Jared’s chest, lying my head on his side and not breaking my gaze.

“What the fuck? Are you serious?” Patsy finds her voice, but it’s filled with ugly laughter. “Well! Oh, honey... He doesn’t have any money. Not anymore. Not with my alimony, and the money he sank in that house.”

“I have my own money, thanks. I want him for his heart. For what’s inside,” I say in a warning tone, little bits of my magic escaping in my rage.

“Chloe, careful,” Jared whispers. “Not worth anyone getting hurt and uh... Any follow-up that might cause.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“She’s a scrawny thing next to me, Jar. She’s not going to hurt me. Hell, I’m surprised she doesn’t get squashed under you. Did you tell her that’s why I stopped sleeping in the same bed with you, in case you rolled over and—”

“Enough!” Jared’s tone quivers with hurt, while mine pierces like an arrow. I see Patsy grab her left eye, and I know that the banshee version of an ocular migraine is about to make her week a living hell.

Yay. Goody. I mean, oh, what a shame.

I push away from Jared’s side, slowly walking to Patsy.

My steps are measured, trying to force control into my seething body in just a few feet.

“I like when he’s on top. Underneath. Behind.

” I close my eyes with an exaggerated look of pleasure on my face, exaggerated for her benefit, not because it’s untrue.

“He didn’t tell me anything about you, except that you hurt him. Guess he’s mine to heal, huh?”

“I... Whatever you say. I still say that you’d better up your insurance or plan to have your own bedroom,” Patsy mumbles, rubbing her forehead.

That fucking does it. I grab the Prius by its short, stubby tail and yank backwards,

letting out a little cry of spiraling song to pull up some of my banshee powers.

The car moves.

Patsy falls.

“Crap,” I whisper.

“That was so fucking fantastic!” Jared sweeps me into a hug over Patsy’s collapsed form. “Superwoman!”

“Well, ha ha. I hope you still think that once she wakes up and starts screaming at me.”

Jared releases me and bends to shake Patsy. “She’s out.”

“She will be for a few hours, too.”

“Well, let’s see what papers she was screaming about,” he sighs, picking up the fallen sheets from under her. “Oh. Oh... Oh, damn it!”

Each “oh” changed pitch, from confusion, to surprise, to anger. When he stops, I ask, “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve been divorced for months, but my publishing bonus was part of the contract I had while I was still married to her. It’s just been paid out recently, but Patsy’s lawyer seems to think she gets half.”

“What’s a publishing bonus?”

“I was credited in the publication of a paper on honeybee decline that included my

specialty area of research, potential medical interventions to stop whatever viruses or mites may be contributing to the decline. At the last university where I worked—one of the biggies—lead scientists and professors got bonuses per paper they published in a scientific or peer-reviewed journal. For us lowly assistants, there was also a bonus, much smaller, but still pretty hefty to me. Twenty grand if it was published in an international journal. Which it was.”

“And she wants ten thousand dollars for work you did while you were married—but didn’t get paid for until after the divorce? Is that even legal?”

Jared shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t care. Patsy’s lawyer does what he wants to get his cut. I’ll write her a check, and she’ll go, leave us alone.”

But my insides don’t like that idea, because I can see the shit that’s coming—in little flashes, little blinks of misery and frustration.

Not that the money matters, but the way in which Patsy lords it over him makes him feel like she’ll always be a part of his past he can’t shake, a constant reminder of the pain she likes to inflict.

“She’s going to keep doing this. Every time you publish from now on and get a bonus, she’s going to argue that it was based on work you did while married to her, even if the payout comes much later.

She’s going to find a shifty lawyer and a bored judge, and they’re going to keep coming back to get more and more money—because she likes making you pay.

It’s her way of making sure you never get rid of her. ”

Jared shrugs. “Don’t I know it. I heard her bragging once when we were first separated, saying that she was going to be single with a string of lovers for the rest of

her life so that I'd always be her personal piggy bank. I guess I was too much of a pushover to keep fighting in court."

My hands rub his shoulders. "That's not true. You were hurt and lonely. You were shocked that someone who once claimed to love you so much would treat you like that."

Jared looks into my eyes. He's so much more than cute at this angle. There's a handsome earnestness in every line. A quiet, tenacious nobility. "The strongest warriors know when to leave the battle," I whisper.

"You don't think I'm weak? Or whipped?"

"No. No, I think you hoped someone better would come along—and I'm here now.

" I slide my hands through his and squeeze tight.

"Will you let me fight this battle my way? I promise—she won't get hurt.

Well, she'll probably have a migraine, a real big case of shame, and her bank account will be a lot lighter. "

"What are you going to do?"

"Um. I have a couple of friends in town—one of them is your landlord, and he's going to be in his office tomorrow, I think."

"My landlord? Alban Wymark? What's he have to do with this?" Jared shakes his head, baffled."

"He's a lawyer and a warlock. By tomorrow afternoon, I think we might get Patsy to

sign a new alimony agreement, a legally binding one—all of her entirely free will. Honest.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, first, I’m going to call Artie, the police officer. He’s a pooka. He understands magical accidents, believe me.”

“What’s a—never mind. I’ll look it up later.”

I whip out my cell phone and scroll through my contacts. Fortunately, Artie’s in there, and more fortunately, he picks up. “Artie?”

“Hi! How’re you, stranger? Oh, no. Is something wrong? Did someone break into your shop?” Artie’s voice goes from calm and relaxed to full-on officer in seconds.

“Someone tried to wedge their car into my alley, sassed me, sassed my boyfriend, and got my recycling bin wedged under her car. There was a little argument—she said my bins were against the penal code.”

Artie snorts. “Oh, no. Not the dreaded person who thinks they can quote the penal code as an intimidation tactic.”

“Nailed it. She’s a little... banshee’d.”

“How little?”

“Right now, she’s snoring on the sidewalk. Tomorrow morning, she’ll wake up feeling hungover as heck.”

“Oh, no. Vagrancy and public ‘drunkenness.’ Now, that’s against the penal code. I’ll

be right over.”

“Wonderful, we’ll be waiting. Oh, and do you know if Liam is still in town?”

“Liam! Yes, he is, but what do you want with that reprobate?”

“Oh, come on. He’s not really a reprobate. He’s just on a different diet than the rest of us. It could be worse.”

“You’re right about that. I can help you find him.”

“Well, I’ll pay his bar tab if he plays nice with this lady.”

“Chloe, what in the world are you thinking?”

“I just want him to meet her tomorrow and see if he can’t charm her into accepting one of his famous proposals.”

Jared’s eyebrows fly sky-high. “Who?” he mouths.

“Incubus who lives out next to Jax Alley, the roadhouse that’s kind of dingy... but fun,” I mouth back.

“Pooka. Warlock. Incubus.” His brow is furrowed and his mouth hangs open.

“Banshee.” I beam. “Don’t worry, honey. Every monster I just mentioned is less evil than this thing,” I whisper, and nudge Patsy with my foot.

“I’ll be right over,” Artie sighs.

“I owe you anything in the shop, officer.”



“No, thank you. Just doing my duty.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Do I feel guilty that my ex-wife is sleeping off a banshee-induced mini-coma in the local jail?

Not even a little.

In fact, I'm turned on. Not by the jail cell (which I have been assured is reasonably comfy), but by the fact that Chloe put her there.

I know it's stupid to think of it like this, but seriously.

.. Chloe just kicked Patsy's ass with her voice, and it was so fucking awesome to watch.

She's a superhero. Do you know what it's like for a comic book nerd who spends hours playing games with mythical beings to suddenly find themselves dating a paranormal superhero?

Erotic combustion, my friends.

Do these thoughts make me a bad person?

I decide no, they don't, because Chloe's not a bad person for putting Patsy there in the first place.

I double down on my decision when I see the bruise on my sweetie's hip and under her ribs from where the car backed into her.

When I realize that happened—I think about Patsy’s glove compartment full of speeding tickets and the way she loved to leadfoot around, and suddenly I’m holding Chloe’s hand in a hospital bed while machines beep and her heart rate ticks lower and lower from internal bleeding.

I know we’ve had a long day, I know tomorrow might be even crazier, and I don’t fucking care.

I finish my shower in Chloe’s pink and green bathroom and hurry to the bed where she’s sprawled out in a thin white nightgown, the kind that’s cotton but almost sheer.

“You could have gotten run over,” I whisper, eyes tracking the damaged spots I can’t see now, but I still see them in my mind’s eye.

“I could have. Didn’t.” She holds out her arms, and I crawl up the bed, my bulk seeming too big in this little space.

Chloe doesn’t think so, curling up tightly to me.

I place my hand on her shoulder and rub gently, wishing my libido and stress could talk things out.

My brain is going over horrible What-Ifs, and my cock is grabbing all the blood from my brain and sending it south, greedy for this soft, lithe body that fits perfectly against me.

“Love you,” she whispers.

I swallow hard, hard enough for her to hear. She said it. She said it first this time, or maybe she said it back from last time. Whatever, it doesn’t matter.

“Love you, too. So much.”

We just hold each other for a long time, and when I feel my eyelids getting heavy and sleep winning out over the aforementioned erotic combustion, I hear her voice.

I hear it in my head, in the room, all around me, wrapping tendrils of notes around me as the pot of English ivy in the window starts to spread and creep gently along the wall.

“Thiocfá agus aimsigh mé, chuirfeá i gcuimhne dom i gcónaí an áit a bhfuil mé i gceist a bheith...”

This time, I understand the words. I know them, and I sing with her. You'd come and find me, you'd always remind me of just where I'm meant to be...

Her eyes glow, and she looks up at me. “You are where I am meant to be, Jared. Do you know that?”

“I knew it before you did, silly.”

Chloe climbs onto me sleepily, until she rests atop. I rub my hands across her bare bottom, her nightgown now hiked up over two plump cheeks.

“We fit together,” she whispers, head over my heart.

“We sure do.”

“WHAT’S GOING TO HAPPEN ? And are you sure it’s going to happen today?”

“I offered to pay off Liam’s bar tab, which is substantial. It’ll happen today.”

Chloe and I are sitting in The Pine Loft Coffee Shop, eating the best, butteriest croissants known to God or man on Tuesday morning, when two very different men walk in.

One, I recognize right away. Early thirties, tall, dark, and handsome yuppie type with a big smile and a sharp suit—my landlord, Alban Wymark.

He looks too nice to be a lawyer, let alone a warlock.

The other one makes me swallow my coffee too fast. I've never seen someone who looks like... I don't know. Those super pale vampire heartthrob guys? Like a cross between an Anne Rice actor and an anime heartthrob?

"Don't stare," Chloe whispers.

"I'm not," I whisper back, even though I am.

"Oooh, sweetie, who is this big papa bear?" Mr. Sex Personified sits down and smiles. He has teeth that start with fangs and end in a smile that's too wide.

Chloe tilts her head. "I didn't know you worked on such a broad base of clientele, Liam."

I shift uncomfortably. I'm flattered, but also freaked out. "I'm Jared," I cough.

"I'm Liam, recently arrived Incubus, and don't you worry, you sweet cinnamon roll.

I prefer my meals more along the lines of Chloe's size and with all of the accompanying 'equipment,' but I'm ravenous this morning.

" He sighs dramatically and crosses his legs in long black leather pants, showing off

black leather boots with high, clunky heels and silver studs.

“David Bowie!” I cry out, turning heads. With his pale features, spiked, uneven hair, and thin form in dramatically high-heeled boots, I finally figure out who this guy reminds me of.

“Well, I’ll do it for free now,” Mr. Incubus says, beaming at me. “Chloe, is this hunk of goodness yours?”

“Yes, he is. And stop acting like a sleazy sex bomb. You’ll give him the wrong impression.” Chloe rolls her eyes and pulls a layer of flaky goodness off her croissant.

Alban comes back with two coffees. Liam uncrosses his legs, loses his predatory smile, and his features relax into something much more... wholesome. I think that’s the word I want.

“Patsy Lochenko is sleeping off one of my little screams in a jail cell,” Chloe begins.

“That’s my ex. She hit Chloe. Backed into her with a car,” I speak up, hands clenching on the tabletop.

“And she’s a rude, insulting, petty bitch. Pretty, though,” Chloe grudgingly admits.

The two men catch my eye, and I shake my head vehemently. “Not once you know her,” I explain.

“The problem is—she has a shady lawyer who keeps taking what belongs to Jared. His house. His dog. His fax machine.”

“Fax machine?” Alban’s eyebrows arch.

Chloe ignores him. “Now, she wants half of any bonuses he earns for publishing his research. Patsy’s going to claim she gets half since he completed a lot of his research while they were still married. I sensed it when I heard her speaking. I just... I know.”

I’m puzzled about how all of this works, but Mr. Incubus and Mr. Warlock nod with sympathetic faces.

“I brought a copy of my current alimony agreement and the divorce settlement. There’s this line in there about any property acquired during the marriage—physical or intellectual—shall be evenly divided.”

“That’s poorly worded. Any proceeds from the intellectual property that were acquired during the duration of the marriage— maybe , but this is really a shakedown. It’s got loopholes a mile wide. How can she determine what intellectual property was acquired during the marriage.”

“She’s claiming any research and writing I do from here on out is based on knowledge I gained then.”

“Why wouldn’t it be based on knowledge you gained before you married her?

Who’s to determine where knowledge starts?

” Liam demands, crossing his long, slender fingers under his chin and resting his sharply angled jaw on them.

“Isn’t everything you know now based on your ability to read and do basic math?

I assume you’re some sort of scientist or something. ”

“You’re right, and yes, one could argue that without basic reading and math skills, all

research would come to a halt. I wouldn't be able to do calculations, examine data, or read reports. I wouldn't be able to write my own findings up, either."

Liam and Alban exchange glances. "And they say my kind are predators," Liam mutters with a low whistle.

"And she got the house? The dog?"

I shift uncomfortably in my chair. "I let her keep him in the end, I guess. She said moving Kep from house to house or sticking him in a tiny apartment wouldn't be fair to him.

But she's not really... She always said she loved animals, but she doesn't like the mess they make.

She didn't really know that until after we had a dog.

"I hurriedly sip my own coffee to wash down the pain in my throat.

I shouldn't have gotten a dog with her. I shouldn't have left Kep behind. I should have fought.

Liam reaches over and lays his ice-white hand on mine, giving it a little squeeze that startles me. "It's okay. You were too busy with heartbreak to think clearly. It hits you hard, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." I'm grateful that's all I have to say.

Alban is going through my divorce paperwork with one frantic finger, and I notice his lips moving, silent, speedy words flying from his mouth.



When he's done, he pulls a laptop from his handsome leather shoulder satchel, opens it, and presses a single key.

"This is legally binding—and fair, in my estimation. It removes the intellectual property clause and also says that as soon as the former Mrs. Lochenko gives you verbal or written notice that she is in a committed relationship, your alimony ceases and may not be reinstated for any reason." He turns the screen to face me.

My eyes glaze over after the first three paragraphs of legalese, but I nod. "I doubt she'll sign this, Alban. Or admit to being in a committed relationship. That might be years away. But thanks. It's good to have it in my back pocket."

Chloe rubs my arm. "Honey, that's just Alban's part of the plan. Now, Liam takes over."

Liam smiles and looks into my eyes. I feel—warm and confused. Then, irritated. "I'm with the lady, buddy," I finally grumble.

To my surprise, Liam just rubs his hands together happily and giggles.

"Yes, but if you weren't betrothed to our local banshee, you'd be well on your way to being seduced.

And just so you know, I'm not like one of the incubi of old.

I can seduce and feed on desire without having a full 'meal,' so to speak.

I think that after I rush to Miss Patsy's assistance this morning, catching her wobbly form as she exits the police department, she'll start to fall for my charms. And of course, I'll insist that she sign this decree before we start our new life together. "

“Wait... You’re going to trick Patsy into falling in love?”

“No, sweetie. I can’t do that.” Liam shakes his head, and there’s sadness all across his handsome features. “I can make her fall in lust, though, unless she actively resists. I’m all about free will. Kind of a big deal.”

“It won’t break her heart?”

Chloe’s grip tightens on my arm, and I feel her pulse beating through my skin. “I love you so much,” she hisses.

Well, I might as well be king of the universe right now. She said it. This amazing woman loves me, and she told other people, too! “I love you, too.”

“I mean, because you are so good, Jared. Other people have hurt you, but you won’t stoop to their level. You’re truly wonderful.”

She nuzzles into my shoulder, and I bow my head to kiss her. “It’s a different story when they hurt you,” I whisper, remembering the bruises on Chloe’s side.

I suddenly don’t care what tricks they play on Patsy. She needs to learn a few hard lessons about how she treats people.

“Don’t worry, nothing illegal or underhanded will happen. Sneaky, but not underhanded. I would say this agreement is more honest and fair than the first one.”

“Won’t she realize she’s been duped and just sue or something?” I ask.

“She might. I doubt it. As long as she gives off enough sexual energy for me to snack on, I’ll be happy to be her main squeeze for a few weeks. Again—I don’t have to do the deed to get the feed,” Liam reassures, his toothy smile back in place.

I'm about to ask Chloe if I can trust these guys, but then I stop. I don't think I need to ask, after all. I trust them more than I trust Patsy.

Sometimes the humans are the monsters, dearie," Liam sighs and chugs his coffee. "Ugh. Alban, two sugars, I told you."

"No, you told me to get you something with more syllables in it than an Italian dictionary. Coffee, black. Go dress it up yourself, smiley."

"You're just jealous because you can't wear leather," Liam huffs and saunters off.

"I like him," I say aloud.

Chloe laughs. "Good, because he could use a friend like you. Everyone could."

Alban rises. "You pay for the coffee and the filing, kids, and the rest is on me. Pro bono for one of my best tenants... even if you'll be moving out soon."

"Huh? Oh, I have no plans to leave—" I look over at Chloe, who is looking at her croissant, now just crumbs.

The image of two cars parked in front of the townhouse is back, the little girl with purple Velcro sneakers on her feet and tiny blonde pigtails resting on my hip, the kiss as we walk to our vehicles—and the cat and dog jumping into Chloe's car... And this time, Kep's there, too.

I blink. "To leave the area, but I'm thinking a little townhouse with a yard might be nice."

Chloe shakes Alban's hand. "A summer wedding would be nice. Want to be an usher?"

“Just tell me when to show up.”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Notes and Hazards:

Can't Help Falling In Love

I wait for Patsy to call me after she's out of jail, to resume her attacks and demands.

If she does—I'll tell her no. I'm fighting.

This time, I'll fight this, fight her. I'm no longer some broken-hearted lost guy, shuffling through in his pathetic post-break-up stage.

I have Chloe next to me, and we have a good life ahead.

I can see it.

“This is the first time I've marshaled the troops,” Chloe says as we stroll together, hand-in-hand.

“Hm?”

“Oh, there are lots of problems around here. Sometimes people don't see them.

I mean, 'normal' people don't see them. There was the time Frankie Watson's daughter got kidnapped—for about fifteen minutes.

Eddie Hyde chased the dude down and got the little girl back.

They got married. Frankie and Eddie, not the little girl. ”

“Ah. Got it.”

“And then there was the time that Marina’s ancient overlord demon daddy showed up and tried to drag her off to the underworld. That was like a full-scale paranormal posse event.”

“Is someone writing these things down? They’d make amazing books.”

“I don’t know if anyone would want to read little sappy tales of romance and the neighbors getting together to solve problems. It’s probably boring,” she sighs. “But this was my chance to help, and I liked it. You can count on your fellow paranormal types.”

“I guess so.” We pause at Mad Hatter Music. “Wanna go in? Today, I have time.”

“I will for a little. I have to open the shop, especially if we still want to have our little deserted campus rendezvous tomorrow, and then go and see that lady with the rescue dogs on Friday.”

As we browse the stacks, I ask, “Are there other normal people married to supernatural types?”

“A lot! There’s Wesley and Gloria, Kev and Marina, Madge and Reynaldo.

.. There are more, too. And some of us just haven’t found our match yet.

” Chloe huddles under my arm and holds up an old vinyl record from the Seventies, its cover blurry and golden orange, with candlelight and a shadowy piano on the cover.

“ Endless Romance . Hits to Set the Mood .” I read from the cover and tuck it under my arm. “Keeper.”

“Yeah. You are.”

WORKING TODAY IS TORTURE . Patsy hasn't called Jared.

Liam hasn't called me. The store is unexpectedly busy when Lennox, the mothman arborist and gardener who works at White Pines, brings the local garden club in (I didn't know we had a garden club, and now I have to join) to hunt for unique vases, baskets, and planters.

For an hour or two, the shop distracts me.

In the afternoon, Jared distracts me, coming in with his laptop and sitting on the backstairs, saying he wants to work here, just to be near me.

And when he's around, sitting here doing his thing, in my space, there's no lust boiling over, no heartbreak, no worry.... just something calm running through me.

“I want to do this every day for the rest of my life,” I tell him, closing the register after the last customer leaves for the day. “Not where you sit in the corner and work, though that's great. Just be with you. Be near you. Feel you near me. You soothe my soul, Jared.”

He shuts his computer and crosses to my side, removing his glasses. I smirk. “Oooh, serious kissing is about to occur,” I purr, then lose myself in his embrace—right as I notice that stubborn purple African violet springing into life, one bud opening, then two, three, four, five, suddenly seven...

“I have to go to the Night Market tonight. I haven't been there all week, and there are

some customers who don't like to come into the shop, some who can't travel easily in daylight," I whisper against his mouth.

"We have a few hours until it's dark. When did you want to head over?" he whispers back, hands gentle on my sides.

"Around seven?"

"Good. That gives me plenty of time."

With a sudden swoop, Jared picks me up, and I curse the people who ever thought his extra padding meant he was weak and soft.

He's strong and just soft enough. He swings me easily from his front to his back, draping my arms around his shoulders so I'm riding piggyback as he hurries up the short flight of stairs to my attic apartment.

Marmalade goes scurrying out of his path.

"What are you doing?" I giggle as he lays me down on the bed.

"I always have an afternoon snack around this time." He smirks and pushes my dress up my thighs as he drops to his knees.

"And I want you to know something. I'm a very goal-oriented person.

A lot of 'nerds' are. We gotta beat the level.

Finish the quest. Get the gold. Save the princess.

Whatever. Since I first heard your song, my goal has been to make you love me for



real—and to make you addicted to me as much as I’m addicted to you.

” His thumbs hook into the legs of my panties and pull down, leaving me bare under his searching fingers.

He hones right in on my pleasure spot with two fingers while his lips kiss their way from my knees to my rapidly soaking center.

“I’m addicted already. Can’t help it,” I moan as his mouth descends, owning me.

His tongue sweeps and separates my outer lips before moving in to fuck my pussy, all the while circling my clit with the same firm, even pressure that drives me crazy.

It builds as he turns me into a sloppy, slick puddle, screaming his name while my hands dig into his hair.

I don’t tell him, but after yesterday, I’m also addicted to the feel of him coming inside of me, of feeling the hot burst, the frantic vibration deep inside that seems to be the cherry on the sundae of pleasure he gives me.

“My turn,” I tell him.

In seconds, Jared’s lying on my bed, and my mouth bobs around his cock, lips sucking tight circles around him while my fist works from his base to the tip whenever I take a break to breathe.

I love the way he moans, enraptured, helpless, his hands now tangled in my long locks, but today, it’s not what I want.

“I want to feel you inside of me,” I hiss, climbing him, sinking on top, sweet wetness splitting on his thickness.

SHE'S A POWERFUL BEING . Enchantress. Banshee. I'm trapped by her song, her smile, and now by the sexual web she weaves. And I'm never, ever going to let myself be freed from it. I don't care if a thousand omens point in the opposite direction, she's mine.

Chloe rides harder and harder, dress thrown off now.

I reach up to unclasp her bra to watch her breasts bounce, to catch them in my hands.

I sit up against the wall of her bedroom and pull her forward as she squats on me, her pussy clenched around me.

My mouth finds one dark pink nipple and sucks greedily, moving from one to the other.

"I want to come inside you again," I hiss, just telling her my desires, knowing I'll need to avoid that. We were careless yesterday, but we can't be again.

"God, yes. I want to feel it. I want to feel you come in me. Mark me." Chloe's cries are accompanied by her nails dragging down my arms.

Mark me.

I feel something bursting under my skin as I burst inside of her, and I look at the tiny white lines her nails left in my skin. They heal over with a flash of gold and swirls and squiggles of vines and leaves.

"I'm all yours," I promise. "Wouldn't change it for the world."

Chloe croons in sleepy contentment as she rocks off of me, letting me catch a glimpse of a glorious, gooey pussy full of my cream, but a scary thought suddenly irks me.

I really could end things with her just with a simple word, a single denial. It doesn't feel fair. Her heart must feel like it's on a tightrope. I want to know how to get her off that ledge and make sure she knows she's always safe in my love.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Hazards of Being a Banshee:

Sometimes You're Powerless

“O h, hey! There's Alban. That must be his wife.”

“Harper, yep. And those little ones are their twins.”

“I have to go ask him something. Want me to pick up popcorn on the way back?”

I inhale the hot, buttery aroma that sings to me on the cool spring night.

“Nah. I can't be munching on buttery popcorn when I'm selling.

I might get stuff dirty.” I gesture to the rack of clothes and bedding I have in my “stall” area, along with a cheap bookcase and a folding table filled with bric-a-brac for sale.

It's always loaded into my beat-up old green van that's parked behind my building.

Everything is on wheels or pretty light (at least for a banshee), so it's no trouble to cart it from the van to my stall and then pack it up again.

“Oh, don't worry about that. I'll man the stall while you eat, then we'll switch.”

“You'd do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I do that? I want you to be able to eat popcorn. Or, y’know, walk around and see your friends. Or shop. This place is so cool,” he looks around, and I see his eyes zero in on the back row—then widen. “Does that guy have wings?” he whispers.

“He’s a gargoyle, and yes, he does. Go say hi and get popcorn. Or, um, get the popcorn and look at the stone carvings he does. You might want to skip the small talk until he gets to know you.”

“How is he going to get to know me without small talk?”

I frown. “That’s probably a good point.”

Jared kisses my cheek and trots off, leaving me glowing. I see Alban wave, and they fall into conversation. Jared makes a point of bending down and shaking each of Alban’s kids by the hand, smiling at them, and pointing to the stuffies they have with them.

He’s going to be such a good dad.

Ten years ago, that wouldn’t have been hot.

Right now?

I could bite through his shirt and haul him into the back of my van for a second round of lovemaking.

“Oooh, let’s stop here, Li! I love this gold bracelet. Although it’s probably fake, so I’m not paying more than ten dollars for it. Miss? I—oh. It’s you.”

My happy dreams cloud over when I hear an unpleasantly familiar voice beside my

stall.

Patsy.

I force a smile for Liam's sake, since the cold-eyed redhead is draped across the incubus like a cheap scarf. "Hi, Liam. Had a good day?"

"You know her?" Patsy looks at me as if I've just slapped her grandmother, face horrified and disgusted.

Liam waves an airy hand. "Just because I love to shop, darling. And you're right, that bracelet would look so perfect on your dainty little wrist." Liam picks up Patsy's hand and kisses her knuckles.

In seconds, she's giggling as he slides a golden bangle over her fingers.

"How do you two know each other? I thought you were new in town."

"I'm just passing through... unless I find a good reason to stay."

"Don't you have a dog to get home to?" I ask.

"He's out in the kennel. I'll feed him when I get home tomorrow ." Patsy's eyes are full of promises, all of them sinful, all directed at Liam.

To his credit, he's a good actor, and his acting equals survival, so I'm not surprised when he inhales Patsy's face like he's sucking out her soul.

If he were an evil incubus, that would be an accurate description.

I can see fine white mist floating from Patsy to Liam, and his color goes from milk

white to peach cream.

I hate to interrupt his meal and all, but... “Wouldn’t that mean that your dog’s been outside for two days at that point?”

“You sound just like Jared. The dog, the dog, the dog. He’s fine! He has a big container of food and a bucket of water in his pen.”

I picture him lonely and cold outside, no fresh water, no walks, no tummy rubs. My vocal cords itch.

Liam may be what some call a demon, but to me, he’s a saint. “I wanna see where you live tonight, sugar. And I’m just wild about dogs. Why don’t we take him on a long walk—before bed?”

“Ooooh.” Patsy giggles and simpers like a drunken virgin. “Okay, baby.”

“But not until you introduce me, of course. How do you know this lady? How does she know your dog, precious?” Liam asks, a faint pout on an otherwise perfectly seductive smile.

“She’s dating my ex-husband. I’m just here to handle some alimony stuff. Where is Mr. Know-It-All?” Patsy huffs, looking around with bleary eyes.

As if on cue, Jared strides over. “Patsy. You’re still in town?”

“Some stupid thing about cars. But, if I hadn’t had to spend the night in this hick hideaway from hell, I wouldn’t have met Liam. Sign the papers I—” Patsy digs in her purse, a frown on her face. “Wait, did I give you the papers last night?”

Jared could lie. He could simply switch papers. I know he has a printed copy of the

agreement Alban drew up in the zipper pocket of his tan jacket.

But my man is a good man, and for some reason, Patsy forgot that. Her loss is my gain.

“Patsy, I think that I’d rather you sign this one. You keep everything you have, but my intellectual property is no longer your payday. And there’s got to be a limit on alimony. You’re going to find someone someday.”

Liam draws himself up. “Alimony? You don’t need that with me, sweet cheeks. Tell your ex that you’ll sign so we can get out of here.” He licks a serpentine tongue up her neck and flicks the back of her earlobe. Patsy sags at the knees, I wince, and Jared looks on, face flat.

“Well... I mean... We just met, Li.”

“But I’m crazy about you, honey. I want to go home and meet your dog. I showed you around my town. We spent the whole day together... and the night is just beginning.” His eyes flicker to ours before fixing Patsy with a lecherous gaze. “Don’t you want something serious ?”

Patsy nods, white mist rolling from her, invisible to the naked eye, but crystal clear to me. This woman is giving off enough lust and need to power a generator.

Or a hungry incubus. Liam guides Patsy’s hand to the pen I keep next to the small cash box and card reader on my folding table.

“Tell him you’re serious, sign the paper, and let’s get home .

” Liam’s hips jerk pointedly into her rear, and Patsy gulps, grabs the pen, and snaps impatient fingers at Jared.



“Papers, now!” she hisses.

Jared hands them over, wordlessly.

She signs.

“If you’re in such a serious relationship, you’ll need to sign this one, too,” he explains in a monotone voice, offering her another paper, which she signs without reading.

Things move fast then. Jared whips out his phone, and the camera flashes several times. “I don’t want to hold you and Liam up. I’ll send this updated agreement to both lawyers and have it filed at my expense. Okay?”

She just waves, lips fused to Liam’s as he guides her away.

I swallow. “I’m sorry, honey. That was probably hard to see.”

“It was.” Jared looks pained. “I feel so bad for Liam. Are you sure I shouldn’t go rescue him? I could put Patsy in a coma by explaining the difference between a noble gas and an inert gas?”

“I think he’s okay. He doesn’t feed without consent, so finding someone that eager... Well, let me put it this way. Patsy might be his meal ticket for a few days before he can’t stand her attitude. Also, I’m pretty sure he just did this to move our plan along and rescue your dog.”

“Kep! What’s wrong with Kep?” Jared asks, face paling.

“Nothing! He’s home in an outdoor kennel with food and water. It’s just that Patsy said she’d go home tomorrow, and I realized the dog would have been alone for two days at that point. Seems cruel to me.”

Jared's face twists. "I think so, too." He swallows several times. "Um. So. I was in the middle of talking to Alban. Let me go catch him real quick," Jared rasps and runs off, but not before I see how much Patsy's treatment of his dog has upset him.

I whip out my phone and bite my lip. If I send this text now, it could ruin everything. If Patsy sees it, she'll know something is up, she'll figure out we maneuvered her into signing...

Chloe: Bring the dog back with you. I'll pay you whatever you want—cash.

Please, please, please don't let Patsy see the text. Please don't let her realize that we— My phone buzzes and I look down to see the reply.

Liam: I'm sexy, not stupid, sweetie. The dog will be with you as soon as I'm back in town. Tell Papa Bear it's on the house in exchange for the she-devil looking to score.

Liam: Not literal she-devil. Going dark for now. Have a happy time finding out which bed is just right, Goldilocks.

He's insufferable, but awesome. I shove the phone back into my pocket. We've already got a signed agreement that waives the alimony, and Jared's keeping his intellectual property. I think about Kep and hope Liam can deliver a hat trick.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU run the store and that stall. I'm beat, just from the sheer number of hours I've been awake," Jared yawns.

"I don't always do both. It's easier with a partner," I tell him as I change for bed.

We're at my place again because the cat is here, and it's plain to see that Jared doesn't want to think about someone neglecting their furry friends.

Marmalade is smart. She senses it, too, and is sitting on the rounded spot just under his sternum, purring and getting her cheek stroked adoringly.

“Tomorrow, can you take a few hours off to check out the botanical lab with me?” Jared murmurs, head drooping.

“Of course!” I crawl in beside him, noticing that he’s already dozed off. Marmalade eyes me, seeing if I choose selfish snuggling over letting her have her favorite perch.

“We’ll share him, silly,” I say, and cuddle up beside him. “Love you,” I whisper, the secret easier to say each time, especially when we’re alone.

Except...

Except that it’s suddenly quiet, and I suddenly start to wonder. Am I stupid?

Did I love too easily?

Yes. Yes, yes, yes. A handful of days after two months of casual smiles and waves if we crossed paths, and now my cat has adopted him, and I’m so in love.

Can’t picture life without him now.

And this is the honeymoon phase, where everything seems rosy and fine, but it won’t be one day.

One day, it could be the worst morning ever. The coffee maker will break, I’ll be cranky, my ferns will develop fungus and put people in chokeholds, Marmalade will hack up a hairball on his favorite collectible, and he’ll suddenly say, “I’m done.”

And we will be. Just like that.

My chest hurts, and I rub it to stop the ache, but it doesn't stop.

We'll be done, and I'll still love him, because banshees don't take lover after lover, and once they sing their song, the die is cast—but the dice rolls right into someone else's hand. I've made my offer to secure an escape, to secure freedom, and he shook his head and picked me.

But what if one day he doesn't... and there's nothing I can do about it? He can leave me, holding my heart in jigsaw puzzle shards, and he'll have the last piece.

A hiccuping sob pops out of my mouth, and Jared's eyes fly open, then settle shut.

I go cry downstairs in the shop, telling myself it's stupid to think Jared would ditch me—but still being scared all the same.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“ M y gosh! This is gorgeous! Will it ever be open to the public?” Chloe whirls around the middle of the botanical center and research lab.

“Probably not. Good thing you have an in,” I tease.

To me, this place is neat, but it’s hardly gorgeous.

There are walls of growing plants and rows of different pots among computer stations, steel benches, and lab tables.

I walk away from Chloe, belatedly thinking about how her mood could affect dozens of ongoing studies, even though everything is on hold for a week with Spring Break.

But I’ll take her out of the lab area and into the lab proper in a second.

Just need one piece, one stalk that’s long enough and soft enough...

“What are you doing?”

“Just looking at the herbs. A large part of the research is going to be on botanicals for medicinal properties. NYU isn’t just throwing money around to make the place look pretty.

Botanicals are all the rage right now, trying to tie folk remedies to a reason they gained popularity.

Like the properties of oregano oil, for example.

” I pat an oregano plant with one finger and keep walking and talking casually, leading her out of the growing area, “The oregano plant is a powerhouse of flavanols, and quercetin...”

I yammer away, and Chloe listens, catching up and linking her arm through mine.

I talk and walk until we get to the walkway between the new lab and the new greenhouse.

Someone said a fountain is going to go here, but I don’t think it will.

We’re a satellite campus, and frankly, there’s probably some magical jiggy-pokery that got us a grant for this much of an expansion.

I can’t imagine they’re going to put in a fountain.

But there is a bench, one of those new green and brown benches made from fifty thousand recycled plastic grocery bags, or some such astounding number.

It’s a beautiful day. More trees are starting to really bud out.

There’s a dogwood next to us, but it’s bare except for tiny green tips on the lower branches.

“Sit with me?”

“Sure.”

We sit, with her head on my shoulder and my head on her head, and all is right with the world.

Or it will be in a few minutes.

“I smell rosemary?” Chloe sniffs the air and then my jacket.

“You would. Because Alban told me I should use this.” I hold up a sprig of rosemary I snapped off.

“For what, chicken dishes? Soup?”

“To make an offer that is binding and cannot be broken. I asked him to help me with a little idea last night when I ran into him at the Night Market. Actually, it’s a big idea, at least to me.

He told me rosemary is for remembrance, permanence, sincerity, and honesty.

So it’s perfect for this. Chloe O’Neill.

” I show her the flexible young sprig of rosemary, now tied in a circle.

With a soft grunt and a slide, I get to one knee in front of the bench, swallowing the lump in my throat that springs up when she puts both hands over her mouth, and her eyes shine.

“Will you make an unbreakable pact with me? Will you be my wife? I ask you to be my betrothed, and if you accept my offer, I cannot rescind it, nor ever love another, until death do us part.”

I hope those words are spell-y enough... Alban said rosemary is the herb to seal a deal, and he said all I had to say was that my offer was permanent—just like her offer to me.

If she rejects it—I don't know what happens. Are we still engaged, but it's sloppily one-sided?

Behind me, there is such a rustle and woosh that I stop looking at my beautiful goddess and whip around to see if a sudden windstorm is about to take us out.

It's not wind. The rustle is the sound of the dogwood fast forwarding, the sound of hundreds of leaves opening at once, hundreds of white and pink flowers bursting open.

That's a yes if I've ever seen one, but I wait, ring held out, heart in my throat.

“Yes! Yes, I accept your offer and vow. Until death do us part, I am yours, and you are mine!” Chloe cries, sliding her delicate finger through the circle. She cups my face in her hands and kisses me until the salt of her happy tears wets my lips, and I realize maybe we're both crying.

Because I'm a sap.

But I'm the happiest sap on earth.

“Get off your knees,” Chloe says, tugging me up with a laugh.

“I have a better ring than that. I mean, I'm going to get you one. I thought... I thought maybe one of those rings that has the stones in a flower shape? And I thought... maybe an emerald?”

“Because I'm green?” Chloe laughs.

“Because you love green things—and I love you.”



She nods, looking at her hand. “You know this is real, right? Permanent? You can’t make offers like that and get out of them.”

“That’s exactly why I made it. I want to be ‘stuck’ with you. Bound to you. Betrothed, engaged, partnered with, married! All the synonyms. Want me to go on? I’m pretty sure there’s a thesaurus somewhere on this campus.”

I love her laugh, and I love it more now, because there is a note of happy freedom and incredulity in it that I haven’t heard before.

“No need to go raid the library. But I do believe I was promised a spot on a potting shed table?”

“Bent over it or up on top of it?” I ask in a low voice, more sure than ever that this is the right woman. Who else could I cry with, make the most poetic vows of my life to, laugh with, make stupid jokes with, and also be incredibly deviant and horny with?

My wife. My future bride.

“I think you’re my best friend,” I say when it clicks.

Chloe laces her fingers through mine and nods, excitement in her eyes, lips slightly parted in awe. “Yes! That’s what that feeling is. But not only your best friend.”

“God, no. That’s like, level one. Love of my life is level two.”

“What’s level three?”

“I don’t know,” I muse as we meander towards the potting shed down the path. “Wife and mother of my children?”

“Mmhm. Hey, if we have a daughter, can we name her Rosemary?” Chloe twists the circlet of herbs on her finger.

The little girl in pigtails and purple sneakers. Rosemary. She has a name, and it cements into my heart the second I hear it. My voice is barely audible as I whisper, “I love that.”

Hers is much louder as she squeezes my hand. “I love you .”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Mum. I’m engaged. Properly engaged, with a doubly unbreakable vow.

It was so romantic, he proposed with a ring of rosemary, and then we went to the jeweler in town—a proper goblin jeweler, Mum, and Jan Stilz made a ring for me with an emerald.

I’ll send pics. Okay, love you, Mum. Love to Dad. Bye!”

“That was a message?” I look across my living room on Friday morning and see my beautiful Chloe on her phone, talking happily to her mother—or at least her mother’s voicemail.

“It’s easier this way. In a few minutes, she’ll ring me back with a million questions.

Where will the wedding be, when will she meet you, when are we going to have kids?

” Chloe pauses and runs a thoughtful hand over her torso.

“We should have mentioned that—especially after all the seeds you’ve been sowing in this particular garden.

” Her voice drops into a seductive range, and I wonder if I’m going to survive the honeymoon.

This woman ignites desire in me like nothing I’ve ever known—and I’m worried if I can keep up the pace.

“I might be a lot thinner by next year,” I say, and I realize the reply doesn’t make much sense.

“I hope not too much thinner. I love you how you are!” Chloe hurries over to hug me, sighing as she’s wrapped in my arms.

“I can tell, and I’m not going to turn into a gym rat. I’m just thinking that I’m much ‘busier’ with you around. And soon, I’ll have a dog to walk.”

“Oh, yes. If there’s an Irish setter there, the experiment is valid.”

“The experiment is valid either way. I was just joking,” I hastily explain.

“I know, I know. But, um... Well. I think Liam is going to bring Kep back. Not by force. And I know what you said about the yard and all, but there’s a lovely park just a few blocks away, and there are houses for sale. They’re expanding the townhouse development, Pine Point.”

I love how this feels. It was different with Patsy. Everything wasn’t a plan made in peace; it was a push, a frustration reaction. The apartment was too small, time to buy a condo. The condo isn’t big enough for kids, not that we’re ready for kids, but let’s get a house.

The dog was my idea—and I’ve missed my Kep more than I can admit.

“I wanna buy a house with you. For us and our family. And I want that family sooner rather than later. Because I’m almost forty, and God knows when my knees will go.

I want to be young enough and fun enough to take our daughter to ballet or karate, or to play football with our son.

Whatever. I just... Yeah. I'm happy Kep's going to be back, but how will Liam manage it? ”

“I'm not worried about the how. So, if we don't find a dog today—”

“We're finding a dog today. I see it. I saw it. Little red dog with long, silky hair. Tiny. An Irish Setter.”

“Irish Setters are not tiny, sweetie.”

“Well, this one is.”

“Well... Let's go visit Mrs. Fiorenza, then. Jen Chambers told her we were coming to take a look at her foster pups this morning.”

“I thought you needed to open the shop.”

“I do this afternoon. But you can handle our dog without me, right? Or you can bring it over to chill with me, but you'll have to go to the pet shop first. If... If there's the right dog.”

“You said our dog.”

“You said our family .”

It's going to be a good day.

IT'S GOING TO BE A disappointing day. In one aspect.

I can feel it as we get to Mrs. Fiorenza's house.

Oh, it's a nice house, a little bit unkempt, overgrown, and the yard looks like a squeaky toy factory blew up, but it's not about the house.

There's something I can feel. Something about the way Jared's eyes are lit up and glowing with excitement.

He's so sure that there's going to be a certain dog here, and I'm sure that there's not.

I feel the unmistakable sense of something off, the impending feeling of sadness and disappointment centered around him—but I can't stop it.

I can try. I text Liam as Jared drives us down Ridge View Way, where the houses are spaced out, and most look a bit neglected or downright rundown.

Chloe: Any updates?

Liam: Beauty queen is asleep. We're going on a river cruise and dropping off Kep on the way to the city tomorrow. Believe me, he'll be happier with you. Hell, he's happier with me, and I'm a stranger. Ten to one

Patsy will never bother to pick him up again. Actually, make it a million to one. I know my meals.

Chloe: Thank you! I owe you.

Liam: Just let me get a front-row seat at your wedding, sweetie. I'll be full from second-hand sexual tension for weeks.

I have to smile at that.

Chloe: Deal.

“Hey. I heard from Liam. Kep is coming home to you tomorrow.”

“That’s the best news ever!” Jared crows and springs out of the car the second it’s parked.

“Well... Do we even need to do this?” I ask when Jared opens my car door.

“Yep. Come on, two dogs, two cats, two kids... What about it?”

“I think you’re adorable, but Marmalade might like being the queen bee of the cats in our house.

We’ll see. Also, I... I just don’t want you to be disappointed.

Irish Setters are a fancy breed. I don’t think they’re very common.

In fact,” I try to stall him, “I looked it up. They’re way down on the list of popular breeds, like almost eightieth on the list of popular purebreds. ”

“So?”

“The dog you’re dreaming of might not be here.” I try to break this to him easy, but he’s not having it.

With glib nonchalance, he answers, “You said a lot of the dogs they had here were mixes and fancy purebreds that were puppy mill rescues. Why not an Irish Setter or an Irish Setter mix?”

“Because there’s probably not a lot of money in them if they’re not popular? I don’t know. I just don’t want you to get your heart broken if they don’t have one.”

“I believe.” He smiles. “I’m a man of science, but today, I’m a man of faith as well!”

I try to smile at that, but inside, I’m cracking. What happens to this happy, sweet teddy bear I’ve fallen in love with if that faith is tested and failed so early? Is there a chance he’d stop believing in us, too? My heart gives a stout, resolute no, but a tiny whisper of doubt lingers.

“You two are early birds! But that’s just as well.

I have the vet tech coming to do some deworming and vaccines for a new litter.

Come on in!” Mrs. Fiorenza waves from the screen door.

She’s a plump lady with a mass of dark curls, a housedress out of the 1970s, and supportive nurse-type shoes with thick soles.

She’s got a baying beagle in one arm while a dachshund with cloudy eyes and a crooked tail barks at her feet.

“Ignore Romeo. He can’t see what he’s barking at, he just knows he has to defend the house! Klaxon. Hush!” She kisses the beagle on his ear, and he immediately falls silent. “So, what are you folks looking for?”

“An I—”

“A family dog,” I cut Jared off. “A dog perfect for a young family, good with other dogs. Good with kids and babies. And cats!”

“All right then. I’m going to steer you away from old Mr. Slingshot.

Retired from the greyhound track at only two, and the sweetest boy ever, but not



good with cats,” Mrs. Fiorenza says as she leads us in.

A fawn-colored greyhound gets up and headbutts our knees until we pet him.

Romeo and the beagle puppy join the parade of dogs that follows us into a big, empty room attached to a sun porch.

When I say empty, I mean empty of furniture. There are puppy playpens galore, old towels, big troughs of dog food, and little bowls of puppy chow. It smells like a kennel, but not a dirty one.

“Ohhhh. Oh, my gosh. Jared. These are the sweetest little fluffballs!” I cry when Mrs. Fiorenza gestures for us to look around.

There are little white dogs that look like they’re held together with silk and feathers, so fluffy and soft.

There are wriggly little pitbull types who lie with a thin mama dog, nursing as she pants up, her wide mouth friendly.

“Oh, no. She’s going to want them all,” Jared says, but his eyes are roving endlessly. Looking for something that’s not there.

“Don’t you?” I hold up one of the tiny, fluffy white pups. “Look at this baby!”

“I love dogs. I’d take them all.”

“Well, my limit is two, especially if you live in a smaller home.” Mrs. Fiorenza sits down next to the mama pittie and strokes her head while giving her some liver snaps.

“Two is a great number. We have a dog. Jared’s dog,” I say, putting the puppy into

his arms. “We’re looking for his sibling.”

THEY’RE ALL SO SWEET . I play tug of war with one of the little black pittie pups, cuddle an armful of what I find out are Malti-Poos, and let a mini goldendoodle sleep on my lap while Chloe and Mrs. Fiorenza talk.

It was silly to think that the dog of my dreams would be here, especially since visions and dreams change. Kep wasn’t in the first vision I had. I don’t even know if these are legit visions. Maybe they’re just wishes. Daydreams.

Does that mean my little girl with her little pigtails is a dream, too? What if it won’t come true?

Don’t be such an ungrateful ass. You have a wife.

You have cut ties with your ex-wife. You’re going to get Kep back.

You have a cat by marriage! I smile at that.

You have a whole new world to explore, the world of paranormal-friendly Pine Ridge, and you have new friends, like Alban and Liam.

People who would easily put the jerks at work in their place if they acted up.

And I can do that myself, now. I have confidence again. I have Chloe. I have hope. I have—

“Sorry, I’m late, but I brought you a client!” A woman calls into the house, distracting my attention.

“Jen! In here, Nurse Chambers!” Mrs. Fiorenza struggles to her feet.

“None of that ‘Nurse Chambers’ stuff. I’m just Jen, visiting vet angel extraordinaire!”

When Jen Chambers enters the room, she has a big satchel with patches sewn on it over one shoulder—and a little silky-coated red dog over her other.

Chloe’s gasp is audible.

“That’s him! That’s my dog!” I gasp.

“Huh?” Mrs. Fiorenza looks startled.

“Sir?” Chambers looks at me in confusion.

“I wanted an Irish Setter puppy. I told Chloe that I was hoping we’d find one here!” I cry. It’s all I can do not to take the little guy out of Chambers’ arms and yank him to my chest.

“Well, if you want him, good, because he’s going to come with vet bills.

He’s a mill reject. Setter and miniature poodle cross.

He got none of the poodle’s characteristics other than size, but he can’t be sold as a purebred now.

He needs all of his shots, he’s the runt of the litter, and he has a heart murmur.

There’s a good chance he’ll grow out of that, but he’ll need to be monitored.

I was bringing him here because I didn’t think he’d last long in a kill shelter. ”

Chloe is standing beside me now, and she hugs my arm, jumping in place.

“We have money! Okay, not a lot of money, but enough money to get his shots and vet bills! More than Mrs. Fiorenza—oh! No, not like you don’t have money, I just mean you take care of all these puppies, and we can take care of this one. Please.”

“Please,” I echo.

“Well, you don’t have to sell me! I’ve given him his first round of shots and anti-parasitics.”

“I have a good vet. Dr. Peters.”

“And I’m a member of PR NYU staff, too.” I point to the lanyard I spot swinging from her neck. “You can check up on me whenever you want!”

“For God’s sake, Jennifer, hand the man his dog before he piddles on my floor from excitement!” Mrs. Fiorenza cries, laughing.

I don’t know if she means me or the dog, because it’s clear that the puppy has now realized that the big human in front of him is “his person.” His sweeping tail ticks like a metronome on high speed, and his tongue is going a mile a minute, licking the air until he connects with my arms, then connects with my face.

I get puppy kisses everywhere he can reach, and Chloe kisses my cheek when she jumps on her tiptoes.

“Is he really ours?” I ask.

“Yeah. Technically, he’s not even one of Fiorenza’s dogs yet.

She didn’t take custody of him, so to speak.

He's just... yours. Yours to rescue, yours to love.

Do you have any ideas on a name for him?

"Jen pulls out paperwork from her satchel.

"You'll have to sign a few things, give me your name, number, email, your vet's address, all that. "

"I don't have a name for him. I just knew he was the one." I look into the little brown eyes looking up at me. He's so soft and so happy to be in my arms.

"You don't need a name right now," Jen Chambers says with a smile.

"I think we should call him Rowan. It means 'little red-haired one.'" Chloe strokes his soft head, and I picture her doing that with our son.

If we have one.

"Or Aiden," she says. "It means, 'little fire.' And it has meaning to my family, as well." She winks at me, and I know there's probably some paranormal stuff I'll find out about later.

"Rowan is cute. Rowly would be a good nickname for this little guy."

"I like it." I hug Chloe and hand her the dog so I can do the paperwork. "We can save Aiden for our son's name?"

"Rosemary and Aiden. Kep and Rowly. Marmalade—just Marmalade for now."

"And Chloe and Jared." I kiss her lips gently. "Because that's where all of this

started.”

“Ah, yes. Poor accidentally engaged fools,” she whispers, a giggle at the end.

I shake my head and think about the life that’s going to spring from her song, about the changes and joy already growing from it. “It was meant to be, sweetheart. No accident about it.”

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on any book review platform!

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

MINNIE (MINERVA WHEN she's mad) Johnson can't believe her cousin is getting married at twenty-two while she's a full decade older and still single.

It's not that she's jealous. She's too mature and too fabulous to be jealous.

She's just dreading a week at a destination wedding with her entire cadre of pushy aunts and passive-aggressive parents.

How can she enjoy a week away at an island resort?

Just pack one simple accessory—a sexy fake boyfriend that will keep her relatives quiet.

Craig Macpherson is a wolver whose career in social work allows him to live up to his ancient roots of helping the needy.

It's not the easiest job in the world, so he's thinking of taking a vacation for the first time in years—especially when his long-time work friend and secret crush offers to take him to an all-inclusive resort.

The price? Pretend to be her infatuated boyfriend for a week at a family destination wedding. The secret? He's not pretending...

Can Craig play it cool and keep Minerva from finding out, or can this fake romance turn into something real in just a week?

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Gerri and Barry are getting married at Mirror Key, and Barry’s insanely wealthy grandparents are paying for everything. Every. Thing.”

“Gerri and Barry are getting married?” I step out of my pink scrubs and matching rubber shoes bedecked with tiny charms along the top and sides. “Sounds like a bad kids’ book.” I hope I can deflect Mama into criticizing my sense of humor—instead of my dating life.

“Will you hush? When I say everything, I mean everything. We’re talking plane tickets, food, shuttle service, and rooms at an all-inclusive private resort for everyone in the family. Apparently, they own Reflections Resort and half the damn island!”

“It sounds like Gerri’s going to be living it up,” I say.

I’m happy for my baby cousin. She was born when I was ten, and I became her babysitter as soon as I hit eleven.

It was a role I loved and took seriously until I left for college.

Gerri was and still is cute, sweet, petite, and totally the kind of girl to leave college with a diploma in one hand and a rock the size of a beach ball on the other.

“We’re all going to be living it up. Aunties, uncles, cousins, Grandma and Poppy, everyone. You need to put your request for leave in right now.”

“Okay, Mama, I will. But shouldn’t I wait to get their Save the Date card or their invitations, or something?”



“Ordinarily I’d say yes, but the wedding is in six weeks.”

“Six weeks ?” I screech.

“Well, yes. You know Gerri’s a teacher. Half of your aunts are teachers.

If they want to go to this wedding, it has to be during spring break or over the summer.

Apparently, Barry’s family already has the island and resort booked for the summer, but they’re juggling a few things and opening a newly renovated wing of the hotel early just for Barry and Gerri’s wedding. ”

“You got all the tea, Mama. Okay. I’ll email my supervisor as soon as I get out of the shower.”

“You’re taking this well, Minerva.”

“Damn, Mama. Not the full name. I’m fine.” I roll my eyes and lean on the bathroom sink, not sure if I want to look over my shoulder and see just how ginormous my ass looks from behind in the flickering fluorescent vanity lights.

“Are you sure you’re fine? Gerri’s fresh out of college, and she’s already got a man. And you...”

I bite my lip so hard I’m worried about blood shooting across the room.

With a shaking breath, I tell Mama, “I. Am. Proud. Of. Gerri. And I love Barry, too. Also, I’m minding my own business, and I’m fine.”

Let me back up. Gerri graduated in December (half a year early because she’s smart

as well as cute as hell) with her degree in math education, a minor in special education, and a sweet, sexy boyfriend who looks like a blonde Christopher Reeve down to the cleft in his chin and the single springy curl on his forehead.

At Christmas, Barry gave her a golden retriever named Bruno.

We're two weeks into January, and he's adding wedding bells.

Good for her.

Did you expect me to be jealous?

I don't do that shit.

I turn on the shower and look in the mirror.

I'm not worried that life has passed me by because my cousin is getting married at twenty-two and I'm still single at thirty-two.

I'm not moaning into my pint of Ben and Jerry's that she snagged someone who probably subscribes to Yacht Club Monthly and could pose for a toothpaste commercial.

Gerri is happy. Barry is a sweetie.

Mama on the other hand... "That's your trouble. You think you're fine. You're almost forty, and soon you'll wish—"

"Almost forty! Mother!"

"You're in your mid-thirties!"

“Early thirties!”

“Right, practically forty!”

“Mama, I can’t with you right now.”

My mother is undeterred. “You know you’re going to be the only one to show up to this wedding without a significant other. At your age, too!”

“Lord, give me strength.”

“Now, your father was talking to Barry’s father at their New Year’s Eve party, and Barry has a single cousin who is an orthodontist with his own practice in Annapolis. Do you know they make more money than most dentists?”

“You are not trying to fix me up with someone who lives three states away, Mama!”

“You’ll be together for five days at the wedding. It’ll be a romantic week—”

“A week? Why do we have to be there for almost a week?” I put the phone on the edge of the shower, turn it to speaker, and tuck my hair into a shower cap. I need to wash off the scent of the hospital and the tension of this conversation.

“You’re going to be a bridesmaid, of course. The first day will be arrival, cocktails, and a family dinner. The second day will be a family beach day. I’m sure people can go off on their own in between all these events, too—”

“Are you reading off of something?” I ask wearily.

“Aunt Belinda sent me the itinerary. You’ll probably get yours this week—oh, and act surprised when Gerri calls you later. I’m not supposed to have said anything.”

“Oh, God...”

My mother could have a career as a battering ram.

She just keeps plowing ahead. “Now, day three is a spa day and rehearsal dinner at night. Day four is the wedding and reception—noon to midnight it says, and then on day five, you need to check out by eleven. You’ll have five days with Barry’s cousin, who is going to be a groomsman. I’m sure—”

“Mama, I’m going to bring my boyfriend.” The words burst out before I can hold them in.

Mama goes silent.

My momentary feeling of victory vanishes the longer the silence goes on—because I don’t have a boyfriend. And Mama’s silence means that she’s just reloading. “I gotta g—”

“Boyfriend? Boyfriend!? What boyfriend? How long have you been dating? When were you going to say something? Where did you meet him? Why did I not know about this? Chuck! Minnie has a boyfriend!”

“Mama, don’t get Daddy invol—”

“A boyfriend! About damn time. How serious is it? How long have they been dating? What does he do for work?”

“Oh, damn it, I’m getting paged. I’m on call. We’ll talk later.”

“Don’t think you’re getting out of this. Tomorrow night. Facetime.”

“Yep, okay. Love you, bye!”

I sag against the shower.

“Well. That was stupid. Not like I can ‘rent a boyfriend’ for spring break.”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Craig. I... Do you have any coffee pods for the machine?”

“Uh, no. I stopped at The Pine Loft this morning. Wanted to treat myself.”

“Ooh. Any special occasion?”

Minerva Johnson sits down on the edge of the counter that separates my desk from the hospital corridor, navy blue scrubs pulled tight over her hip, showing me the generous curve of her bottom.

I shouldn't look. She's a colleague. A co-worker.

A long-time work friend. Her full name is Minerva, after the Roman goddess of wisdom, but it should have been Venus because she's the most beautiful woman in the world.

“It's my birthday. The big three-five,” I finally manage to say, hoping I didn't just zone out and stare at her for as long as it felt. And the big three-five? Who says that?

“It is? Happy birthday, hon!”

Hon. She called me hon. She's a nurse in the small geriatric department at the hospital.

I lead the even smaller social work department (me and two other people).

Minnie probably calls everyone hon out of habit.

I try not to drool—and drool is a real possibility.

If I had a tail, it would be wagging right now, but fortunately, as a wulver, I have the head of a wolf but the body of a man. (Mostly.)

Humans are oblivious to the supernatural around them, which is why Minnie gives me a critical stare and says, “You’re looking sharp, birthday boy. No gray in that beard yet.”

Beard, she says. She’s not the first person to compliment me on my fur as if it’s a beard or tell me I have “shampoo commercial hair.” I wish she’d see the real me, muzzle and all.

If she did, it would be so much easier. She could scream, faint, reject me, and I could stop dreaming that one day she’ll say something like—

“Craig? We’ve known each other for a few years, right?”

My ears prick forward. “Five years, I think.”

“We’ve done a lot of crazy things together. This hospital has seen some weird ass cases.”

Orcs. Mummies. Dragons. She doesn’t realize that some of the stranger cases have been a case of the supernatural, not science. I just nod and chuckle. “Sure have.”

“And we’ve been through a lot. Snowed in for triple shifts. Stuck elevators. Escaped dementia patients. Lobbying for them to put a real nursing home in Pine Ridge at every town hall meeting since...”

“—2020, after the old Pine Hall Senior Living Center’s roof collapsed and the owner

decided a big retirement home like that wasn't feasible," I say, reaching into my satchel.

"But listen to this article in the paper. The lady who wanted to turn the old Hilltop House into a B&B is buying that broken-down old Victorian place by the elementary school and turning it into an assisted living place! It's not a full nursing home, but—"

"Would you let me give you a birthday present?" Minnie blurts.

I blink. Are we going out for lunch? Does she want to buy me something from the vending machine? "Well, that's so sweet, Minnie. But you don't have to do that."

"No... No, it would... It would kind of... It would be like—Would you go to a wedding with me?" Minerva rushes out the words, slamming her palms down on the counter and leaning over it. Her breath explodes in a short puff, and then she seals her perfect, full lips tight.

"Huh?" I stop rooting around for the newspaper in my bag and stare.

I thought there would be more heavenly harp music and ripple dissolve effect the moment my dreams came true.

"Look, let me start over. My cousin Gerri is getting married at some swanky resort island in the Florida Keys. I need a plus-one, or my mom and aunts are going to be on my single ass for five days straight. Plus, I may have kind of already said I had a boyfriend. Maybe. Definitely."

She's adorable when she's desperate.

Minnie puts her face in her cupped palms with a groan.



Her masses of brown sugar ringlets fall free, soft waves and curls that bounce, and it's all I can do not to bury my face in them and pull in her scent.

Wulvers may be mostly human in appearance, but in some ways, we're very different.

Scent is our love language, and I have been addicted to Minerva Johnson since I first caught her sweet aroma of coconut, shea butter, and gardenia.

"Your boyfriend can't go?" I ask, privately ready to take a bite out of the ungrateful jerk. There are millions of men (okay, me) who would climb Everest to be with Minnie. He'd better be donating a kidney to a dying orphan to stand her up when it's obvious she needs him.

"No, Craig! I lied," she moans, a bitter laugh in her voice.

"I lied twice in a row. I told my mother I was on-call last night and was getting beeped, and then I lied and said I had a boyfriend, and now she and my father are waiting to give me the third degree on Facetime tonight. When they find out I lied, they'll practically fling me into the arms of an orthodontist from Ann Arbor.

Or Annapolis. It doesn't matter, somewhere that's not here. "

My ears twitch, and I clumsily pat Minnie's shoulder as she heaves a shuddering sigh, facedown across my counter. I've often dreamed of her being facedown across any surface, but in my dreams, she's always way happier about it.

I cough and straighten myself up. "So, your birthday present would be to take me to a tropical island resort, pay for everything, and all I have to do is hang out with you? Geez, Min, like that would be hard."

Minnie's head bobs up and she bites her lip, her eyes wide and teary around the edges of their deep, coffee-brown depths.

Oooh. I've had some dreams where she looks up at me like this, too.

"Don't joke. I know I should just fess up and let my mother have a heyday with lectures and guilt-tripping, followed by a sun-filled week of family matchmaking," Minnie moans, collapsing down again, her head pillowed in her arms.

"I'm not joking. It's a great present. I haven't taken time off in years except for a sick day here and there. My parents are always telling me to go on holiday more often."

"You should! And you... you probably want to go visit your parents in Scotland?" she asks faintly.

"I don't, not at the moment. They're planning to come visit over here this summer, anyway. I think a luxurious resort in Florida sounds like an amazing birthday gift." I dare to reach out and take her hand in both of mine. "Thank you, Minnie."

For a full ten seconds, she just presses her fingers tightly into mine, but then the worried words come back at high speed.

"Wait, did you catch the part about being my fake boyfriend?"

"Aye. Yep." I cough. I was raised in Scotland, but my accent has faded over the last fifteen years. But when emotions run high, words, phrases, and a trace of a brogue still come out. At least I didn't call her lass.

"For all five days, Craig. Not just a night or at the wedding."

"Grand, grand. What'll I have to do? Sit next to you? Tell you how stunning you

look? Put my arm around your shoulders and get you another drink? Dinnae we do that at the Christmas party?”

“Oh, Craig! I could kiss you!” Minnie leans over and plants a kiss on my furry cheek, almost sending me into orbit. “My cousin just got a teaching job and her mom—that’s my Aunt Belinda—is also a teacher. Two of my other aunts are teachers, too.”

“Riiight?” I draw out the word. Am I missing something here?

“The wedding is in six weeks.”

“So we have time to get our stories straight,” I chuckle, beaming.

I can’t tell you how much I love this. Can’t explain how nice it is to catch each one of Minerva’s worries like a fierce fish, then dispatch it and watch her eyes gleam with joy each time I do.

Her cherub-like cheeks are permanently creased in a happy smile at this point.

“I know a lot of guys would think a resort would be all nightlife and clubbing, but in my family, they’ll expect us to either be setting off alone for romantic walks on the beach or acting like sun-starved tourists with everyone, doing something like deep sea fishing off the Keys.”

I try not to let out a whine. “Deep sea fishing? You know how I love to fish. Love it.” It’s in my blood.

No, like literally. The first wulver (the child of a fae and a werewolf) was born by the river and lived in a steep cave above it.

To teach the local folk of the Shetland Isles that he was benevolent (something not all fae or werewolves could claim), he would take most of his catch and leave it on the windowsills of widows and poor folk.

Even today, hundreds of years later, I cannot wait to fish, but even more, I can't wait to drop my catch off at the retirement home or gift it to a recently discharged patient.

Unlike the first wulvers, my catches are presented cleaned, cooked, lightly battered, or in a lemon-butter sauce, and usually with a side of green beans almondine and an applesauce cake for after.

“You do love to fish. But—you'll have to wear a suit. Probably a tux. I'm a bridesmaid. You might have to pose for pictures.”

“Don't all people pose for pictures on their vacations?” I shrug and cross my arms. “Minnie. I want to go. Any objection you have, I'm going to beat it. It's—it's nice to go somewhere outside of work sometimes. Maybe we can even talk about something other than bed sores or staffing turnovers.”

She smiles at me. A howl bubbles up inside of me, and I fake a hiccup to quell it.

“I'd like that. A lot. You really wouldn't mind playing along? Pretending to be something you're not for almost a week?”

I shake my head, hoping the sadness in my eyes is hidden by my broad smile. “I don't mind at all,” I reply quietly. And I wish it wasn't just make-believe. I wish it was real...

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Our story” isn’t a tissue of lies. We met at work years ago.

We’ve been friends and work buddies. Our departments work closely together, and we’re both civic-minded, so we end up seeing each other at town meetings.

There’s only one really awesome coffee shop in town if you want to grab a quick lunch (you can only eat so many of the hospital cafeteria’s specials before your stomach rebels) so we have “gone out to lunch” a bunch of times.

I guess technically we’ve even spent the night together... during a blizzard that caused everyone on staff to pull extra shifts until we were plowed out.

Okay. Good. I’m good. I can tell my parents something with a straight face.

It’s good that I’m composed because when I answer the call on my laptop, I stare straight into two sets of stern “take no prisoners” eyes. My father has his arms crossed. Mama—God help me—has her laptop balanced on her knees. “What’s this boy’s name, baby?” she says.

“Hi, to you, too. His name is Craig Macpherson—what are you doing? Are you doing a background check?” I gasp, horrified. “That’s a terrible invasion of privacy, Mama!”

“You’re our only daughter. You’re single and desperate—”

“Not desperate,” I mutter.

“You see a lot of older women get taken in by these smooth players,” Daddy says, hand on his graying stubble, nodding and looking wise.

“I’m not older ! Older is like late forties, even fifties! I’m not older, I’m not desperate, and I’m—”

“He’s Scottish? Is this him? Craig Macpherson, lives in Pine Ridge, thirty-five, born in Caithness? Got his degree in social work at Antonia College in Pennsylvania?”

Mama is rapid-firing off questions as she shoves the computer in her lap so that its screen faces the desktop screen. I see a blurry face with long, wavy dark hair and a beard that suddenly reminds me of a certain Lord of the Rings ranger and dark-haired Viking.

He’s handsome. Even blurry. I try to focus on the details of his face, but I just end up blinking and thinking it’s time to take out my contacts. I know Craig is a good-looking guy, but I can barely describe him.

You’re probably just overtired and dehydrated.

“Aw, hell. Is he gonna wear a kilt to the wedding? Plaid? Plaid at a wedding ? It’s going to clash. Rose pink and palm green are the wedding colors, that’s what Aunt Belinda said.” Daddy closes his eyes and tips his head back in a gesture of supreme suffering. “Does he talk funny?”

“No more than the Georgia side of the family ‘talks funny.’” I cross my arms.

“Social worker... That’s a noble profession—with crappy pay,” Mama sighs.

“Well... He’s the head of his department.

And hello, nurse? Also could use a raise.

” I cross my fingers behind my back since I know my hospital offers a good salary for its small size and semi-rural location.

“And, Daddy? No, he’s not going to wear a kilt.

I told him a tux or a suit, and he was fine with that.

He’s... He’s really excited to meet all of you in six weeks.

He’s also thrilled that I invited him. A week of sun and fun, amazing food, fishing, a resort in the Florida Keys. ..”

“Is he a gold digger?” Daddy’s eyes flash warningly, and Mama gasps and shuts her laptop with a bang.

“No! No, he’s a perfectly nice guy. He’s in a related field, and he’s handsome, funny, kind, and responsible.” He’s perfect on paper. Why haven’t I ever asked Craig out? For real?

“Why are you frowning? He’s Mr. Perfect. Or isn’t he? What’s the deal? Is he short? Allergic to dogs? Doesn’t want kids? Gambling? Drinking?”

“No! No. I think... I think...” I have to answer, fast on my feet, a thing that shouldn’t be hard to do for a nurse who has to make life-saving decisions in a split-second.

And yet, it is. I have to really dig through my mind to think about Craig.

While his facial features seem a little fuzzy, his place in my life isn’t.

He's just Craig—Craig at the desk on the hospital ground floor, Craig who always seems to magically appear when the vending machine won't take my ripped dollar bills, Craig who always helps my patients without family find skilled in-home care or a spot in a rehab, no matter how many calls he has to make.

Craig, who seems to actually care about his job and the people he helps.

“I dunno, Mama. He was always just there. Solid. Dependable. Reliable.” Does that make him boring?

I don't know anything about his hobbies except that he likes to fish and goes to all the town hall meetings. I know he has parents in Scotland.

Five years and that's all you know about someone you see for five-sevenths of your life?

“Solid and dependable? That's what scared you off? Lord...” Mama looks heavenward. “And you wanted someone flashy, huh?” Her pursed lips show her disdain for that idea. “Honey, when are you going to realize that the nice, solid, dependable men are what you need ? What you should want ?”

“Well, right about now,” I throw back, equally exasperated—and a little pissed at myself, too.

Half of me is mad because I should have paid attention to Craig as a person, not just a colleague I could always count on.

Maybe I would have asked him out for real and then I would have a romantic week in Florida to look forward to instead of one where I'll have to walk on eggshells, hoping no one finds out the truth.



The other half of me is annoyed. Well, maybe he never stood out because he is boring! Mama wants me to settle for someone boring, and I shouldn't settle at all. I can have someone exciting and dependable.

Those guys still exist, right?

"Honey, don't give Minnie a hard time," Daddy abruptly loses his hatred of plaid and accents to take my side. "I seem to remember a certain college freshman who turned down dates with the president of the campus tennis club because she had her eye on the members of the football team."

I give my mother an accusing look. "That's a new story. Dish it, Daddy."

"We can't stay on right now, baby, Aunt Belinda's coming over with about forty mother-of-the-bride dresses."

"I gotta go," Daddy bolts across the room, and my mother pauses to sigh and shake her head.

"Craig sounds very nice. How long have you two been dating officially?"

"Um. About six weeks. I mean, months! But it was kind of low-key at first," I yelp.

Six weeks. We have six weeks to go out a few times, to practice acting like a couple. Will he think that's weird? Does he have a girlfriend, someone who doesn't feel threatened by his colleagues asking him to go away for a week? Or what if he's gay? He could be gay, and that might be easier.

But the unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach says no, it wouldn't be.

I think... "I like him, Mama. A lot. I'm glad he's coming with me," I murmur, more

to myself.

“Mhm. You sound happy. You sound serious.”

“Oh, well. Don’t get your hopes up too high, but... But yeah. On paper, we’re a perfect match.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Do you know what February is when you work with the elderly in a semi-remote mountain town in the Northeast?

Pneumonia season. Bronchitis season. Wear-a-mask-and-rub-your-skin-raw-with-constant-washing season.

Flu season. After our initial conversation, I tell Minnie that I want to sit down over coffee (the closest I've ever gotten to actually asking her out) so that we can go over our fake love story in more detail.

Actually, I just want to know about her. In detail.

In detail... Every detail...

I mean important details that will make or break or charade at her family wedding, not physical details. Intimate details.

My cock twitches when I smell a hint of gardenias wafting down the hall. Don't think about Minerva right now, Craig. Don't imagine how she'd look in a bikini. Or with just a sprinkle of sand on her bottom and coconut oil on her skin.

I shake myself as Minnie rushes past my window, sneakers slapping the tile as she works a resuscitator mask over a patient's face, running alongside the gurney that paramedics push towards the elevators.

Shame on you, Craig Macpherson. You were just imagining her in a skimpy swimsuit instead of wondering about what her favorite bands are, who her heroes are, what her

favorite foods are... all the things a good boyfriend should know.

Maybe if I'm a really good fake boyfriend in Florida, I'll come back to New York as the genuine article.

I could start laying the groundwork now.

Wait, is that sleazy? I consider the question as I take a quick call from a resident in pediatrics, asking me to send up someone to help a family whose little one needs to have a feeding tube placed.

I turn back around, and Minnie is walking past, pulling off a thick scarf-like headband that covers the front half of her hair. She pauses, and it's like every music video my horny teenage self ever watched.

She glistens with a light sheen of sweat on her forehead. Those honey and best bitter curls bounce free and sway back as she closes her eyes and scoops her hair back into place.

"Oh, hey, Craig. I'm telling you, not enough people got their flu shot this year," she pants. "Second patient this morning I had to bag on the fly."

"Aye, I saw you savin' that woman on the fly.

You looked like some angel of mercy, but not like those little delicate angels that wouldnae get their pretty wings dirty, but some sort of heroic one, sweeping across the dead and the dyin' to heal them," I babble, jaw hanging open at the end and my mostly-buried accent flying free.

Minnie stares at me, licking her lips (sweet Jesus), and her light brown cheeks seem to glow brighter.

“Are you kidding? I look like I had a hot flash or got caught in the rain.” She wipes her arm across her forehead, and I seriously have to control the wolfish instincts to go over and lick her arm to steal her scent.

“No. Ye dinnae look like any such thing. Besides... I’d best get used to seeing you wet.”

Minnie stares.

I stare.

I stammer. “I mean, in Florida, there’s going to be swimming at the resort and days on the beach, aren’t there?”

“Oh! Oh, yes.”

Sleaziness be damned, I’ve waited years to get my shot.

I don’t care if Minerva Johnson lives the rest of her life seeing me as a hairy bloke instead of an immaculately groomed wulver.

“An angel savin’ lives doesnae deserve to cook after all day on her feet.

You were saying you’d have to give me the family gossip before we head off on our ‘getaway.’ We’ve got three weeks left.

I’ll take you out to the River House tonight and you can spill the tea. ”

“That sounds sooo good. If I eat one more Lean Cuisine this month, I might not make it to Florida. But... I really want to lose ten pounds before the wedding. Maybe we shouldn’t...”

“You look perfect right now. And I thought you already got your dress?”

“I did, but it’s a little snug in some spots.” Minnie’s hand travels to her hip in an unconscious gesture.

“As your fictional boyfriend, can I tell you that any man lucky enough to date you would consider you in a snug dress an absolute bonus? A vision?”

“Flatterer...”

“Truth! I speak as a bachelor who would give my right arm to... to actually have a woman like you in my life. You know,” I clear my throat, “confident, beautiful, caring, a leader in your community... Ahem. So? Dinner?”

Minnie hesitates for a moment. The hospital cell phone in her pocket begins to beep, and I know she has to go.

“You’ve got to take care of things, I know. We can always take a raincheck,” I laugh, hoping I sound casual. Not in the slightest desperate.

“Tonight at 8? I know it’s late, but I don’t get off until seven.”

“Eight is great.” Good Lord. I’m rhyming.

Minnie doesn’t mind. She laughs and trots off. “You might want to take notes. I’ve got a lot of relatives.”

“I’ll bring my trusty legal pad.” I kid back, because it’s well known that even though we live in the digital age, I waste too much time taking down case notes by hand and then typing them up.

“It’s one of the things I like about you,” Minnie chuckles, glancing back over her shoulder. “You take the time to do things right.”

I’m so glad when she disappears through the doors to the general admissions ward. I practically collapse on my desk, moaning under my breath. “Oooh. You have no idea just how much time I’d take with you...”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

Angela Argento is the stepdaughter of a mafia capo—something she only realizes after her parents' meddling in her dating life turns obvious. They don't just hope she'll hit it off with good-looking, charming Vincenzo Genovese. They've already set their wedding date for early next summer!

Angela tries to protest, especially after Vincenzo makes it clear he's just following orders to unite two minor crime families to create a more formidable organization. He's not interested in Angela and he'll keep his string of lovers on the side.

What do you do when you need to be rescued from the prince of a mafia family? Who do you call when a royal pain threatens an unwitting and unwilling mafia princess?

Look for a dragon, of course— but Angela didn't expect to find a real one!

Graham Kane loves his only brother. That's why the dragon shifter agrees to house-sit and oversee the family business, even if the younger dragon really doesn't want to leave his bustling Los Angeles lifestyle to spend a few months in sleepy paranormal Pine Ridge.

He's prepared for an uneventful spring—until he agrees to do a favor for an old friend and find someone's missing daughter.

Graham plans to (eventually) settle down with a female shifter to preserve the family bloodline. But when the missing daughter turns out to be the woman of his dreams, he's torn between duty and love. Can he prove that sometimes the princess is better off choosing the dragon?



*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Graham. Graham, are you sitting down?”

I roll into a sitting position and push my black tangled mess of hair back from my stubbled cheeks. Usually I pull it back when I go to bed. Must’ve lost the elastic band when I slept. Or maybe I was too smashed to put it in last night. “I’m sitting,” I say, perching on the edge of my rumpled bed.

“I need you to come to Pine Ridge for a month. Look after the business for me and mind the house.”

I blink and wonder if I’m still asleep, having a weird hangover dream.

Pine Ridge is a perfect little place, a happy little paranormal suburban gem for the “nice monsters.” My brother is proof of that.

He’s got a big red brick house, a garden shop, and a landscaping company with big, fat contracts from the local bigwigs and the neighborhood college. He’s got a sweet, pretty brunette wife.

A human wife.

There’s no way Mr. Perfect could need my help when he has the lovely and talented Vanessa, a woman he loves enough to turn his back on his own kind for.

“Why? What’s wrong?” I demand, my voice scratchy and my temples starting to throb.

I stagger upright and look for pants, water, and the Kane amulet that I'm not supposed to take off—but I do almost every night.

I don't want my family mixed up in the dirty dealings that happen in the California CrossRealms.

“Vanessa is pregnant—and he's got the dragon genes. He's going to be able to shift, like us!”

A spear of surprise sends me stumbling over the bathroom sink, nearly making me drop my phone into the basin. “What? How d'ye know?” The faint trace of an accent skitters out and I cough it back down.

“Ultrasound shows the little one's growing in a ‘hardened calcified sphere.’”

“An egg. Vanessa's growing an egg ?” I demand. She's a human. How is that possible?

“The doctor says it's soft and it'll come out naturally with the afterbirth. The little one'll break through it just like the amniotic sack.”

Maybe hearing this kind of talk isn't the best after a long smoky night filled with too much whiskey.

My stomach whirls and I beg the contents to stay down.

“Why do I have to come home? How far along is she? When were you going to tell me, ye wee scunner?” Is she sick?

I hope she's not sick. My heart stutters.

I gave Ian a hard time when he married Vanessa three years ago, but she's been nothing but good to him—and somehow she's carrying his child. A dragon.

I thought Ian was a fool, condemning our bloodline to die out by marrying a human.

Well. Who knows if it'll have all the capabilities of a full dragon?

Wait, if they can tell it's dragonborn right now, can they tell if it's well? What if the little one is sick?

“Sixteen weeks.”

“What??” I yelp. “That's months, Ian!”

“You were so adamant that we both marry women of our own kind, you fool. I didn't want to tell you in case the baby was just an ordinary human.

Bad enough to have to listen to you rant at me for dooming our dying race without having to tell you that you were probably right.

If Vanessa hadn't needed this special scan, I probably wouldn't have told you until he was born. ”

“It's a he? A boy?”

“Another Kane lad coming into the world. I'm taking Vanessa home to pick the amulet herself and have it blessed by the High King.”

“Can she fly in this condition? Why did she need a special scan. Wait, is this why you want me to come home?”

“Just to mind the business for a month until we’re home again.

And she needed a special scan because her heart rate was getting a bit low and unsteady.

Turns out human women carrying dragonborn need high potency calcium supplements once the little one starts to get solid bones and the shell starts to thicken.  
”

“She’s going to be okay, isn’t she?” I ask, sitting down on the edge of the grotty little counter in my studio apartment’s minuscule bathroom.

“Ah, look at that. You do care. We’re going to name him after you, you know. Murdo Graham Lewis Kane. Lewis is Van’s father. You met him at the wedding.”

My heart swells—then hardens. “When are you leaving?”

“First of May.”

“I... I don’t know. I’ve got a lot of irons in the fire here.”

“In a CrossRealms? It’s hellfire, then. Graham, Mother wouldn’t want you near that place.”

“It’s not all bad. I’m in a legal business.” I mean... I’m muscle. I’m a repo man for someone quite shady, but it’s legal. The people who don’t pay their car loans get their vehicles taken back, it’s simple. Legal.

I don’t let myself think about the fact that my boss is an Incubus, and if he doesn’t get paid in cash, he’ll eventually take souls. That’s not my department. I would never...

I stop my train of thought. There's a lot I said I would never do that I've done since I started working here.

"There's legal work here, too!"

"There aren't as many of our kind," I snap.

When Ian and I came to Pine Ridge, it was because we'd heard tales of so many "monsters" finding their mates in Pine Ridge.

After a year of running a business together, Ian was smitten with a human and hearing wedding bells. I was furious and I felt betrayed.

"You mean dragons? There must be nice dragonesses there, I'm sure, but I heard," Ian drops his voice, "that a lot of them work for crime families or have been corrupted by the dark energy coming from the CrossRealms."

"So? Dragons are fierce. We're meant to protect and fight, not to work in garden centers.

" The second I say it, I regret it. Our mother is a fierce dragon, but she was a ranger with the National Trust. It's from her that Ian got his love for nature.

It's from our father that I got my stubborn streak.

I always wanted to be out finding trouble or creating it, the way he would constantly agitate members of other clans, the way he was always on about the Kaness' position in the High King's council, or always on about our land and how our we should have more, how it was our birthright.

"Aye, well, we're not supposed to be so fierce we get ourselves a bad name with

every other clan in all of the British Isles, Graham.

Wee Murdo will be a fresh start for the Kanes and you're bloody well going to help.

If you don't... Well. This is Pine Ridge.

The people here don't fight between clans.

I'll ask everyone in town to take a shift if I have to, but I will get Murdo his amulet and I will have Vanessa and our baby blessed by the High King. ”

Ian's fire sparks my own. I can feel the human skin I normally wear shifting to scales, and feel talons emerging as my skin turns dark violet.

In seconds, I'm in my halfling form (a humanoid dragon for those not in the know) and there's only a shred of calm keeping me from turning into a dragon proper—the kind with a wingspan and lashing tail that would destroy my little apartment.

“I'll see if I can get away, but don't count on me. You're the older brother, not my clan elder, not the High King.” I throw the phone onto the bed as I stalk past and grab my long leather trenchcoat from the heap of clothes where it lives.

Scaring the shite out of someone when I go to claim their car might put me in a better mood.

And maybe I'll even figure out why I'm so angry in the first place.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:37 am*

“Princess, help me decide. The gold or the silver?”

I stand in my mother’s closet, which has a raised circular platform surrounded by three full-length mirrors.

It looks like the inside of a couture fashion house.

Then again, that's my mother's new life, spending money on clothes.

Trying on clothes. Clothes. Buying things with her new husband's money is her passion, her hobby, and her career.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for my mother to be spoiled.

My dad was the definition of a lousy, no-good, rotten deadbeat.

The hell he put my mother through made me more than happy for her to find someone who would treat her right, especially since I want to live my own life without worrying about her rattling around in New Jersey all on her own while I'm going to.

.. well, I don't know what I'm going to do exactly.

“I’d go with silver. What's the occasion?” I asked my mother.

Ronnie has some big business meeting tonight and I have to go with him. He really wanted you to come along, sweetie. He said, ‘Angela should come. She’d love Joey’s

family. Lots of good-looking boys.’”

The way my stepfather talks about his business associates reminds me of some cheesy 80’s mobster movie. Not the mainstream ones. The ones that were on television as reruns on Saturday afternoons. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was in the mob.

“You never come to Ronnie’s work dinners. You never stick around when we have dinners here.” Her voice goes into a nasal whine that I swear is a “rich trophy wife” affectation. She never had it while we lived in New Jersey, and that’s saying something.

“Well, Mom, I’ve been busy.”

She looks at me with pursed lips and a glare that would freeze flame. “Oh, really?”

“Really.” It’s a lie. I get busy lining up several pairs of stilettos that would match her dress.

I’m not busy. I want to be busy, but even if I was bored and dying for something to do, I would still avoid Ronnie’s overly friendly business pals.

Even though I’m sure all of his friends are just a little bit quirky, we have nothing in common.

They seem to be from a pocket dimension where time stopped somewhere between the 1950s and all of their wives fell out of hairspray ads from the 1980s.

Whenever I’m in the room, the women cluck over me and try to fix me up with their sons, cousins, or other handy male relatives.

The men ogle me, while the older, wrinkly ones pat my cheeks and tell me what a



pretty wife I'm going to make someone someday.

The younger ones look at me for too long—and not at my face.

I have to bite my tongue every time and remind myself that my stepfather is a lot older than my mother and maybe his friends just haven't moved with the times.

My mother is content and getting every luxury she had to do without while she was working.

two jobs to support my father and his three six-packs a day and his career of betting on losing horses.

“Busy doing what? You finished school. You don’t have any papers to write. Why is your head always buried in your laptop these days?”

“I’ve got to get my grad school applications done as soon as possible.”

“Oh baby,” my mother frowns at me and drops the discarded gold dress carelessly to the velvet side chair that sits in the corner of her lavish closet-slash-dressing room.

“Angela, sweetie, you don't need to bother with that anymore.

Ronnie has been very generous to both of us.

You don't need to look for a job or go back to school slaving away over those books that give you so much stress and make your skin break out.” Mom pouts at me and puts her hands on my cheeks.

I roll my eyes at my mother. “You've been hanging out around Ronnie's friends’ wives way too much. You always told me that education was my ticket out of a bad situation.”

“You’re not in a bad situation! And... And maybe I was wrong.

All those years I tried to take online classes.

.. All the money I could have been saving for a good lawyer.

.. No, all I needed was some good shapewear and the right eyeliner to snag Ronnie,” Mom says with a sudden flash of anger in her eyes.

That is quite unexpected. I’ve only seen her deliriously happy ever since Ronnie Argento walked into the diner where she waited tables and swept her off her feet three years ago.

“I didn’t have some fancy degree! Ronnie loves me—and you. He even adopted you, legally, even though you were already an adult. He wanted to make sure you were his legal daughter so your father could never bother you and you’d have all of his money if something happened to us.”

“Mom! I love Ronnie. I was happy to sign the papers, okay?” I rub her back gently, silently realizing this is a parenting gesture, the child soothing the mother, something I’ve been doing for far, far too long.

“This has nothing to do with how much I love him.

I can't just sit around filing my nails and spending someone else's money.

Even if I didn't want to go back to grad school, I'd want to work. Even part-time.”

“Well, that's no problem! Ronnie's friend Zooley? You met him at the Christmas party? He says you can model for him any day. His work is always very tasteful. I saw his work in Mature Swimsuits just this month.”

I refrain from commenting on the name of my stepfather's photographer friend.

Any guy who wants to use me as a model is not a legit photographer.

I'm too short and too round to be a model.

My figure might be hourglass but it's like saying a Shetland pony and a thoroughbred are the same.

Everything on me is short and plump. Cute but dumpy.

And okay, maybe I have finally let my mother give me some fashion chips that make the most of my squat little hourglass.

On a good day, you could call me sexy...

but I know I'm not a traditional photographer's dream.

And I think I'd die if I were in Mature Swimsuits at twenty-six.

My mother grabs a pair of silver pumps to go with the dress she's selected and comes over to give my chin a little squeeze.

"Don't work yourself so hard, sweetie. You promised me that you'd go to New York with me next week. Remember?"

"Yes, Mother," I say, dropping a curtsy with the sides of my fluttery tank top. "I'm looking at a couple of grad schools, though. You said we could visit some campuses."

"And we have tickets to three different shows! All musicals, all sold out!" Mom squeals like an excited toddler.

“Knock knock, Joanne, are you decent?”

I have to smile at the way. Ronnie enters his own bedroom. When he sees my mother in her frilly fuschia dressing gown, he staggers back and then rubs his hands.

“Oh my Lord,” Ronnie exclaims, putting his hands to his cheeks. “How is it that I married the most gorgeous woman in the world? Angela, how did a retired old coot like me end up married to this hot young thing?”

“I’m the lucky one, baby,” Mom gushes and they rub noses.

“And I have one beautiful young lady as my daughter. You know, it won't be long now before I'm going to be hearing some other lucky young man saying the same thing about you.” Ronnie beams with pride at me.

I blush. “Aw. Thank you.” I have to admit his compliments make me feel good. I've been single for a while now with a string of dates that never turn into anything serious. Maybe it's all my mother's old-fashioned advice or Ronnie's sweet smile that prompts me to say, “Well if you know anybody...”

“My Angel! I thought you'd never ask! When we go to New York next week you've got to meet an old family friend of mine. His son is so handsome and such a respected businessman! I know you two would hit it off.” Ronnie flings open his arms. “You two sit next to each other at the theater, okay, Angie?”

Sometimes I think Ronnie believes any woman will be happy with a handsome man who gives her some attention. “He’s a respected businessman” was never high on my list of turn-ons.

But I’m only in New York for a week. I’ve already got a bunch of tickets to Broadway shows. It might be nice not to be the third wheel... “I thought the shows were all sold out?”

“That’s not an issue.” Ronnie shakes his head.

“If you will be his date for the evening, this young man will be able to get a ticket. He's extremely well-connected. If you two should hit it off... You will make your mother and I very happy, and do yourself a favor. Joey’s son, Vincenzo, will see that you will want for nothing.”

“All right, Pops. Sounds good,” I say, giving Ronnie a playful hug as I pass. “But let's not jump the gun. Dinner and the theater? Sure. Wanting for nothing? That's marriage stuff.”

“Angela, you're not getting any younger.

You don't want to end up missing a golden opportunity or worse, marrying the wrong person like I did, just because he's exciting and talks a good game. You should let your father and I help you find a sweet man who will really love you and spoil you like Ronnie spoils me,” my mother purrs, wrapping her arms around Ronnie's neck and running her fingers through his silver hair.

“That's my cue to leave, lovebirds.” But as I walk back to my own room in the gorgeous Bayside house that I now call my home, I can't help but wonder if she's right.

It wouldn't be so bad to find the kind of love that my mother and stepfather have. I've never seen people so happy together. Maybe it is old-fashioned, but why shouldn't it be? It's been around for thousands of years.

And maybe if I'm single at twenty-six, with no job, no clear career path, and no boyfriend, I should let someone help me. A little.

I drag out my suitcase when I get back to my room.

Instead of just packing my normal leggings and sweatshirts, I go to my closet and start browsing through all the designer labels my mother has brought me over the last year.

Yes, I have to admit I have enjoyed being pampered and spoiled by Ronnie's bank account.

I take out a few of the most flattering (and tightest) dresses that I own.

“Vincenzo, hmm?” Could he be Italian? Italian-American?

I hold up a pale pink dress that's cut lower and slit higher than anything I'd normally wear, wondering if I should pack it.

I picture a handsome man with dark hair, a sensuous mouth, and intense dark eyes.

I picture a faint Italian accent, even though I know I'm stereotyping left and right.

Ronnie says he's a businessman. Suit and tie. Sharp haircut.

Maybe looking to settle down and spoil someone?

I could still work! Go to school. I could be someone's girlfriend at the same time. I could even be someone's wife.

I press the dress to my body and wonder if Vincenzo and I will hit it off.

Do I want us to?

I pick out another dress, a slim little black number by some ungodly expensive designer. Mom says it brings out the caramel notes in my skin, make my dark hair look more lustrous. I drop the pink dress and hold up the black one.

It gives “Very Available” vibes.

Well. You are very available, Angela.

Maybe it's time I start putting my eye-catching wardrobe to good use...

How do Angela and Graham end up together?

You're just going to have to find out in Princess Seeks Dragon .