



# Best Town, Best Witch

## (Starting Over #3)

**Author:** *Amy Gregory*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** In the quirky magical town of Assjacket, West Virginia, Chloe Woolsworth has finally found her place—complete with a sarcastic talking rooster familiar named Frosty and a budding relationship with handsome warlock publisher Lincoln Sands. But just as their romance begins to bloom, Lincoln receives a life-changing offer from a major media conglomerate to buy his publishing company—a deal that would require him to remain in New York City for years.

As Chloe struggles with vulnerability and fears of abandonment, Lincoln searches for a solution that won't force him to choose between his business legacy and their relationship. But when a mysterious magical storm appears over Assjacket, threatening everything they've built, they must combine their talents to protect the town they love.

Faced with unexpected dangers, family expectations, and the possibility of a future together, Chloe must decide if she's brave enough to embrace love despite her fears. Can Lincoln create a path that honors both his professional ambitions and his heart? And will Frosty ever stop giving unsolicited relationship advice?

With equal parts magic, romance, and humor, *Best Town, Best Witch* delivers a heartwarming tale about finding family in unexpected places and the courage it takes to let love in.

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

CHLOE

I was sitting in my hiding spot, okay, my library. I had a book open but couldn't concentrate on the words.

"Chloe?"

I glanced up to see Frosty holding my cell phone.

"I answered it."

That was new. My bodyguard dude was nosey, but there were lines we didn't cross for each other.

"It's Zelda, so I didn't want it to go to voicemail."

My heart started to instantly constrict. There was just something about talking to the most powerful witch in the realm that still caught boring me off guard.

"Hey there." She sounded cheerful so that was something. "So news travels fast in a small town ya know."

If there weren't a hundred songs and even more books with that premise. "Yeah?" I drew out my answer, not sure where she was going.

"We need to talk about you and Lincoln. Are you free tomorrow?"

Am I free? She knew I would be. What else would I be doing? Except trying to hide.

“Um, yeah.”

“Let me get the kids to preschool and we can meet for coffee. See you at the Diner about 9:30 tomorrow morning?”

“Sure.”

“Fantastic, see you then.”

My thoughts immediately went from love to fear. And I had another twelve hours to sweat out the rolling anxiety that had taken hold of my entire body.

I paced the length of my cottage living room, the worn path in the braided rug testament to my anxiety rituals. Ten steps to the window. Pivot. Ten steps back. Repeat until sanity returns or feet bleed, whichever comes first.

"You're going to wear a trench through that floor," Frosty clucked from his perch on the kitchen counter. "And you know who'll have to fill it? Not the one with opposable thumbs, that's for sure."

"I'm fine," I muttered, checking my phone for the seventeenth time in twenty minutes. The screen remained stubbornly notification-free.

"Sure. And I'm just a regular barnyard animal who can't recite Shakespeare." Frosty hopped down and waddled to the refrigerator. "Since you're determined to pace yourself into oblivion, I'm making nachos."

Last Friday flashed through my mind—Lincoln's fingers laced through mine as we walked along the creek behind my cottage. The way he'd stopped, turned to me with

those golden-brown eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

"I don't want to see anyone else," he'd said, his voice low. "Just you."

My heart had nearly burst. After decades of solitude, I'd agreed to be someone's girlfriend. Like a teenager. A 112-year-old teenager.

I checked my phone again.

"For the love of corn feed, woman!" Frosty slammed the oven door with his wing. "The man is in meetings. He told you he'd be busy tonight."

"His last text was just 'K'," I said, dropping onto the couch. "Who says 'K' unless they're annoyed or losing interest?"

"People with thumbs who are in business meetings? Crazy thought."

I pulled up our text exchange.

Me: Hope your meeting's going well. Miss you.

Lincoln: Miss you too. Swamped here.

Me: Can't wait to see you Friday. I found a new hiking trail.

Lincoln: K

"See?" I thrust the phone at Frosty. "That's it. He's realized I'm a socially awkward hermit with trust issues and a talking rooster."

Frosty adjusted his tiny reading glasses. "Or he's in a room full of mortal publishing

executives and can't exactly text 'Can't wait to see you, my magical goddess of delight.'"

The microwave dinged. Frosty extracted a plate of nachos with surprising dexterity for someone with wings and placed them beside me, along with the remote.

"Here. Bad TV and cheese. Universal remedies."

I flipped channels until landing on "Paranormal House Hunters."

"Perfect," Frosty said, settling beside me. "Nothing like watching mortals get excited about fake ghosts when we know Mrs. Zambuzzlebutt in town is actually haunting three different properties for the senior ghost discount."

I checked my phone again. Nothing.

"He's going to realize I'm not worth the trouble," I whispered.

"If you need me, I'll be in the kitchen banging my head against the refrigerator door."

I slept terribly and woke up in a tangle of blankets on the couch, surrounded by romance novels I'd deny owning if questioned under oath. The clock read 8:15, which gave me just enough time to panic properly before meeting Zelda.

"Coffee's ready," Frosty announced, pushing a steaming mug across the counter with his wing. "And I ironed your least terrifying outfit."

I grunted my thanks and shuffled to the bathroom, where my reflection confirmed my worst fears. I looked like I'd been dragged backward through a hedge while arguing with a lightning bolt.

"It's just coffee with Zelda," I muttered to myself, applying concealer to the dark circles under my eyes. "Not an interrogation."

Forty-five minutes later, I slid into my usual booth at the Assjacket Diner, fifteen minutes early because punctuality is the anxious person's superpower. DeeDee, the owner, waved from behind the counter.

"Morning, sugar! Your usual?"

I nodded, fidgeting with the salt and pepper shakers. The diner hummed with morning activity, but I felt eyes on me. At the counter, Mrs. Ravenwood and her sister leaned toward each other, whispering behind menus while glancing my way.

Great. Town gossip was spreading faster than Frosty's feathers during molting season.

I arranged and rearranged my silverware into perfect parallel lines. Then perpendicular. Then at precise 45-degree angles.

"If you keep that up, we'll have to hire you to set tables."

I jumped. Zelda stood beside my booth, looking effortlessly put-together in a green dress that matched her eyes, her auburn curls bouncing as she slid into the seat across from me.

"DeeDee! Two coffees and whatever pastry just came out of the oven!" she called out before turning her attention back to me. "You look like you've been wrestling night terrors."

"Just regular insomnia. Nothing a gallon of caffeine won't fix."

DeeDee appeared with our coffees and two massive cinnamon rolls. "On the house,

girls. Fresh batch."

As soon as DeeDee left, Zelda leaned forward. "So, the town council had an emergency meeting last night."

My stomach dropped. "About?"

"Lincoln Sands buying up half the commercial district."

I nearly choked on my coffee. "He's what?"

"The old Nightstalker building, the vacant lot next to the bookstore, and apparently he's in talks about the Iddlebottums property." She stirred cream into her coffee. "The council wants to know his intentions."

"His intentions with... buildings?"

"His intentions with Assjacket. And with you." Zelda's eyes met mine. "Word is he's looking to relocate part of his publishing business here."

I set my mug down carefully. "That's the first I'm hearing of it."

"There's also talk about him renovating the old Blackwood mansion on Crescent Hill." She paused. "That's a lot of commitment to a town he doesn't live in."

The implications hung between us like smoke. I suddenly realized how little I actually knew about Lincoln's plans.

"Chloe," Zelda said gently, "are you ready for what it means if he's serious about putting down roots here? About being serious with you?"

I stared at Zelda, feeling like I'd been dropped into someone else's life. Lincoln relocating? Buying property? The Blackwood mansion?

"I don't—" My voice cracked. "We haven't discussed any of this."

Zelda's expression softened. "I'm not trying to upset you. The council just needs to know if there's a new permanent warlock moving to town. It affects magical zoning, protection spells, familiar accommodations."

"Right. Magical bureaucracy." I picked at my cinnamon roll, appetite gone. "I'll talk to him."

"Gently," Zelda cautioned. "Men spook easily when cornered about their intentions."

I left the diner with my thoughts spinning like a tornado in a trailer park. The walk home felt twice as long, each step weighted with questions I wasn't sure I wanted answers to.

Frosty was practicing tai chi in the front yard when I arrived, his three-foot frame perfectly balanced on one scaly leg.

"How'd it go? You look like someone replaced your grimoire with a cookbook."

"Lincoln's apparently buying half the town without mentioning it to me."

Frosty dropped his wing position. "Ah. The old 'I'm secretly planning our future without consulting you' routine. Classic warlock move."

I collapsed onto the porch swing. "What if he's just investing? It doesn't have to mean?—"



My phone buzzed. Lincoln's name flashed on the screen with a video call request. I took a deep breath and answered.

Lincoln's handsome face appeared, his office a hurricane of activity behind him. Papers floated through the air, assistants darted in and out of frame, and someone was definitely crying in the background.

"Chloe! Sorry about the chaos. Manuscript crisis." His smile made my stomach flip despite my confusion. "How are you, beautiful?"

"I'm..." Fine? Confused? Wondering if you're secretly planning to move to my town?  
"...okay."

He turned the phone toward the floor-to-ceiling windows. "Look at this view. Thirty-eight floors up and you can see half of Manhattan. Though I'd trade it for your porch swing any day."

My chest tightened. "About this weekend?—"

"That's why I'm calling." His face fell. "The board called an emergency meeting. Some corporate takeover nonsense. I can't make it."

A young woman in a crisp suit appeared at his shoulder. "Mr. Sands, the board is waiting in conference room A. They've moved the meeting up."

Lincoln's eyes met mine through the screen, torn and apologetic. "Chloe, I have to?—"

"Go," I finished for him. "It's fine."

"We need to talk soon. About... everything." His gaze was intense, meaningful.

Did he know I knew? Should I ask about the properties now? The questions died on my lips as I watched him juggle three crises at once.

"Soon," I agreed. "Go save your publishing empire."

The call ended, and I stared at my dark screen, the weight of unasked questions hanging in the air.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

I slumped in the passenger seat while Frosty drove us to town.

Yes, my three-foot rooster familiar drives.

He installed custom pedal extensions in my ancient Volvo and wears special driving gloves over his wing feathers.

It's less weird than it sounds. Actually, no, it's exactly as weird as it sounds.

"You could cancel," Frosty suggested, expertly navigating a curve. "Fake a magical emergency. Cauldron explosion. Hex gone wrong."

"Roger would know. He always knows." I pressed my forehead against the cool window glass. "Besides, I already paid for this session, and my cheapness outweighs my avoidance issues."

Roger's office sat above the town's only laundromat, which meant therapy always smelled faintly of fabric softener and poor life choices. I trudged up the stairs, each step heavier than the last.

I pushed open the door and was immediately assaulted by the newest addition to Roger's "art" collection—an enormous canvas depicting what appeared to be two abstract figures in a position that defied several laws of physics.

"Do you like it?" Roger appeared from his inner office, gesturing proudly at the monstrosity. "It's called 'Tantric Tuesday.'"

"It looks like someone threw paint at two octopuses while they were mating."

"That's exactly what the artist said! You have an eye." He ushered me inside. "So, how's life with Mr. Warlock Wonder-Dick?"

I choked on air. "We are NOT discussing Lincoln's... anatomy."

"Fine, fine." Roger dropped into his chair, notepad ready. "How about we discuss why you haven't told him about your meeting with Zelda? Three days and counting."

I narrowed my eyes. "How do you even know about that?"

"Small magical town, big magical gossip." He tapped his pen against the pad. "Why are you keeping Lincoln at arm's length? And don't give me that constipated look—you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I'm not keeping him anywhere. He's in New York, doing important New York things with important New York people."

"While secretly buying property in your town." Roger leaned forward. "Interesting that you're not curious about that."

I picked at a loose thread on my sweater. "Maybe I don't want to know."

"Because?"

"Because what if it's not what I think? What if he's just diversifying his investment portfolio or whatever rich people do?"

"The words tumbled out faster than I could filter them."

"Or worse, what if it is what I think, and he's planning some grand gesture without asking me, and then realizes small-town life with me isn't what he expected, and he goes back to his real life and?—"

"Ah." Roger's expression softened. "There it is."

I stared at Roger, hating how easily he'd zeroed in on my deepest fear.

"So what if I'm afraid?" I crossed my arms. "Lincoln has this whole glamorous life in New York with fancy cocktail parties and intellectual conversations about books. I have...a cottage in a town called Assjacket and conversations with poultry."

"Hey now," Frosty called from the waiting room where he was thumbing through a magazine with his wing tips. "I'll have you know I'm exceptionally well-read poultry."

Roger ignored him. "You think you're not enough."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." He leaned back in his chair. "Chloe, has it occurred to you that maybe—just maybe—Lincoln is buying property here because he wants to be closer to you?"

"That's worse," I mumbled.

"How is that worse?"

"Because then I'd have to believe he actually wants me." The admission felt like pulling out a splinter—sharp, quick pain followed by relief.

Roger's phone buzzed. He glanced at it, then smirked. "Speaking of your feathered Socrates, he just texted me that Lincoln called your house phone while you were driving here."

My heart did a pathetic little flip. "And?"

"And nothing. That's all Frosty said." Roger tapped his pen against his notepad. "Interesting that your familiar is texting your therapist about your boyfriend."

"It's not interesting, it's annoying. And inappropriate. And?—"

"A sign that everyone in your life is conspiring to make you happy despite your best efforts to sabotage yourself?"

I slumped in my chair. "I hate when you make sense."

"It's literally my job." Roger set his notepad aside. "Here's your homework: call Lincoln back and ask him directly about the property purchases. Use your words like a big girl witch."

"I'd rather drink a potion made from toad warts."

"That can be arranged too." Roger grinned. "But I think a conversation would be less nauseating."

"Debatable," I muttered, but I knew he was right.

I dragged myself through my front door, Roger's homework assignment hanging over me like a guillotine.

The emotional excavation of therapy had left me hollow, my nerves raw and exposed.

All I wanted was to curl up with a book and pretend the outside world—particularly the part containing tall, handsome warlocks with property-buying habits—didn't exist.

"Welcome back to the nest of neurosis," Frosty said as he walked ahead me into the kitchen. "Therapy go well, or should I hide the sharp objects?"

"Very funny." I dropped my bag and followed Frosty into the kitchen to find him now standing on a step stool at the counter, putting chocolate into a saucepan. He wore the tiny reading glasses perched on his beak that he insisted helped him read recipes but I suspected were purely for aesthetic.

"Sit." He gestured with a wing tip to the kitchen table. "I'm preparing my special medicinal cocoa."

"Is the medicine whiskey?"

"Cinnamon schnapps, actually. I'm feeling festive."

"He poured the steaming liquid into a mug and waddled over, setting it before me with a flourish.

Then he hopped onto the chair across from me, folded his wings, and fixed me with what I recognized as his "serious counseling face"—beak slightly downturned, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"Oh god," I groaned. "Not you too."

"As your familiar and primary emotional support poultry, it's my duty to help you process your psychological trauma through cognitive reconstructional therapy."

I snorted into my cocoa. "You mean cognitive behavioral therapy?"

"That's what I said." He waved dismissively. "The point is, you're experiencing classic avoidance paradigms due to your fear of abandonment issues stemming from your childhood neglect syndrome."

"Did you swallow a psychology textbook?"

"I watched a YouTube series." He preened. "Now, let's discuss your transactional analysis and how it's affecting your libidinal displacement with Lincoln."

I nearly choked. "My what with Lincoln?"

"Your inability to accept happiness without waiting for the other shoe to drop." His tone softened. "Chloe, I've known you for years. You're pushing away the one thing you actually want because you're terrified it might work out."

The simple truth of his words cut through my defenses. "What if he realizes I'm not worth it?" I whispered.

Frosty's eyes gentled. "What if he already knows exactly what you're worth?"

I blinked back the embarrassing moisture gathering in my eyes. "When did you get so wise?"

"I've always been wise. You've just been too busy being a disaster to notice." He hesitated. "Lincoln and I have been talking, you know."

My heart stuttered. "About what?"

"Ways to bridge your worlds. He's been asking about what makes you comfortable,



what you need to feel secure." Frosty looked almost sheepish. "He really wants this to work, Chloe."

The revelation warmed something in my chest even as alarm bells clanged in my head.

"Wait, what exactly have you and Lincoln been discussing?" I demanded, suddenly imagining my rooster familiar divulging all my embarrassing habits. "Please tell me you didn't mention the time I tried to enchant my hair and ended up with tentacles for a week."

Frosty ruffled his feathers indignantly. "Give me some credit. I only shared the important things—like how you pretend to hate romance novels but have a secret stash under your bed."

"I do not?—"

A sharp knock at the door cut me off. We both turned toward the sound.

"Expecting anyone?" Frosty asked.

"No." I approached the door cautiously, peering through the peephole to find a courier in a crisp uniform holding a package.

"Delivery for Chloe Woolsworth," the man announced when I opened the door.

I signed for the package—a sleek, black box tied with silver ribbon that practically screamed "Lincoln." The courier tipped his hat and departed.

"Ooh, presents," Frosty said, hopping onto the coffee table as I brought the box in. "Maybe it's jewelry. Or lingerie. Or jewelry to wear with lingerie."

"Can you not?" I muttered, untying the ribbon with fingers that suddenly felt clumsy.

Inside the box lay a thick manuscript, its title page reading "The Midnight Garden" by Elizabeth Chen. Two envelopes sat atop it—one formal and cream-colored with "Woolsworth Editorial Services" typed on the front, the other a rich navy blue with my name written in Lincoln's elegant script.

I opened the blue envelope first.

Chloe,

After our conversation about that fantasy novel you "corrected" (eviscerated might be more accurate), I realized something: you have a natural talent for editing. Your insights were sharper than most of my senior editors.

This manuscript landed on my desk last week. I'd love your perspective on it—professionally.

Lincoln

"What is it?" Frosty asked, craning his neck.

I wordlessly opened the cream envelope and pulled out a formal offer letter from Sands Publishing, offering me a position as a freelance developmental editor, complete with a contract offering terms that made my eyes widen.

"Holy shit," I whispered.

A second note fell from the contract:

This way, even when I'm trapped in board meetings or you're hiding in your library,

we can still work together. No pressure—but I think we'd make an excellent team.

Yours, L

"Well?" Frosty demanded, practically vibrating with curiosity.

"He's offering me a job." The words felt strange in my mouth. "As an editor."

"Brilliant!" Frosty clapped his wings together. "He's finding ways to be part of your life without invading your space. That's some top-tier courting strategy."

I stared at the contract, excitement and terror waging war in my chest. A job at a prestigious publishing house—something I'd never even dared to dream about. A connection to Lincoln's world that was entirely my own. A way for us to build something together while maintaining our separate lives.

It was thoughtful. It was perfect. It was absolutely terrifying.

"What if I'm terrible at it?" I whispered.

I sat at my desk, tapping my pen against the contract while staring at the signature line like it might spontaneously combust. Frosty had retreated to the kitchen, claiming he needed to "marinate on this development" (which usually meant stress-baking something with cinnamon).

The blank space where my name should go seemed to mock me. My reflection in the desk's polished surface showed the same hesitation I'd worn most of my life—the same expression I'd had when I declined joining the coven's advanced herbology course because I feared being the worst student.

The memory of my old bedroom in Connecticut surfaced—walls lined with books I'd

analyzed but never dared to edit, journals filled with observations I'd never shared, opportunities passed over because they required stepping out of my comfortable isolation.

My phone rang, Lincoln's name lighting up the screen.

"I was just going to call you," I lied, answering.

"Did you get my package?" His voice carried that mix of confidence and vulnerability that always made my stomach flip.

"I did. It's... unexpected."

"In a good way, I hope?"

I traced the contract's letterhead with my fingertip. "Lincoln, what if I'm terrible at this? What if I embarrass you? Your reputation?—"

"Chloe," he interrupted gently, "my first year as an editor, I accidentally approved a children's book that contained what I thought was a charming foreign phrase. Turned out to be an extremely vulgar insult in Portuguese."

I snorted despite myself. "You didn't."

"We had to pulp the entire first printing. Ten thousand copies. My grandfather nearly disowned me." His chuckle warmed something in my chest. "Everyone fails spectacularly at least once."

"The town council's been asking questions," I blurted. "About why you've been buying property. About your intentions here."

A pause. "And what do you think my intentions are?"

"I don't know. That's the problem. Are you just... visiting my world? Or building something more permanent?"

"I've been looking into opening a satellite office in Assjacket," he said quietly. "Nothing huge—just enough to justify spending at least half my time there. With you."

The air seemed to still around me.

"That's... a big change."

"It would be. For both of us." His voice softened. "I'm not asking for an answer today. About any of it. But I want you to know I'm thinking about our future."

I picked up the pen, looking at the contract. "This won't be easy."

"The best partnerships rarely are."

I signed my name with a decisive flourish. "There. I'm officially your newest editor."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

CHLOE

I spent the entire weekend rearranging my study, trying to transform it from "witch's chaotic research lair" to "professional editor's workspace."

" This mostly involved hiding my more questionable grimoires behind respectable literary classics and pretending the burn mark on my desk was from a candle and not from that time I accidentally summoned a small fire demon while trying to heat up leftovers.

"What about this?" Frosty appeared in the doorway, holding what looked like a fountain pen made from a peacock feather. "Guaranteed to increase intellectual acuity by sixteen percent."

"Where did you even get that?" I asked, eyeing the suspicious shimmer around its nib.

"Won it in a poker game with that warlock who runs the antique shop." Frosty placed it ceremoniously on my desk. "Never lost a hand while holding it."

"So it's a cheating pen?"

"I prefer 'luck enhancement writing implement.

" He scurried behind me and started adjusting my chair height for the third time that morning.

"Ergonomics are essential for peak cognitive function.

My cousin knew a hen who developed terrible posture from improper perching.

Ended up with a permanent lean to the left. "

"I'm pretty sure chicken anatomy and human office ergonomics aren't comparable."

"Tell that to my cousin Henrietta." He squinted critically at my desk arrangement.

"Your monitor should be exactly at eye level. Also, your coffee mug should be on the left for optimal hydration-to-typing ratio."

"That's not a thing."

"Is too. I read it in 'Productivity Quarterly.'"

My laptop pinged with a new email notification. From Lincoln.

"It's here," I whispered, suddenly feeling like I might throw up the anxiety-pancakes Frosty had insisted on making me for breakfast.

"Well, open it!" Frosty hopped onto the desk, nearly knocking over my "luck enhancement writing implement."

I clicked open the email.

Chloe,

I've selected this manuscript specifically for you. The author shows promise but needs guidance from someone with your perceptive eye. No pressure - just your honest assessment.

- Lincoln

Attached was a fantasy manuscript titled "The Witch's Familiar."

"Is he serious?" I muttered, downloading the file.

I opened the document and read the first paragraph:

Moonlight cascaded like liquid silver through the ancient forest, dancing upon the witch's flowing ebony locks as she gracefully pirouetted among the mystical toadstools, her emerald eyes glistening with unshed tears of magical power.

I reached for the peacock pen without thinking.

"Well?" Frosty peered at my screen.

"This," I said, uncapping the pen with newfound purpose, "needs work."

Three hours later, I'd forgotten about Frosty's ergonomic adjustments, Lincoln's expectations, and even the questionable magical properties of my new pen. The manuscript had pulled me in—not because it was good (it wasn't), but because I could see exactly how to make it better.

I finally surfaced from my editing trance when Frosty slammed a plate of sandwiches on the desk, narrowly missing my laptop.

"You've been muttering to yourself for four hours," he said. "Started speaking in editor shorthand. Kept saying things like 'passive voice' and 'purple prose' while making angry slashing motions."

I blinked, realizing my hand cramped from writing. The document before me



bloomed with comments, strikethroughs, and suggestions. "I think I'm actually good at this."

"Shocking revelation," Frosty deadpanned. "Now eat something before you—" His eyes widened. "What time is it?"

I glanced at the clock. "Three-fifteen, why?"

"Jezfucnubooles!" I shrieked, nearly knocking over my chair. "The video conference is at three-thirty!"

"I reminded you an hour ago! You grunted and said 'just one more paragraph.'"

I flew to my bedroom, yanking open drawers. "What do editors even wear? Professional but not stuffy? Creative but not weird?"

"Definitely not that," Frosty commented as I held up a faded Metallica t-shirt.

Three outfit changes later, I settled on a simple black blouse that said "I'm professional but won't judge you for using too many adverbs." My hair, however, had formed an alliance with chaos.

"You look fine," Frosty insisted, shoving me back toward the study. "Besides, they're book people. Their bar for personal appearance is 'did you remember pants?'"

I scrambled to my desk just as my laptop chimed. I clicked to accept the video call, but instead of Lincoln's face, I got a black screen with "Audio connection failed" flashing red.

"No, no, no!" I jabbed at keys randomly.

"Stop panicking," Frosty hopped onto the desk. "Let me fix it." He pecked at several keys with his beak.

The screen went blue. Then displayed a beach screensaver I'd never seen before. Then started playing what sounded suspiciously like a polka version of "Highway to Hell."

"What did you do?" I hissed.

"I'm implementing advanced troubleshooting techniques," Frosty insisted, pecking another key. The screen flipped upside down.

My phone rang. Lincoln.

"Technical difficulties?" he asked, amusement warming his voice.

"My familiar thinks he's IT support."

"I've rescheduled for five minutes from now. Try turning it off and on again."

Five excruciatingly long minutes later, I stared at a screen filled with professionally dressed people, all watching me expectantly.

"Everyone, this is Chloe Woolsworth, our brilliant new acquisition," Lincoln announced.

A woman with steel-gray hair and sharper eyes spoke first. "Your notes on Elizabeth Chen's manuscript, "The Midnight Garden" were... unexpected."

My stomach dropped. "Too harsh?"

"Not at all," she said. "You identified precisely why it wasn't working. Most new editors try to be nice. You went straight for the jugular."

I forced a smile while my internal organs played musical chairs. Had I been too harsh? Too direct? I'd spent hours tearing that manuscript apart, convinced I was doing the right thing.

"Thank you?" I managed, my voice teetering between question and statement.

"Eleanor doesn't give compliments lightly," Lincoln added, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Or ever, actually."

Eleanor—apparently the steel-haired woman—made a dismissive gesture. "When something's worth doing, it's worth doing honestly. Your suggestion to restructure the protagonist's journey and eliminate the talking squirrel sidekick salvaged what might have been an unmarketable manuscript."

"The squirrel had potential," I defended, surprising myself. "Just not as the moral compass of the story. He worked better as the chaotic element that forced the protagonist to make difficult choices."

A man with thick glasses and a bowtie leaned forward. "Precisely what I said! The squirrel represents the protagonist's repressed desires!"

"Or it's just a squirrel with boundary issues," I muttered.

Unexpected laughter rippled through the screen. Even Eleanor's lips twitched.

Lincoln beamed at me with unmistakable pride, sending a warm flutter through my chest.

"We'd like you to take on two more manuscripts," Eleanor said. "Lincoln will send the details. Unless that's too much with your... other commitments?" Her pause suggested she knew exactly what my "other commitments" entailed—namely being a witch in a magical town.

"I can handle it," I said, ignoring Frosty's skeptical cluck from somewhere below the camera's view.

After discussing deadlines and expectations, the meeting concluded. Lincoln lingered after the others signed off.

"You were brilliant," he said. "They're notoriously hard to impress."

"So am I impressing your colleagues or editing books?" I asked. "Because those feel like different goals."

"Both. Neither." He ran a hand through his hair. "I wanted them to see what I see in you."

"A witch with control issues and a talking rooster?"

"A perceptive mind that cuts through pretense."

I stared at Lincoln's face on my screen, the warmth in his eyes making my apartment feel less empty.

After the video conference with his team, I'd spent the rest of the day with my nose buried in manuscript pages, losing track of time until Frosty had insisted I eat something besides coffee and anxiety.

"A perceptive mind that cuts through pretense," I repeated. "Is that a polite way of

saying I'm judgmental?"

Lincoln laughed. "It's a compliment. Eleanor texted me after the meeting to say you're 'acceptably astute for someone so new.'"

"High praise from the literary dragon."

"The highest." His smile faded slightly. "I should let you go. You've had a long day."

I nodded, though I didn't want to end the call. "Good night, then."

"Good night, Chloe."

The screen went dark, leaving me staring at my own reflection. I sighed and closed my laptop.

My phone's insistent buzzing dragged me from a dream about editing a manuscript written entirely in interpretive dance notation. I fumbled for it in the darkness, squinting at the screen. Midnight. Lincoln.

"Hello?" I mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

I pushed myself upright, blinking away sleep.

Lincoln appeared on my screen, his usually immaculate appearance disheveled.

His tie hung loose around his neck, his hair stood in odd directions like he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly, and stacks of papers surrounded him like a paper fortress.

"You look terrible," I said, because tact abandoned me at midnight.

"Thanks. Just what every man wants to hear." He attempted a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

Lincoln sighed, loosening his tie further. "Berkshire Media has made an offer to buy my company."

"The publishing giant? That's... good, right?" I asked, though his expression suggested otherwise.

"It's complicated. The money is substantial, but they want to restructure everything. I'd need to stay in New York full-time for at least a year during the transition." He rubbed his eyes. "Possibly longer."

## Page 4

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My stomach dropped, but I forced my face to remain neutral. "That sounds like an amazing opportunity."

"It could be. The resources they have would allow us to take on projects we've always had to pass on." His exhaustion showed in every line of his face. "But the timing is..."

"Inconvenient?" I offered, when what I meant was heartbreaking.

"I've been trying to find ways to spend more time in Assjacket, not less."

I swallowed hard. "You should take it. We can make this work."

"Chloe, I—" His image froze, then pixelated. "—don't want to—" The audio cut out, his mouth still moving.

"Lincoln? I can't hear you."

His image dissolved into digital chaos, then the call dropped completely.

I stared at my blank phone screen, the sudden disconnection like a punch to the gut. The universe had a sick sense of timing—cutting Lincoln off right when we needed clarity most.

"Fantastic," I muttered, tossing my phone onto the nightstand.

Sleep was now a distant memory. I padded to my desk, flipped on the lamp, and pulled the manuscript toward me. If I couldn't fix my relationship uncertainties at

midnight, I could at least fix dangling modifiers and plot holes.

Peacock pen in hand, I attacked the pages with surgical precision. One hour blurred into three as I lost myself in someone else's fictional problems instead of my own very real ones.

The rhythmic scratching of pen against paper unlocked a memory I'd buried years ago.

Twelve-year-old me, proudly showing my mother the short story that had won first place in the school competition.

Her distracted nod as she rushed to attend Jenny's dance recital.

"That's nice, dear. Put it on the fridge if you want. "

Meanwhile, Jenny's participation trophies earned dedicated shelf space and breathless praise. "Our little star!" they'd called her, while my academic achievements collected dust.

I shook my head, refocusing on the manuscript. The protagonist was facing her nemesis—a woman who'd stolen her identity. The irony wasn't lost on me. Jenny had always been better at being the daughter my parents wanted.

"Editing at three in the morning is how serial killers are born."

I jumped, nearly knocking over my coffee mug. Frosty stood in the doorway, his feathers ruffled from sleep, tiny reading glasses perched on his beak.

"Says the rooster who practices roundhouse kicks at dawn," I countered.



"That's different. That's art." He hopped onto the desk, examining the sea of red ink. "You're butchering this poor manuscript like it personally insulted your ancestors."

"I'm improving it."

"At three in the morning?"

I sighed, dropping my pen. "Lincoln's publishing company might be bought out. He'll be stuck in New York for a year. Maybe longer."

"Ah." Frosty settled beside my elbow. "And you think you're just a small-town diversion from his real life."

"When did you get your psychology degree?" I snapped, then immediately regretted it. "Sorry."

"You don't need a degree to recognize self-sabotage. You're trying to prove your worth through work because you're afraid you're not enough otherwise."

I blinked at him. "That was... surprisingly insightful."

"I contain multitudes." He straightened proudly. "Also, I watched Dr. Phil while you were sleeping yesterday."

I stared at Frosty, trying to process his armchair psychology. "So what exactly are you suggesting? That I just ignore the fact that Lincoln's entire life is in New York while I'm stuck in?—"

The distant rumble of an engine cut me off. At five in the morning in Assjacket, any vehicle sounded like an invasion.

"Are we being raided by the FBI?" I pushed back from my desk and moved to the window.

"Finally!" Frosty hopped excitedly to the windowsill. "They've come for my manifesto on chicken rights."

A delivery truck with a logo I didn't recognize crawled up my driveway, headlights cutting through the pre-dawn fog. The driver, a burly man with an impressive beard, struggled with something large in the back.

"You're not expecting anything, are you?" I asked Frosty.

"My samurai sword collection isn't due until Tuesday."

I rolled my eyes and headed for the door, wrapping my cardigan tighter against the morning chill. The delivery man looked relieved when I appeared.

"Ms. Woolsworth? Special delivery. Need a signature." He thrust a tablet at me while eyeing Frosty, who had followed me outside and was now performing what appeared to be tai chi on the porch railing.

After I signed, the man carefully unloaded a large rectangular package wrapped in multiple layers of protective material and marked "FRAGILE" in aggressive red lettering.

"What in the name of witchcraft is that?" Frosty circled the package once it was safely inside. "It's either a cursed artifact or the world's most pretentious toaster."

"It's from Lincoln." I recognized his handwriting on the shipping label.

"Ooh! Maybe it's a portal to his dimension. Or a teleportation device so you can visit

New York without dealing with TSA!" Frosty pecked experimentally at the corner of the wrapping.

"Or maybe it's just a really big book." I carefully began removing the layers of bubble wrap and protective foam.

"No one sends books via specialty courier at dawn, Chloe. It's probably the preserved head of his last girlfriend."

"Your imagination is concerning." I pulled away the final layer of wrapping and gasped.

Inside was a glass display case, museum quality, containing a leather-bound first edition of "The Night Circus" – my absolute favorite novel. The book that had saved me during my darkest days at the family ice castle.

"Holy mother of egg whites," Frosty whispered reverently.

My fingers trembled as I found the note tucked alongside the case.

I stared at the note in my hands, my heart doing that annoying flutter thing that happened whenever Lincoln managed to surprise me. Which was happening with alarming frequency lately.

"Well?" Frosty hopped impatiently beside me. "Is it a ransom note? Secret coordinates to buried treasure? His secret cookie recipe?"

"It's from his private collection." My voice came out softer than intended as I read Lincoln's elegant handwriting:

Chloe - This first edition was part of my grandfather's collection.

Only 500 were printed with this binding, and this is number 7.

The author signed it at a private event in 1912.

I've kept it in my personal library for decades, but I realized it belongs with someone who truly understands its magic. Like you.

"Is that... are those actual tears forming in your cynical eye sockets?" Frosty peered up at me.

"Allergies," I muttered, carefully opening the case. The scent of aged paper and leather filled my senses.

With reverent fingers, I opened the cover. Inside, Lincoln had placed delicate bookmarks at various pages. I turned to the first one and found a passage about night gardens highlighted with a faint pencil mark:

"The circus arrives without warning..."

In the margin, Lincoln had written: This reminded me of you appearing in my life.

"Sweet crispy nuggets," Frosty whispered, genuinely moved. "The man's gone full Shakespearean for you."

I turned to each marked passage, finding similar notes connecting the story to our relationship. When I reached the final page, my breath caught. There, in his careful script:

"Distance is just geography. You're always with me."

My fingers hovered over the glass case. For once, my brain's sarcasm department had

gone silent.

"You know," Frosty said, his voice uncharacteristically gentle, "some people spend their entire lives waiting for someone who speaks their language."

I touched the glass, allowing myself to feel the connection Lincoln had woven between us through literature. This wasn't just a rare book—it was a bridge between his world and mine.

"I should call him," I whispered.

"Maybe put on pants first," Frosty suggested. "Even for telephone romance, pants are generally advised."

I carefully placed the glass case on my bookshelf where the morning light would catch it without causing damage. Each time I glanced at it, something warm and unfamiliar expanded in my chest.

"If you keep smiling like that, your face might crack," Frosty remarked, arranging his feathers on the couch. "Don't you have that editing deadline tomorrow?"

"Shit." The manuscript. I'd been so absorbed in Lincoln's gift that I'd forgotten about the actual work part of our new arrangement.

I hurried to my desk where the fantasy manuscript lay waiting, my notes and edits covering nearly every page. Three days of intense focus had yielded surprising results—I'd finished the substantive edits yesterday. All that remained was finalizing my editorial letter.

"Did you know," I said, settling into my chair, "that the author used the word 'suddenly' thirty-seven times in one chapter?"

"The horror," Frosty deadpanned. "Did you also count their commas? Please say yes so I can stage an intervention."

"Mock all you want, but this book actually has potential." I pulled up my document of notes. "The protagonist's magical system is inconsistent, but the world-building is solid. And there's this subplot with a sentient library that's genuinely brilliant."

"Listen to you, all professional editor-like." Frosty hopped onto the desk. "Next you'll be wearing tweed and saying things like 'the metaphor is trite but salvageable.'"

"The metaphors are trite but salvageable," I replied, typing rapidly. "Also, the romance subplot needs serious work. Nobody falls in love that fast."

"Says the witch who's gone from hermit to career woman with boyfriend in record time."

I shot him a glare but couldn't argue the point. Instead, I focused on completing my editorial letter, carefully explaining my suggestions and highlighting the manuscript's strengths. Four hours later, I hit send—a full day ahead of schedule.

"Done," I announced, stretching my cramped fingers.

My phone pinged almost immediately. An email notification.

"That was fast," Frosty peered at my screen. "Did you break the internet?"

I opened the message, expecting an automated response. Instead, it was from the author:

Ms. Woolsworth,

I just received your edits and notes. I've worked with three different editors at major publishing houses, and none provided feedback this insightful or respectful of my vision.

Your suggestions for the library subplot especially opened up possibilities I hadn't considered.

If Lincoln will allow it, I'd like to request you specifically for the sequel.

Sincerely,

Marcus Wells

"Well, well, well," Frosty said, reading over my shoulder. "Looks like someone's found their calling."

My phone rang before I could respond. Lincoln's name flashed on the screen.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

LINCOLN

I spread the checkered blanket across the small clearing in Chloe's favorite spot near the creek.

The gentle burble of water over stones provided a perfect soundtrack as I unpacked the picnic basket I'd prepared.

Well, technically my chef had prepared it, but I'd personally selected each item with Chloe's preferences in mind.

"Is that actual honest-to-goddess prosciutto?" Chloe's eyes widened as I unwrapped the delicate meat. "In Assjacket? Did you teleport to Italy this morning?"

"Not quite. Though the look on your face might be worth learning that particular spell." I handed her a plate with the charcuterie selection. "I may have had some supplies flown in."

"You chartered a plane for lunch meat." She shook her head but couldn't hide her smile. "Your ridiculous extravagance is both alarming and strangely endearing."

The sunlight filtered through the leaves above us, dappling her face with golden light. Even with her sardonic expression, she looked beautiful. A familiar warmth spread through my chest—that peculiar mixture of contentment and nervous energy I only felt around her.

"I've been meaning to ask you something." I cleared my throat, suddenly finding the



perfectly aged gouda fascinating. "My grandfather has been asking about you."

"Your grandfather?" Chloe paused mid-bite. "The one who left you the estate? I thought he was?—"

"Dead? No, just exceedingly old and stubbornly alive." I poured us both some wine. "He's quite interested in meeting the woman who's apparently made me 'less insufferable' according to his sources."

"His sources?"

"He has his ways. Ninety-seven years of magical connections builds quite the intelligence network." I tried for casual, but Chloe's face had already drained of color. "It would just be dinner at the estate. Nothing formal."

Her hand trembled slightly as she set down her glass. The shift was subtle—most wouldn't notice—but I'd learned to read the microscopic changes in her expressions. Her breathing had become shallow, her eyes slightly unfocused.

"The last family dinner I attended ended with my sister Jenny trying to poison my sweet potato casserole." Her voice came out flat. "My mother commented on my weight throughout appetizers, and my father spent the entire meal talking about Jenny's superior magical abilities."

She stared into the distance, and I knew she wasn't seeing the creek anymore.

"My mother asked why I couldn't be more like Jenny. This was three days before Jenny created a voodoo doll of me and nearly succeeded in—" She stopped abruptly, her fingers twisting in her lap.

I reached across the blanket and gently took her hand. "Chloe, there's absolutely no

pressure. I just wanted to extend the invitation."

I couldn't focus on the quarterly reports.

The words blurred together as my thoughts drifted back to Chloe.

Her face when I mentioned my grandfather had haunted me all night.

That flash of panic in her eyes—I knew that look.

It was the same expression she wore whenever her walls threatened to crumble.

My phone buzzed with a text from Marigold: "Operation Outfit Rescue underway. Your witch is in DEFCON 1 panic mode."

I smiled despite my concern. Marigold had appointed herself our relationship coordinator from day one. While her enthusiasm sometimes bordered on intrusive, her heart was in the right place.

Another text arrived: "Joanna bringing reinforcements. Frosty demanding veto power."

I could picture the scene—Chloe's cottage transformed into a war room of fashion decisions, Frosty strutting around offering unsolicited opinions. The mental image made me chuckle, but the underlying anxiety radiating through those texts was unmistakable.

I set aside the reports and dialed Chloe's number. After several rings, I heard a breathless, "Lincoln? Can I call you back? I'm currently being held hostage by the fashion police."

In the background, Marigold's voice carried clearly: "The emerald dress brings out your eyes, but the navy says 'I'm sophisticated but not trying too hard.'"

"Is that Lincoln?" Joanna called out. "Ask him what his grandfather prefers—traditional or modern?"

"Tell him I've declared myself your emotional support poultry and require formal accommodation!" Frosty's indignant squawk was unmistakable.

"Lincoln?" Chloe's voice returned, lower now. "I'm having a minor meltdown. I hate dresses. Define 'nothing formal' on the Sands family scale. Are we talking casual billionaire or merely everyday millionaire?"

The vulnerability beneath her sarcasm tugged at my heart.

"Chloe, listen to me." I softened my voice. "My grandfather wears mismatched socks because he claims it confuses malevolent spirits. Last time I visited, he was wearing pajama pants with his dinner jacket."

A small laugh escaped her.

"He's going to adore you exactly as you are—brilliant, sarcastic, and completely authentic. That's who I..." I paused, the word hovering unspoken between us. "That's who I care about. Not what you wear."

The line went quiet for a moment.

"Even if I show up in my ratty Sunnydale High t-shirt?" Her voice had lost its edge of panic.

"Especially then. Though I can't promise Frosty would ever forgive you."

I pulled up to Chloe's cottage in my 1965 Aston Martin DB5 convertible, the engine purring like a satisfied cat.

Grandfather had gifted it to me on my hundredth birthday (or thirtieth, according to my driver's license).

The silver finish gleamed in the morning sunlight, almost as if the car knew it was making an impression.

As I stepped out, Chloe appeared in the doorway wearing dark jeans and a simple emerald blouse that made her lavender eyes pop.

She'd clearly compromised with Marigold on the color while sticking to her comfort zone on style.

Her hair was loose around her shoulders, and she'd applied the barest hint of makeup.

She looked beautiful, but her face was a mask of contained panic.

"Your chariot awaits, my—" The rest of my greeting died as Frosty strutted out behind her, followed by what appeared to be his entire worldly possessions.

"Lincoln! Excellent timing. I've packed the essentials." Frosty gestured dramatically to three suitcases, a garment bag, and what appeared to be a small cooler. "One must be prepared for all social contingencies when meeting aristocracy."

I blinked. "It's one night, Frosty."

"One night, four outfit changes, seventeen potential social scenarios, and breakfast preparations." He adjusted the tiny bow tie he'd somehow affixed to his feathers. "I refuse to eat subpar biscuits, even in a mansion."

Chloe shot me an apologetic look. "I tried to reason with him. But apparently emotional support poultry requires emotional support luggage."

I laughed despite myself and popped the trunk. "Let's see what magic we can work with the storage space."

The next ten minutes involved a complicated game of luggage Tetris, with Frosty directing operations like a general commanding troops.

"The garment bag must remain horizontal! My formal feathers cannot be creased!"

When we finally managed to close the trunk, Frosty insisted on riding in the back with a special cushion he'd brought specifically for the occasion.

Chloe slid into the passenger seat, her fingers fidgeting with her seatbelt. She hadn't spoken much during the loading process, and her silence continued as I started the engine.

As we pulled away from the cottage, I reached across the console and gently took her hand. A familiar spark of magic passed between us—warm, electric, and comforting all at once. Her shoulders relaxed slightly, and she turned her hand to intertwine her fingers with mine.

I navigated the winding roads out of Assjacket with one hand on the wheel, the other still intertwined with Chloe's. The warm connection between us seemed to calm her, though I could practically hear her thoughts racing.

"Remind me again why your grandfather wants to meet me?" Chloe's voice was carefully neutral, but I caught the underlying anxiety.

"Because I haven't stopped talking about you for weeks, and he's curious about the

witch who's managed to distract me from quarterly projections."

From the backseat, Frosty cleared his throat. "I assume my invitation was a given, considering my status as Chloe's executive advisor and security detail."

I caught his reflection in the rearview mirror, perched regally on his cushion. "Grandfather specifically mentioned wanting to meet Chloe's extraordinary familiar."

"Extraordinary." Frosty preened. "A rooster of discernment knows when he's being properly acknowledged."

The gas gauge dipped toward empty as we approached a small roadside station. I pulled in beside the only pump.

"Pit stop," I announced, releasing Chloe's hand reluctantly. "Need anything while I fill up?"

"Maybe some water," Chloe said, unbuckling her seatbelt.

The attendant—a weathered man with a name tag reading "Earl"—ambled over. "Fill 'er up?"

"Premium, please."

Earl whistled, admiring the car. "Don't see many classics like this." His gaze drifted to the backseat where Frosty sat motionless, having instantly adopted his "mortal-present" stillness. "That's some fancy taxidermy you got there."

"It's a... family heirloom," I improvised.

Earl leaned closer to the window. "Dang realistic. Almost looks like it could start

crowin'."

Frosty's eye twitched almost imperceptibly.

"My grandfather is an enthusiast," I said, watching Chloe bite her lip to suppress a laugh.

"Must be worth a fortune. My cousin Leroy tried taxidermy once. Ended up with what looked like a rabid squirrel crossed with a mop."

As Earl filled the tank, Chloe whispered, "Frosty's going to explode if he has to maintain that pose much longer."

She was right. The moment Earl turned his back, Frosty's feathers ruffled in indignation.

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"Taxidermy?" he hissed. "I have never been so insulted. I am a living work of art, not some stuffed conversation piece!"

Chloe's tension finally broke as she dissolved into giggles, the sound making my heart skip. It was the first genuine laugh I'd heard from her all day.

The gas station mishap left Frosty grumbling for the next twenty miles, occasionally muttering phrases like "common barnyard fowl" and "philistines wouldn't know quality poultry if it pecked them."

I glanced at Chloe, who had relaxed enough to roll down her window, letting the wind tousle her light brown hair. The afternoon sun caught the subtle lavender in her eyes—a trait unique to witches of her lineage, though few mortals would notice.

"We're about ten minutes out," I said, turning onto a private road lined with ancient oaks. "Just a heads up—Grandfather tends to be a bit... excessive."

"Excessive how?" Chloe's shoulders tensed again.

"You'll see."

As we rounded the final curve, the trees parted to reveal the estate. I heard Chloe's sharp intake of breath.

"Holy Jezfucnuboobles," she whispered.

The Sands estate sprawled across fifty acres, the main house a sprawling Tudor-



Gothic fusion with turrets, expansive windows, and stonework that seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

Fountains dotted the landscape, their waters defying gravity by flowing upward in spiraling patterns.

Gardens stretched in every direction, blooms in impossible colors tracking our car's movement like curious spectators.

"You said estate. This is a small kingdom." Chloe's voice had gone flat—her defense mechanism when overwhelmed.

"My grandfather believes in making an impression." I reached for her hand again, feeling her pulse racing beneath my fingertips. "The staff are all magical beings. You don't have to hide anything here."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" She withdrew her hand to tuck her hair behind her ear.

As we pulled up to the main entrance, a line of staff stood at perfect attention—the butler, housekeeper, groundskeeper, and several others I recognized from childhood visits.

Frosty leaned forward between our seats. "Now this is more like it. A proper reception committee."

I parked and came around to open Chloe's door, but she sat frozen, staring at the assembled staff.

"I can't do this," she whispered. "This is... this is..."

"This is just a house, Chloe. And they're just people."

"Your definition of 'just' needs serious recalibration." Her breathing had quickened.

The butler, Nathaniel, approached and opened her door with a formal bow.

"Miss Woolsworth, we are delighted to welcome you to Sands Estate.

Master Sands is eagerly awaiting your arrival in the conservatory.

" His gaze shifted to the backseat. "And this must be the distinguished Frosty we've heard so much about. "

Frosty puffed up his chest. "Finally, someone with proper manners."

I offered my hand to Chloe, watching the color drain from her face as the full reality of where she was sank in.

I gently squeezed Chloe's hand as I helped her from the car, feeling her trembling slightly beneath my touch. The poor woman looked like she might bolt back down the driveway at any moment.

"Breathe," I whispered. "I promise no one will turn you into a toad."

"That's reassuring," she muttered. "Because that was definitely my primary concern."

Nathaniel led us through the grand foyer with its soaring ceilings and ancient tapestries that subtly shifted scenes when no one was looking directly at them.

I watched Chloe's eyes dart everywhere, taking in the enchanted artifacts and portraits of stern-looking Sands ancestors whose eyes followed our movement.

"Before meeting Grandfather, perhaps you'd like to freshen up?" I suggested, noting how Chloe's knuckles had gone white around the strap of her bag.

"Yes. Goddess yes." The relief in her voice was palpable.

"Nathaniel, please show Miss Woolsworth and Frosty to the East Suite."

"Of course, sir. This way, if you please."

As we ascended the grand staircase, Frosty strutted alongside us, examining the ornate banisters with a critical eye. "Not bad craftsmanship. Mahogany?"

"Rosewood, actually," Nathaniel replied without missing a beat. "Harvested during the full moon of 1887."

"A man who knows his wood. I approve." Frosty nodded sagely.

Nathaniel paused before an intricately carved door. "Your accommodations, Miss Woolsworth."

The door swung open, and Chloe froze in the doorway. I placed my hand gently on the small of her back.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"This... isn't what I expected."

The East Suite had been transformed. Instead of the formal, antique-filled space I remembered, the room now featured floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with leather-bound volumes.

A reading nook with plush cushions sat beneath a bay window overlooking the gardens.

The four-poster bed was draped with linens in soft lavender—the exact shade of Chloe's eyes.

"My grandfather insisted on preparing this himself," I explained, watching her face. "He's been... researching."

Chloe ran her fingers along the spines of the books. "These are first editions of my favorite authors. How did he?—"

"I may have mentioned your reading preferences."

Frosty wandered to the corner where an elaborate perch stood, crafted from polished bronze and inlaid with moonstone. "What's this contraption?"

"Your sleeping quarters," Nathaniel explained. "Master Sands the Elder enchanted it himself. It maintains perfect temperature, massages tired talons, and—" he pressed a small button "—dispenses these."

A compartment opened, revealing golden biscuits.

Frosty's eyes widened. "Are those..."

"Honey-butter biscuits from Carpe Diem Bed & Breakfast. We had their recipe magically replicated."

Frosty looked at me, then at Chloe, then back at the biscuits. "I take back every skeptical thought I had about this place."

Chloe turned to me, her expression softening for the first time since we'd arrived.  
"Your grandfather did all this?"

I nodded. "He wanted you to feel at home."

She glanced around the room again, her shoulders relaxing slightly. "I might have misjudged this visit before it even started."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

CHLOE

I smoothed down my emerald shirt for the hundredth time as Lincoln guided us through corridors that seemed to stretch and curve in impossible ways. Paintings on the walls shifted subtly as we passed, the subjects' eyes following our progress with unmistakable curiosity.

"Just through here," Lincoln said, pausing before a set of massive oak doors carved with intricate runes that pulsed with a faint blue light. "Grandfather spends most of his time in the library."

"Of course he does," I muttered. "Nothing says 'intimidating patriarch' like surrounding yourself with ancient tomes of forbidden knowledge."

Frosty adjusted his bow tie—yes, he'd insisted on wearing a bow tie. "I'm ready to make my intellectual debut. Do you think he'll appreciate my discourse on post-modern magical theory?"

"I think he'll appreciate if you don't set anything on fire," I whispered.

Lincoln pushed open the doors, and my sarcastic defenses crumbled.

The library was... magnificent. Three stories tall with spiral staircases connecting different levels, but that wasn't what stole my breath.

Books—hundreds of them—floated gently between shelves, reorganizing themselves.

Some hovered open in mid-air, pages turning by invisible hands.

Globes of soft golden light drifted near reading nooks, and a massive fireplace crackled with flames that shifted between all colors of the rainbow.

"Lincoln, my boy!"

The voice drew my attention to a sitting area near the fireplace.

Rising from a high-backed leather chair was a man who could only be Augustus Sands.

White-haired but tall and straight-backed, he wore a smoking jacket that seemed to shimmer with constellations when he moved.

His eyes—the same light golden-brown as Lincoln's—sparkled with vitality that belied his apparent age.

Before I could prepare myself, Augustus crossed the room with surprising speed and wrapped me in a warm embrace.

"Chloe Woolsworth! At last!" He pulled back, hands on my shoulders, examining me with undisguised delight. "The witch who's captured my grandson's heart. I've been absolutely dying to meet you."

"I, um—" My usual arsenal of witty retorts abandoned me completely.

"And this must be the famous Frosty!" Augustus turned to my familiar with the same enthusiasm. "Lincoln tells me you're quite the martial artist."

Frosty puffed up his chest. "I've mastered seventeen forms of combat, sir, including

three that I invented myself."

"Marvelous! You must show me your technique later." Augustus guided us toward the sitting area. "Chloe, Lincoln mentioned you have an impressive collection of magical texts. Tell me, have you ever encountered Grimshaw's Compendium of Practical Enchantments?"

I blinked in surprise. "Actually, yes. I have a first edition, though the binding is falling apart."

"A first edition! Remarkable. I've been searching for one for decades."

As we sat, Augustus asked about my garden, my favorite authors, my thoughts on modern magical theory. Not once did he mention my family or background in that probing, judgmental way I'd expected. He listened—really listened—to my answers, his eyes lighting up when we discovered shared interests.

I watched in amazement as Augustus leaned forward, genuinely interested in my thoughts on magical theory. This wasn't at all what I'd expected. Where was the intimidating interrogation? The subtle digs about my family background? The implied question of whether I was good enough for his grandson?

"And what do you think about Willowbranch's assertion that intent amplifies magical resonance?" Augustus asked, his eyes twinkling.

My mind went completely blank. I'd read Willowbranch's work years ago but couldn't remember a single detail under pressure. The silence stretched awkwardly as Lincoln shot me a concerned glance.

"If I may interject," Frosty said, strutting forward importantly.



"Willowbranch had some fascinating theories, but his collection of rare manuscripts is nothing compared to what I'm seeing here, Mr. Sands.

" He gestured with his wing toward the floating books.

"Is that a first edition Morgenstern on your third shelf? The gold embossing is unmistakable."

Augustus's face lit up like a child on Christmas morning. "You have an eye for bindings, sir! Indeed it is. Are you a collector yourself?"

"I dabble," Frosty said modestly, though I'd never once seen him show interest in rare books. "Though my wingspan limits my shelving options."

Augustus laughed heartily. "Come, you must see my pride and joy." He led Frosty to a glass case where a massive tome rested on velvet. "The original Bartholomew's Bestiary, with hand-painted illustrations."

"Barth-oh-lomew," Frosty pronounced carefully. "One of my favorites. His work on magical creatures is unparalleled, especially his chapter on... um... mystical chickens."

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. There was no such chapter.

"Indeed, though I've always been partial to his section on sea serpents," Augustus replied with a perfectly straight face. "Lincoln, why didn't you tell me your girlfriend's familiar was such a literary scholar?"

Lincoln caught my eye and winked. "Frosty's talents are innumerable. Wait until you try his biscuits and gravy."

"You cook as well?" Augustus clapped his hands together. "Magnificent! I insist you join me in the kitchen tomorrow morning. My chef makes an excellent breakfast, but I'd love your input."

"I would be honored to share my culinary secrets," Frosty said, bowing so low his comb nearly touched the floor. "Though I must warn you, my recipes have been known to cause spontaneous marriage proposals."

The tension in my shoulders melted away as Augustus's booming laugh filled the library. Somehow, my ridiculous feathered companion had accomplished what I couldn't— transformed this meeting from an ordeal into something that felt remarkably like... family.

The dining room took my breath away. Crystal chandeliers floated without chains, their light dancing across a table that stretched longer than my entire cottage. Place settings arranged themselves as we entered—silverware hopping into perfect alignment, napkins folding into elaborate swan shapes.

"This is..." I struggled for words that wouldn't betray my anti-magical upbringing.

"Completely excessive," Lincoln finished for me, squeezing my hand. "Grandfather believes formal dinners require at least seventeen pieces of silverware per person."

"Tradition matters, my boy." Augustus guided me to a chair that pulled itself out. "Though I've reduced it to fifteen pieces in my progressive old age."

Frosty strutted to a specially elevated seat with what I could only describe as rooster swagger. "The proper silverware arrangement demonstrates civilized breeding," he declared with mock pomposity.

I stifled a laugh. My familiar had clearly been watching too many period dramas.

As enchanted serving dishes floated around us, Augustus leaned forward conspiratorially. "Did Lincoln ever tell you about his first attempt at magical publishing?"

Lincoln groaned. "Grandfather, please?—"

"He was seven," Augustus continued, eyes twinkling. "Decided to 'improve' my first-edition spellbooks by adding his own illustrations. Turned every familiar in the Northeast purple for a week."

"The spell diagrams clearly needed visual enhancement," Lincoln defended himself, cheeks flushing.

"My publishing visionary," I teased, delighted to see this new side of him.

Augustus waved his hand, and a leather-bound book appeared. "His original artwork. I preserved it, naturally."

Lincoln buried his face in his hands as Augustus showed me childish drawings scribbled across ancient text. "I was going to be the next great magical illustrator."

"Instead, you revolutionized magical publishing," Augustus said, his tone shifting to genuine pride. "Started with just that small investment from me—what was it? Ten thousand?"

"Five," Lincoln corrected. "And you made me sign a proper business plan."

I paused mid-bite. "You built your company from five thousand dollars?"

Lincoln shrugged modestly. "Grandfather taught me the value of earning my way. The family vault was off-limits until I'd proven myself."

"He slept on a futon in a studio apartment for three years," Augustus added. "Refused additional help even when that dreadful merger nearly bankrupted him."

I looked at Lincoln with new understanding. All this time, I'd assumed he was born into publishing royalty, handed a company on a silver platter.

"Speaking of rare texts," Augustus said, "I've been meaning to show you my collection of Arithmancy manuscripts. They're quite valuable—both monetarily and magically."

The dinner concluded with a dessert that literally sparkled—some kind of magical soufflé that tasted like my first night of freedom in Assjacket. Lincoln excused himself to take an urgent call from New York, leaving me alone with his grandfather.

"Walk with me, Chloe," Augustus said, offering his arm with old-world charm. "I've something special to show you."

I glanced at Frosty, who waved a wing dismissively. "Go ahead. I'm discussing poultry rights with the chef."

"Sure, Mr. Sands," I said as Augustus led me down a corridor lined with portraits that followed our movement with their eyes.

"Please, call me Auggy or Grandpops, we're family after all. Besides, Lincoln's ancestors," he explained. "Judgmental lot, even in paint form. I tend to be more relaxed than that stuffy lot of wiccans."

My heart swelled with emotion. No one had ever treated me with such warmth and kindness, especially my own family. But this man welcomed me into his home and has treated me like royalty...like family. "Thank you, Mr. ... Grandpops," I said sheepishly in a choked voice full of emotion.

"You're very welcome, my dear," Grandpops said with a smile as he gently squeezed my arm.

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We entered a circular room where glass cases housed objects that hummed with magical energy. A silver pocket watch suspended in midair caught my attention—its hands spinning backward.

"Time-turner?" I asked.

Grandpops raised an eyebrow, impressed. "Indeed. Temperamental little thing, though. Once sent my great-aunt to the Renaissance for a fortnight."

He guided me to a display containing a delicate crystal vase filled with ever-blooming roses. "Lincoln's mother enchanted these. They've bloomed continuously for thirty years."

"She's a witch?"

"Powerful one. Has a particular talent for preservation spells." His voice softened. "She built our library's rare book collection—insisted magic and literature were natural companions."

I thought of Lincoln's publishing house, suddenly understanding his love of literature.

Auggy paused before a pedestal where an ancient leather-bound book floated beneath a dome of shimmering light. "The Sands family grimoire. Nine centuries of magical knowledge."

The book radiated power that made my skin tingle. "It's beautiful."

"Lincoln is the first in generations to blend our magical heritage with the mortal business world so successfully." Augustus studied me. "He's never brought anyone here before. Not once."

I swallowed hard. "Never?"

"My grandson guards his worlds carefully—keeps them separate." Augustus touched the protective dome, making it ripple. "He needs someone who understands both sides of him."

My heart quickened as Grandpop's meaning became clear.

"The publishing mogul and the warlock," I murmured.

"Precisely." Augustus smiled warmly. "You know, watching him tonight—the way he looks at you—reminds me of how I looked at my Eleanora."

I stood frozen, Grandpop's words echoing in my mind. The comparison to his beloved wife felt monumental, especially coming from someone who clearly cherished family above all else.

"He talks about you constantly," Augustus continued, his eyes twinkling. "In our weekly calls, it's 'Chloe this' and 'Chloe that' until I threatened to hex his phone if he didn't bring you to meet me."

My cheeks burned. "I'm not... I don't know if I'm?—"

"There you two are." Lincoln appeared in the doorway, his expression brightening when he saw me. "Grandfather, are you showing off the family secrets already?"

"Merely the PG-rated ones," Augustus winked at me. "I'll save the truly scandalous

tales for breakfast."

Lincoln approached, placing his hand gently on my lower back. "I hope he hasn't been boring you with ancient history."

"On the contrary," I said, leaning slightly into his touch. "I've been taking notes for future blackmail purposes."

"Wonderful," Lincoln groaned. "Speaking of embarrassing history, would you like to see where teenage Lincoln spent his angsty years?"

Augustus chuckled. "I'll leave you two. The grimoire and I need our beauty sleep." He squeezed my hand before departing. "Welcome to the family, Chloe."

Lincoln led me up a winding staircase to the third floor. "My grandfather has never taken to anyone so quickly."

"The feeling's mutual," I admitted. "He's nothing like what I expected."

Lincoln stopped before a door with faded stickers warning: "ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK - MAGICAL EXPERIMENTS IN PROGRESS."

"I was a dramatic teenager," he explained, pushing open the door. "Mother refused to let anyone update it after I left for college. Said it was important to remember where we came from."

The room that greeted me was a perfect time capsule. Posters of bands I'd never heard of covered one wall, while another displayed framed certificates from young publishers' competitions. Bookshelves overflowed with an eclectic mix of magical texts and dog-eared paperbacks.



"You were a neat freak even then," I observed, noting the meticulously organized desk.

Lincoln shrugged. "Chaos in my mind, order in my space."

I wandered to his desk, where leather-bound journals sat in a perfect row. "May I?"

"Be my guest. Just don't laugh too hard."

I opened one to find detailed notes on a spell labeled "Automatic Page Turner v.3.7" with a list of failed attempts. Beside it was a sketch of a book with tiny wings.

"I was determined to create magical reading aids," Lincoln explained, coming to stand beside me. "That particular experiment set my eyebrows on fire."

I flipped through more pages of Lincoln's teenage journal, trying not to giggle at his meticulous documentation of "Enchanted Bookmark Prototype #12: now stays in place but occasionally eats page corners."

"You were such a nerd," I said, tracing my finger over his neat handwriting.

"Were?" Lincoln raised an eyebrow, standing close enough that I could feel his warmth.

I spotted a photo tucked into the journal—teenage Lincoln with Augustus at what looked like a publishing conference. Lincoln's face beamed with pride as he held some kind of award, his grandfather's hand on his shoulder.

"You two have always been close," I observed.

Lincoln nodded. "After my grandma died and my parents moved abroad to run the

international leg of our publishing house, he became everything to me—father, mentor, friend.

" He took the photo, smiling at the memory.

"This was my first Junior Publisher's Innovation Award.

I created a spell that would help editors track changes in manuscripts magically. "

"And now you run your own publishing house." I studied the earnest face of young Lincoln. "You actually made your childhood dream happen."

He replaced the photo carefully. "I had good guidance." His eyes met mine, suddenly serious. "You know, you're the first person I've ever brought here."

"Really?" My heart skipped.

"Really." He took my hands in his. "Chloe, I'm falling in love with you. I think I have been since that first day I saw you at the Carpe Diem Bed and Breakfast."

The words hung between us, honest and terrifying and wonderful. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Lincoln brushed his thumb across my knuckles. "You don't have to say anything. I just wanted you to know."

I stared at our joined hands, my mind racing. The magnitude of what he was offering—not just his heart, but a place in his complicated life with its publishing empires and family legacies—overwhelmed me.

"I'm scared," I whispered finally.

"Of what?"

"Of how much I want this to work." I met his gaze. "Of how much I'm falling for you too."

His smile could have lit the entire mansion.

Lincoln stepped closer, his golden-brown eyes searching mine. His hand brushed my cheek, thumb tracing the line of my jaw.

"May I?" he whispered.

I nodded, unable to form words.

His lips met mine with gentle pressure that quickly deepened into something more urgent.

My hands found their way to his chest, feeling his heartbeat quicken beneath my fingertips.

The kiss tasted of the dessert wine we'd shared earlier and something uniquely Lincoln—a hint of cinnamon and old books.

When we finally broke apart, I felt dizzy, my lips tingling with the remnants of our shared magic.

"Goodnight, Chloe Woolsworth," he murmured against my ear.

"Goodnight," I managed, retreating to my guest room with wobbly knees and a head full of stars.

Sunlight streamed across the terrace the next morning, casting long shadows across a breakfast spread that would make a five-star hotel weep with inadequacy. I approached cautiously, coffee already calling my name, only to find Frosty and Augustus deep in animated conversation.

"The problem with Hemingway," Frosty declared, adjusting his tiny reading glasses with one wing, "is that everyone thinks he invented minimalism when really he just couldn't be bothered with adjectives."

Augustus chuckled, buttering a scone. "Bold statement from a creature whose species communicates primarily through clucking."

"Precisely why I appreciate linguistic efficiency," Frosty countered.

I slid into a chair, pouring myself coffee from a silver pot that somehow knew exactly how much cream to add.

"Ah, Chloe!" Augustus beamed. "Sleep well?"

"Like someone hit me with a sleeping spell," I admitted, reaching for a croissant.

Lincoln appeared, freshly showered and devastating in casual clothes. He kissed my temple before taking the seat beside me, his hand finding mine under the table.

"Lincoln, the board was asking about your succession plans again," Augustus mentioned, his tone deliberately casual as he sipped his tea. "Apparently, maintaining family control while expanding further into international markets has them concerned."

Lincoln's fingers tensed against mine. "The board needs to trust my judgment. We've increased profits three quarters running."

"They're old warlocks, grandson. Old money, old ideas. They expect certain... traditions to continue."

Frosty's head swiveled between them like watching a tennis match.

"What traditions?" I asked.

Augustus smiled kindly. "Nothing to worry about today. Just the usual expectations—heirs, legacy planning, strategic marriages to strengthen publishing alliances."

My croissant suddenly tasted like cardboard.

Lincoln's jaw tightened. "Grandfather, perhaps we could discuss this another time."

The pieces clicked together in my mind—the merger offer, the long hours, the board meetings. Lincoln had been shielding me from the complicated reality of his position all along.

Augustus must have noticed my discomfort. He cleared his throat and shifted the conversation to safer territory—his collection of enchanted fountain pens that wrote in colors that changed based on the reader's mood.

After breakfast, Lincoln excused himself to take a call from his office, leaving me alone with his grandfather on the sunlit terrace.

"Walk with me," Augustus said, offering his arm with old-world charm.

We strolled through gardens where flowers turned to follow our path. The morning dew still clung to emerald leaves, sparkling like tiny diamonds.

"He's always been driven," Augustus said without preamble. "Even as a boy, Lincoln would stay up all night perfecting a spell while other children played games."

"He mentioned his parents weren't around much."

Augustus nodded, his face momentarily shadowed.

"My son and his wife built the international branch of our business.

Excellent publishers, less excellent parents.

"He patted my hand resting on his arm. "Lincoln found solace in books and business plans.

I worry sometimes that he forgot there's more to life. "

"Until recently," I ventured.

The old warlock's eyes twinkled. "Until recently." He stopped beside a fountain where water flowed upward in defiance of gravity. "Chloe, I want you to know something. Whatever nonsense you heard about board expectations and traditions—that's just old warlocks clinging to outdated ideas."

"So no strategic marriage alliances?" I raised an eyebrow.

Augustus laughed. "Good heavens, no. This isn't the eighteenth century, despite what some board members believe." His expression softened. "What matters is Lincoln's happiness. And I haven't seen him this happy in decades."

We reached a secluded garden alcove with a stone bench. Augustus turned to face me directly.

"You're welcome here anytime, Chloe Woolsworth. With or without my grandson."  
He squeezed my hands. "This house has been too quiet for too long."

"Thank you, Grandpops" I whispered, unexpectedly moved.

"Now, one last thing." His eyes gleamed mischievously. "Has Lincoln shown you his collection of magical rejection letters? The ones that sing increasingly sarcastic songs when opened?"

"Not yet."

"Ask him. They're hilarious—especially the one that turns the reader's hair blue for an hour."

## Page 9

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CHLOE

The ancient grandfather clock in my living room ticked away, marking each second of my quiet meltdown with mechanical precision.

I stood in the center of my cottage, still wearing the clothes from our weekend at the Sands estate, unable to move past the entryway.

My suitcase remained untouched by the door while Frosty bustled around, already unpacking his three bags with methodical efficiency.

"You should have seen Augustus's first edition of Magical Herbology Through the Ages," Frosty said, carefully arranging his tiny bow ties on the special rack I'd made him. "The man has taste. And did you notice how the binding was reinforced with actual dragon skin? Not that cheap imitation stuff."

I nodded mechanically, my eyes scanning my humble cottage.

The worn sofa with its faded throw blanket.

The mismatched mugs hanging from hooks in my tiny kitchen.

The stacks of books that served as impromptu side tables.

After a weekend in Lincoln's childhood mansion, my cozy home felt. .. different. Smaller. More precarious.



"And the enchanted card catalog? Jezfucnuboobles, I nearly laid an egg when he showed me how it could—" Frosty stopped mid-sentence, his head tilting as he finally noticed me. "Chloe? Hello? Earth to witch?"

My breath caught in my throat. The walls seemed to be closing in, not with the familiar comfort of my sanctuary but with an oppressive reminder of how different Lincoln's world was from mine.

Images flashed through my mind—the grand staircase of the Sands estate, the staff in their crisp uniforms, Augustus's casual mention of board expectations.

Then, unbidden, the memory of my parents' ice castle in Connecticut. The cold, formal dinners. My sister Jenny's perfect posture and practiced laugh. My father's dismissive glance whenever I spoke. The crushing certainty that I didn't belong.

"I can't—" My voice came out as a wheeze. "I can't breathe."

Frosty was at my side in an instant, his feathers brushing against my leg. "Head between your knees, right now. That's it."

I sank to the floor, following his instructions.

"Breathe with me," he commanded, his voice surprisingly gentle. "In through the beak, out through the tail feathers."

I couldn't stop my hands from shaking as I took several deep breaths. Frosty's feathery presence grounded me enough to function, but the panic still hummed beneath my skin.

"Better?" Frosty asked, his beady eyes fixed on mine.

"Not really."

Frosty fumbled for his phone. "Siri, call Roger, the therapist with the penis paintings."

"They're abstract expressionist interpretations of human sexuality," I corrected automatically, as the phone began ringing.

Thirty minutes later, Frosty and I burst through Roger's office door without knocking. The waiting room had been empty—a small mercy since I probably looked like I'd been dragged backward through a hedge.

"Well, well, the hermit emerges for an unscheduled appearance," Roger said, looking up from his desk. Today he wore a Hawaiian shirt so loud it practically screamed. "Must be serious."

I paced the length of his office, pointedly ignoring the new addition to his wall art collection—something with swirls of red and flesh-toned protrusions that I refused to interpret.

"I went to Lincoln's family estate this weekend."

"And you didn't burst into flames? Impressive."

"His grandfather has a library bigger than my entire house." I continued pacing. "The silverware probably costs more than everything I own. They have staff, Roger. People whose job is to... to... exist around them and do things!"

Roger leaned back. "And this is troubling because...?"

"Because!" I threw my hands up. "He belongs there! In that world of wealth and

power and important publishing people and family legacies. And I'm just—" My voice cracked. "I'm just me."

"Just you?" Roger repeated. "Define 'just you' for me."

"A witch who lives in the middle of nowhere with a talking rooster.

A woman who wears the same three oldy ratty sweatshirts in rotation.

Someone who panics at dinner parties and uses sarcasm as a shield and can't even—" To my horror, tears sprang to my eyes.

"I'm not enough, okay? I've never been enough. "

Roger watched me with unusual stillness. Then he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a Magic 8-Ball.

"What are you doing?"

"Ask it if Lincoln thinks you're enough."

"That's ridiculous."

"Humor me."

I grabbed the toy. "Does Lincoln think I'm..." I couldn't finish.

"Go on."

"Does Lincoln think I'm enough?" I whispered, shaking the ball.

"Signs point to yes," Roger read when I showed him. "Now, is that more or less reliable than the evidence Lincoln's actually given you?"

The question hit like a bucket of cold water.

"What evidence has Lincoln given you about his feelings?" Roger pressed.

"He... brought me to meet his grandfather. He said he's never brought anyone home before."

"Interesting. What else?"

"He gave me a job. He sends me first editions. He calls at midnight just to hear my voice."

"Hmm. Sounds terrible." Roger scribbled something on a notepad. "Homework: make a list of every concrete action Lincoln has taken to show his commitment to you. No interpretations, just facts."

"But—"

"No buts. Facts only. And Chloe? The fear that you're not enough—that's not about Lincoln. That's about your family."

I sank into the chair, suddenly exhausted. "I know."

I left Roger's office with his words rattling around in my brain like loose change. The homework assignment felt like a middle school project, but I couldn't deny its potential usefulness. Not that I'd ever admit that to Roger.

Two days later, I found myself pushing a shopping cart down the cereal aisle of

Assjacket's only grocery store, Supernatural Sustenance.

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead as I debated between granola that tasted like cardboard but was healthy or the sugary cereal Frosty preferred that would probably kill us both eventually.

"Chloe Woolsworth! There you are!"

I froze, a box of Lucky Charms halfway to my cart. Marigold's voice carried across the store like a foghorn, drawing the attention of every shopper within a fifty-foot radius.

"We've been looking everywhere for you!" Marigold barreled toward me, her pink floral dress fluttering behind her.

Three other women followed in her wake—Bethany from the bakery, Eleanor who ran the flower shop, and Susan who I only knew as "that witch with the parrot familiar who gossips more than she does. "

"I've been right here, buying cereal," I said, gesturing vaguely at the shelves. "Not exactly hiding in a witness protection program."

"So," Marigold leaned in conspiratorially, "we heard you visited the Sands estate! How was it? Is it true they have gold-plated bathroom fixtures?"

"And a room just for shoes?" Eleanor added.

"And magical servants who can read your mind?" Susan's eyes were wide with excitement.

I clutched my shopping cart handle like a lifeline. "It was... big. And old. And had a

lot of books."

"That's it?" Bethany looked disappointed. "What about Augustus Sands? Did he like you? Did he give you the family jewels to try on?"

"The family what now?"

"You know," Marigold winked dramatically, "to see if they suit the future Mrs. Sands."

The cereal box slipped from my fingers and crashed to the floor, spilling magical marshmallows that began floating upward.

"Mrs.—? No. Absolutely not. We're just dating. It's new. There were no jewels." My voice had reached a pitch only dogs and possibly Frosty could hear.

"But wedding bells must be on the horizon," Susan pressed. "Lincoln Sands doesn't just bring anyone home to meet Grandfather Augustus."

"No bells. No horizons. No wedding anything." My usual sarcastic shield failed me completely as panic rose in my chest.

"Ladies, if you'll excuse us," a familiar voice cut through the interrogation. "I need to borrow Chloe for an urgent... magical consultation."

Zelda appeared at my side, looping her arm through mine and steering me away from the crowd. Her timing was so perfect I could have kissed her.

"But we weren't finished—" Marigold protested.

"Magical emergency," Zelda called over her shoulder. "Very hush-hush. Witch

business."

Zelda steered me toward the bakery section, safely out of earshot from the gossip squad.

"You looked like you needed extraction from a hostile situation," she said, examining a display of muffins.

"Thank you. I was one more wedding question away from turning someone into a toad." I leaned against the bread rack, trying to slow my racing heart.

Zelda's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Been there. When Mac and I got together, the whole town was planning our wedding before we'd even had a proper date."

"How did you handle it?"

"Told them all to mind their own damn business." She selected a blueberry muffin and placed it in her basket. "But privately? I was terrified. Opening yourself to love after you've built walls is the bravest magic there is."

I stared at her, surprised by the candor. "I'm not sure I'm that brave."

"Nonsense. You let that rooster into your life, didn't you? Anyone who can tolerate Frosty's cooking experiments has courage to spare."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Lincoln's face appeared on the screen.

"Go on," Zelda nudged me. "I'll guard your cart."

I stepped behind a display of enchanted pasta that sang Italian arias when cooked properly. "Hey," I answered, my voice softening automatically.

"Chloe." His face appeared on video, hair disheveled, tie askew. The usual warm light in his eyes had dimmed, replaced by something that made my stomach drop.

"What's wrong?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "The building that houses our headquarters is being sold. The new owners are terminating all leases within thirty days."

"That's... sudden."



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"It gets worse. The board is in panic mode. They're demanding I stay in New York for at least two months to oversee the transition." His voice cracked slightly. "I've been arguing with them all morning, but with the merger talks still ongoing..."

"Two months?" The words felt like stones in my mouth.

"I'm so sorry, Chloe. I've tried everything to find another solution."

I watched his face, the genuine distress in his eyes, the slump of his shoulders. This wasn't what he wanted either.

"Hey, it's okay. We'll figure it out." The lie tasted bitter, but I forced a smile. "It's just geography, right?"

"You're amazing." He sighed heavily. "I need to get back to this emergency board meeting, but I'll call tonight. I promise."

After we disconnected, I stood frozen between shelves of enchanted pasta that had begun humming a mournful Puccini aria, perfectly matching my mood.

I stared at the black screen of my phone, the conversation with Lincoln replaying in my mind. Two months. Two entire months without him.

Zelda appeared at my side, grocery basket in hand. "Everything alright?"

"Lincoln's stuck in New York. For two months."

She studied my face. "And that scares you."

"No, it's fine. Totally fine." I shoved my phone into my pocket. "He has responsibilities. I get it."

"Mmhhh." Zelda handed me my basket. "Just remember, dear—running a company and running from commitment are two different things."

I frowned. "He's not running."

"I wasn't talking about him."

Back home, I paced my cottage living room, mind racing. Lincoln's face—the stress lines, the exhaustion—haunted me. I'd been so focused on my own insecurities that I'd missed how much pressure he was under.

"This is fixable," I muttered, grabbing my laptop. "I can help."

Frosty wandered in from the kitchen, wearing the tiny apron Lincoln had custom-made for him. "What's fixable? The sink? Because I've been telling you for weeks?—"

"Lincoln's work situation." I opened my email and started typing furiously. "He needs help managing everything from New York, and I have editing experience now."

Frosty hopped onto the coffee table, peering at my screen. "It's three in the morning."

"Is it?" I glanced at the clock, surprised. "Doesn't matter. I'm creating a system to organize his current manuscripts. Color-coded by deadline priority, with progress tracking and?—"

"Have you slept at all?"

I ignored him, clicking to a new tab. "I'm also emailing his team to offer taking on additional manuscripts. They're short-staffed, and I have time."

Frosty's comb flopped as he tilted his head. "You've been working for sixteen hours straight."

"I need to be useful." My fingers flew across the keyboard. "If I can prove I'm valuable enough to his business, then maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Frosty asked quietly.

"Maybe he won't forget about me." The words tumbled out before I could stop them.

Frosty's feathers ruffled. "Chloe Woolsworth, relationships aren't performance reviews. You don't earn someone's affection through productivity metrics."

"You don't understand?—"

"I understand you're trying to make yourself indispensable because you're scared." He fixed me with his beady eyes. "Lincoln doesn't love you because you edit manuscripts. He loves who you are."

"He's only admitted that he loves me once," I snapped, defensive heat rising in my cheeks.

"And creating the world's most efficient spreadsheet will change that?"

I stared at Frosty, his words hitting harder than I wanted to admit. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, suddenly unsure.

"I'm not creating spreadsheets to make him love me," I lied, then glanced at the color-coded Excel monstrosity on my screen. "Okay, fine. Maybe I am."

Frosty hopped closer, his tiny glasses sliding down his beak. "Featherbutt wisdom, coming in hot: you can't organize your way into someone's heart."

"Watch me try." I saved the file and slumped back against the couch. "It's just... everyone expects him to be in New York. His grandfather, his board, his authors. Who am I compared to all that?"

"The witch who makes his magic spark," Frosty said, mimicking Lincoln's deep voice so badly I had to laugh.

I must have fallen asleep on the couch, because I woke to Frosty's wing gently patting my face.

"Your phone's about to vibrate itself off the table," he whispered.

I grabbed it, blinking at the screen. Lincoln. My heart did that annoying flutter thing as I answered.

"Hey," I mumbled, voice still thick with sleep.

"Chloe." Lincoln's voice sounded strained. "I just got your emails. All seventeen of them."

I winced. "In my defense, I was very caffeinated."

"It's five in the morning there. Have you slept at all?"

"Technically yes. Just now. For about..." I glanced at the clock, "twenty minutes."

Frosty snorted and wandered toward the kitchen, muttering something about "intervention pancakes."

"The color-coded spreadsheet system is impressive," Lincoln said. "As is your offer to take on three additional manuscripts, create a new filing protocol, and—" he paused, "did you really volunteer to review the entire backlist catalog for potential reprints?"

I sat up straighter. "I have time. And I'm good at organizing things. And you need help, and I?—"

"Need to breathe," he finished gently. "Chloe, this is incredibly thoughtful, but I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine. I just want to help."

"You are helping. But my absence isn't your responsibility to fix."

The words hit me like a bucket of cold water. I stared at the spreadsheet still open on my laptop, with its elaborate conditional formatting and nested formulas.

"I know that," I said quietly.

"Do you?"

I picked at a loose thread on my ratty t-shirt.

"I just... I don't know where I fit in your world sometimes."

You have this whole life in New York with important people and board meetings and corner offices with views.

And I'm just... here. With my cottage and my sarcasm and a rooster who thinks he's Gordon Ramsay. "

"I heard that!" Frosty called from the kitchen.

Lincoln's voice softened. "You know what scares me? That I won't be able to balance everything. That the company will consume me again like it did before I met you. That I'll disappoint my grandfather, or the board, or—worst of all—you."

"You could never disappoint me," I said automatically.

"And you could never be just anything to me, Chloe Woolsworth."

I closed my eyes, letting his words sink in. "So what do we do?"

"We find balance. I'll take your organizational help—within reason—and I promise daily updates. But you have to promise not to turn yourself inside out trying to be my entire publishing team."

"Deal," I said, feeling something tight in my chest finally loosen. "But I'm keeping the spreadsheet."

"I wouldn't dream of taking it away. It has animated pie charts."

### LINCOLN

The third technician knocked over the antique vase in the Carpe Diem lobby, and I winced as the crash echoed through my tablet screen. Fifty-seven minutes into this remote installation, and we'd already had two Wi-Fi router mishaps and one crushed rosebush. My kingdom for competent help.

"Mr. Sands, should I—" The technician on screen, a gangly twenty-something named Derek, held up the broken ceramic pieces like evidence at a crime scene.

"Just set it aside. I'll replace it." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Let's focus on getting the conference room finished before anything else meets an untimely demise."

The camera panned across the B&B's newly renovated east wing. What had once been a dusty storage room now gleamed with hardwood floors, recessed lighting, and half-installed technological marvels that would make most Silicon Valley startups jealous.

"The holographic projector needs to go against the north wall," I directed. "And for the love of all things magical, please use the anti-gravity dollies I sent. That equipment costs more than your annual salary."

A flash of lavender caught my eye on screen. Chloe had arrived, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed, one eyebrow raised in that particular way that made my heart skip. Even through a screen, she had that effect on me.

"Chloe!" I couldn't keep the delight from my voice. "Perfect timing. What do you

think?"

"I think half the town is gathered outside wondering if aliens have landed." She stepped into frame, glancing around at the chaos of boxes and equipment. "Mrs. Haggerty is convinced you're installing government surveillance."

"Only the best for my favorite conspiracy theorist." I smiled as Derek awkwardly tried to navigate around Chloe. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Mission accomplished." Her fingers traced the edge of a sleek monitor. "Though I'm not sure what all this is for."

"It's so I can be in two places at once." I leaned closer to my camera. "The board insists I stay in New York, but I refuse to be absent from Assjacket. So I'm creating a fully functional remote office."

Marigold burst into the room behind Chloe, gasping dramatically when she spotted the curved video wall being unpacked.

"Is that a ninety-inch conference display?" She squealed, bouncing on her toes. "Lincoln Sands, you beautiful genius! We can have virtual town meetings! And movie nights! And—" she dropped her voice to a theatrical whisper "—you can see your girlfriend life-sized when you're apart."

Chloe's cheeks flushed that delightful shade of pink I'd grown so fond of.

"There's more," Derek interjected, glancing at his clipboard. "The special delivery is scheduled for?—"

"Later," I cut in quickly, shooting him a warning look. "That part's a surprise."



I watched Chloe's expression shift from curiosity to mild suspicion as Marigold continued to gush about the technology. Something in her lavender eyes darkened slightly—a shadow I'd come to recognize when her mind wandered to less pleasant thoughts.

"Derek, give me a moment with Chloe," I said, and the technician nodded, directing his team to the opposite corner of the room.

"Hey," I said softly, trying to recapture her attention. "What's happening in that beautiful head of yours?"

She blinked, returning to the present. "Nothing. It's just... a lot. Very sudden."

"I know. The board meeting moved faster than expected. They're pushing the relocation timeline, and I needed to act quickly." I ran a hand through my hair, wishing I could reach through the screen and touch her. "I refuse to let this corporate nonsense come between us."

"It's thoughtful," she admitted, her fingers tracing the edge of the desk. "Excessive and probably astronomically expensive, but thoughtful."

"Speaking of excessive..." I checked my watch. "The special delivery should be arriving soon. Promise me you'll stay for it?"

Her mouth quirked up at one corner. "As long as it's not another first edition. My cottage is running out of secure display space."

"Better," I promised. "And completely practical."

"Lincoln Sands and practical in the same sentence? Now I'm worried."

I laughed, the sound echoing through the B&B's speakers. "Just trust me. And maybe clear your schedule for dinner tonight? I've arranged something."

"More surprises?" She arched an eyebrow. "You're turning into quite the mysterious warlock."

"Only for you." I glanced up as my assistant entered my NYC office with a stack of contracts. "I have to go for a bit. Board meeting prep. But I'll see you tonight, even if it's through ninety inches of high-definition display."

"Go run your empire," she said with a small smile. "I'll make sure your minions don't destroy the B&B in the meantime."

As the connection ended, I caught one last glimpse of her face—thoughtful, guarded, and beautiful. Whatever was bothering her, I'd find out tonight. Some things couldn't be fixed with technology, no matter how advanced.

Chloe

I glared at Frosty across our kitchen table, watching him meticulously align his tiny reading glasses while pretending to be absorbed in yesterday's newspaper. The feathered traitor.

"You know something," I said, drumming my fingers against my coffee mug. "Spill it, Featherbutt."

Frosty peered over his glasses with exaggerated innocence. "I know many things. The capital of Azerbaijan. The recipe for perfect biscuits. The fact that you're wearing mismatched socks."

I kicked my feet under the table. "Don't change the subject. The entire town's acting

like they swallowed canaries—which, considering your species, is disturbing imagery."

"Perhaps they're simply delighted by technological progress coming to our humble hamlet."

"Right. Because nothing excites magical beings like Wi-Fi upgrades." I narrowed my eyes. "This morning at the diner, DeeDee asked if I'd picked out a dress yet. A dress for what?"

Frosty flipped his newspaper page with elaborate nonchalance.

"And Mrs. Pennyfeather actually winked at me. She's never winked at anything except maybe her cat when she thinks it's possessed."

The memory of the diner crawled under my skin. I'd been minding my business, nursing my coffee in the corner booth, when I caught fragments floating from nearby tables.

"...special permit from the council..."

"...never seen anything like it in Assjacket..."

"...wonder if she knows yet..."

DeeDee had refilled my cup with a smile that bordered on conspiratorial. "More coffee, hon? Gotta keep your strength up for the big events ahead." She'd emphasized "events" like it contained secret code.

My stomach had clenched. The last time the town buzzed with secrets, my sister Jenny had been impersonating me and casting black magic. The memory flashed hot

and sharp—Jenny's blonde curls, her purple eyes narrowed with malice, the voodoo doll clutched in her fingers.

"Your face is doing that thing," Frosty observed, interrupting my thoughts.

"What thing?"

"That 'I'm spiraling into catastrophic thinking' thing. Your left eye twitches."

I pressed my fingers against my eyelid. "You'd twitch too if everywhere you went people stopped talking and exchanged meaningful glances. Yesterday, Marigold practically dislocated her neck trying to catch Zelda's attention when I walked into the apothecary."

Frosty sighed dramatically and folded his newspaper. "I am sworn to secrecy."

"By whom?"

"By the sacred code of rooster honor."

I snorted. "That's not a thing."

"It most certainly is. Right after 'wake everyone at ungodly hours' and before 'strut with maximum plumage display.'"

I grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Frosty called after me.

"To find Marigold. She's the weakest link in whatever conspiracy is happening."

"And by 'weakest link' you mean..."

"She can't keep a secret to save her life. Remember when she was supposed to keep quiet about Zelda's surprise birthday party and ended up ordering a cake with 'THIS IS NOT FOR ZELDA'S SURPRISE PARTY' written on it?"

I stormed out before Frosty could mount a defense. The morning air hit my face, crisp and cool against my flushed cheeks. I marched down the path toward Carpe Diem with purpose, mentally rehearsing my interrogation techniques.

The bed and breakfast looked particularly quaint this morning, its windows gleaming in the sunlight. I pushed through the front door to find Marigold arranging flowers at the reception desk, humming what sounded suspiciously like the Wedding March.

"Marigold."

She jumped, sending a spray of baby's breath floating to the floor. "Chloe! What a completely normal and not at all significant surprise to see you here on this ordinary day when nothing special is happening!"

I folded my arms. "Cut the crap. What's going on?"

"Going on? Nothing's going on. Why would something be going on? Do you think something's going on?" Her voice climbed an octave with each question.

"The entire town is acting like they've been collectively body-snatched. I want answers."

Marigold's eyes darted around the empty lobby. She leaned forward, practically vibrating with excitement. "I'm not supposed to say anything, but since you're my friend and I'm terrible at secrets—oh my goddess, the proposal preparations are

coming along so beautifully!"

My stomach dropped through the floor. "The what now?"

"The proposal! Lincoln's been coordinating everything from New York. The special delivery yesterday was the ring—a family heirloom, I heard. That's why he needed the secure connection set up. To plan everything remotely!"

I gripped the edge of the desk to steady myself. "Marigold, Lincoln is not proposing to me."

She winked. "Of course he's not. Wink-wink."

"No, I mean he's actually not. We've been dating for five minutes. We're in a long-distance relationship that barely functions."

Marigold's smile faltered. "But the special delivery... and all the secret calls with the town council about permits..."

"Permits for what?"

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"For the—" She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh no. You really don't know, do you?"

I felt like I was going to be sick. "The town thinks Lincoln is proposing to me?"

"Well, not just the town. Also the neighboring magical communities. And possibly some of the forest creatures. Joanna may have taught a chorus of bluejays the Wedding March."

I stared at Marigold, my mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. The room spun slightly.

"Bluejays? Singing the Wedding March?"

"They're actually quite good. Joanna has perfect pitch."

I sank into the nearest chair, the vintage floral cushion exhaling beneath my weight. "This is a disaster."

"Is it?" Marigold perched on the arm of the chair. "Lincoln is wonderful. You're wonderful. Wonderful people should get married and make wonderful babies with sarcastic expressions and publishing empires."

"We've been dating for three months! Nobody gets engaged after three months!"

"My cousin Gertrude got engaged after two weeks. Of course, he turned out to be a toad. Literally. But that's beside the point."

I pushed myself up. "I need to fix this before Lincoln finds out the entire town is planning our wedding."

I spent the next two hours zigzagging through Assjacket like a woman possessed. My first stop was DeeDee's Diner, where I found half the coven's elders having their morning coffee.

"I am not getting engaged," I announced to the table.

Ethel Higginbottom patted my hand. "Of course not, dear. It's a surprise."

"No, I mean Lincoln and I are not at that stage."

"Keeping it private. Very tasteful." Walter nodded approvingly. "My third wife was the same way. Denied our engagement right up until the ceremony."

At the grocery store, I cornered the produce manager. "Just so you know, any rumors about engagement cakes are premature."

He winked. "The heart-shaped watermelons are already on order. Carved with your initials."

By noon, I'd spoken to seventeen people, each conversation more mortifying than the last. The librarian offered her collection of bridal magazines.

The hardware store owner mentioned he'd set aside his best doorknobs for our "new home."

"Even the mailman handed me a catalog for honeymoon destinations with "magical accommodations."



Desperate for sanctuary, I fled to the library and hid in the Obscure Medieval Texts section where no one ever ventured. I slumped against the shelves, letting my head fall back against a tome about plague remedies.

"Found you." Zelda appeared at the end of the aisle, her auburn curls bouncing as she approached. "Word on the street is you're having a complete meltdown about your non-existent engagement."

"Everyone's lost their minds! I can't convince them it's not happening."

Zelda slid down beside me. "That's because you're going about it all wrong. The more you deny it, the more they think you're being coy."

"What am I supposed to do? Let them plan a wedding that's never going to happen?"

"First, you don't know it's never going to happen."

I shot her a look.

"Fine. But have you considered what your frantic denials sound like? Like you're horrified by the very idea of marrying Lincoln."

The realization hit me like a bucket of ice water.

Zelda's words hung in the air between us. I slumped further against the bookshelves, the reality of my actions hitting me like a freight train.

"Oh Goddess. I've been running around town like a lunatic, basically screaming 'I don't want to marry Lincoln' at everyone."

"Pretty much." Zelda patted my knee. "For what it's worth, nobody thinks you're

actually opposed to the idea. They just think you're being modest or trying to preserve the surprise."

"There is no surprise!" I whispered fiercely, then caught myself. "See? I'm doing it again."

My phone buzzed. Lincoln's name flashed on the screen.

"Speaking of your non-fiancé..." Zelda stood up, brushing dust from her skirt. "I'll leave you to it. Remember—less panic, more perspective."

I answered the video call, Lincoln's face filling my screen. He sat in his corner office, Manhattan skyline gleaming behind him.

"There's my favorite editor." His smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. "How's Assjacket treating you?"

"Oh, you know. Small town. Big imaginations." I shifted nervously, the library's wooden chair creaking beneath me. "Actually, there's something you should know."

"That sounds ominous."

"The town thinks you're going to propose to me."

I braced for shock, concern, maybe even panic. Instead, Lincoln burst into laughter.

"It's not funny!" I hissed, glancing around the empty library. "DeeDee's planning an engagement brunch. Marigold's training bluejays to sing the Wedding March. There's talk of heart-shaped watermelons!"

Lincoln wiped his eyes, still chuckling. "I'm sorry. It's just—your face. You look like

someone told you they're replacing all your books with celebrity cookbooks."

"This is serious. What if your grandpops hears about it? Or worse—the publishing board?"

"Chloe." His voice softened. "It's just small-town gossip. It'll blow over."

He paused, his expression shifting to something more contemplative. "Hypothetically speaking, though... if I were to propose, what would you say?"

My heart stuttered. "I—that's not—we've only been dating three months!"

"I didn't ask about our timeline. I asked what you'd say."

I opened and closed my mouth, words failing me entirely. The question hung between us, pixelated but perfectly clear.

"I'm not planning to propose via courier, if that's what you're worried about," he said finally, his tone gentle. "When—if—that happens, I promise it won't involve trained bluejays or heart-shaped produce."

"Good to know," I managed, my voice barely audible.

"I should go. Board meeting in five." He hesitated. "We'll talk more when I visit next weekend?"

I nodded, and the call ended, leaving me alone with the dusty books and the question neither of us had truly answered.

I trudged home from the library with my mind spinning faster than Frosty during his morning tai chi routine. Lincoln's hypothetical question echoed in my brain like an

annoying pop song. What would I say?

The cottage was dark when I arrived, which was unusual. Frosty typically left at least one lamp on, claiming it "deterred nefarious night-prowling predators with malicious intent toward poultry." His words, not mine.

"Frosty?" I called, flipping on lights as I moved through the living room.

A soft clatter from the kitchen answered me. I found him perched on his special stool at the counter, wearing tiny reading glasses and thumbing through a cookbook larger than his entire body.

"You're up late," he noted without looking up. "I'm experimenting with midnight snack options. How do you feel about caramelized pear and brie paninis?"

"I feel like normal people—and roosters—should be asleep at this hour."

"We established long ago that neither of us qualifies as normal." He finally looked up, his beady eyes narrowing. "Your aura's all wonky. More than usual."

I slumped onto a kitchen chair. "Lincoln asked what I'd say if he proposed."

Frosty's feathers puffed up in alarm. "Holy mother of egg layers! What did you say?"

"Nothing. I panicked and changed the subject." I buried my face in my hands. "And the worst part is, I think... I think I might have said yes."

"And that's bad because...?"

"Because it's ridiculous! We've been dating three months. We live in different states. His life is in New York with publishing empires and fancy apartments and board

meetings. Mine is here with... well, you."

"I'm a delight," Frosty said defensively.

"You know what I mean." I grabbed a cookie from his midnight baking stash. "It's not logical."

Frosty snorted. "Since when has love ever been logical? If it were, we'd all save ourselves the trouble and marry our tax accountants."

"I don't even have a tax accountant."

"Not the point, Fluffybrain." He hopped down and waddled to my side. "You're not afraid it's too soon. You're afraid of being happy because you think it won't last."

The truth of his words hit me like a splash of cold water. "When did you get so insightful?"

"I've been reading Roger's psychology books when you're not looking. Also, I've known you for years." He patted my hand with his wing. "Being afraid but moving forward anyway—that's what courage is."

I stared at the cookie crumbs on the table. "I love him, Frosty. More than I've let myself admit."

"I know," he said softly. "I knew before you did."

CHLOE

I tossed and turned all night, my mind a tangled mess of what-ifs and maybes. By morning, I'd worn myself out enough to fall into a dead sleep, only to be jolted awake by Frosty's unnecessarily dramatic crowing directly into my ear.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty! Your handsome prince awaits in the digital realm!"

I groaned, burying my face deeper into my pillow. "What time is it?"

"Nine twenty-seven. Lincoln's video call is at nine-thirty. I've already set up your laptop, fixed your hair, and applied minimal makeup while you were unconscious."

I bolted upright. "You did what?"

Frosty rolled his eyes. "Obviously I'm joking about the makeup. Though your left eyebrow could use some attention."

I stumbled to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and dragged a brush through my hair. Three minutes later, I dropped into my desk chair just as the laptop chimed with an incoming call.

Lincoln's face appeared on screen, but something was off. Instead of his usual book-lined office, he sat at the head of a glossy conference table. His expression was tense, his usual warm smile replaced by something more guarded.

"Hey," I said, trying to sound normal despite the worry blooming in my chest. "Fancy

backdrop. Are you being held hostage by corporate raiders?"

He attempted a laugh that didn't quite land. "Not exactly, though it feels that way sometimes." The camera panned to reveal a room full of suits, most of whom nodded politely in my direction. I recognized Augustus among them, looking unusually serious.

"Chloe," Lincoln said, his voice shifting into what I'd come to recognize as his business tone. "I wanted you to be the first to know. Apex Media has made an offer to buy my publishing house."

My stomach dropped. "Apex? The mega-conglomerate that's been swallowing independent publishers?"

"The very one." He loosened his tie slightly. "The offer is... substantial. Life-changing, actually."

"That's... wow." I forced my face to remain neutral, though my heart was racing. "Congratulations."

"It comes with conditions," he continued. "A five-year contract binding me to their New York headquarters. No remote work, no extended absences."

Five years. In New York. The words hung between us like a wall.

"The board is strongly in favor," Augustus added from his seat. "It's an unprecedented opportunity."

Lincoln's eyes never left mine. "I wanted your thoughts. Not as my girlfriend, but as someone whose business judgment I trust."

I sat in Lincoln's digital gaze, frozen like a rabbit caught in headlights. Five years in New York. Five years without... us. Whatever "us" had become.

"From a business perspective," I said, my voice surprisingly steady, "it's the opportunity of a lifetime. Publishing is consolidating faster than witches at a potion sale. Independent houses are endangered species."

Lincoln nodded, his eyes searching mine through the screen. "And from a non-business perspective?"

I swallowed hard. "That's... more complicated."

The boardroom door opened, and a woman in a sleek pantsuit whispered something to Lincoln. He nodded and turned back to me.

"I have to go. Apex representatives just arrived for the preliminary meeting. Can we talk tonight?"

"Of course. Go dazzle them with your publishing prowess."

After he disconnected, I stared at the blank screen for a full minute before Frosty cleared his throat.

"You okay there, boss?"

"Peachy. Just peachy-freaking-keen."

The town hall buzzed with the usual chaotic energy of Assjacket meetings. Marigold waved frantically from the third row, patting the seat she'd saved me.

"You're late," she whispered as I slid in beside her. "They've been arguing about the



eastern barrier for twenty minutes."

On stage, Mayor Winchell jabbed his finger at a glowing map. "The fluctuations in the cloaking spell are becoming more frequent. Last week, three hikers wandered through thinking they'd found an abandoned movie set!"

I nodded absently, my mind still trapped in that boardroom with Lincoln.

"...wouldn't be necessary if certain residents would stop experimenting with interdimensional portals in their basements," Mayor Winchell continued, glaring at old Mr. Hoffstead.

"It was ONE time!" the elderly warlock protested.

Marigold nudged me. "They're taking votes on the barrier reinforcement budget."

"Hmm? Oh, right." I raised my hand automatically when others did, not even sure what I was voting for.

After the meeting, I tried to slip out unnoticed, but Zelda materialized beside me, her green eyes narrowed.

"You look like someone just told you unicorns aren't real. Come on." She linked her arm through mine, steering me toward a quiet corner. "Spill it."

"Lincoln's company is being bought. Five years in New York. No exceptions."

Zelda's face softened. "Ah."

"The logical part of me says to end it now. Clean break. Why prolong the inevitable?"

"Is that what you want? The clean break?"

My eyes burned with unshed tears. "What I want doesn't matter. I've always known this was temporary."

"Have you?" Zelda asked, her voice gentle. "Or have you just been telling yourself that to protect your heart?"

The question hit me like a thunderbolt.

I stared at Zelda, her question rattling around my skull like a loose marble. My throat tightened.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I managed, but even to my own ears, the denial sounded pathetic.

"Sure you do." Zelda tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. "You've been preparing for this relationship to fail since before it started. It's like you've been packing your emotional bags this whole time, just waiting for the eviction notice."

"That's not—" I stopped. "Okay, fine. Maybe I have. But look what's happening now! I was right."

Zelda's green eyes sparkled with that unnerving wisdom that made her so annoyingly helpful. "Were you, though? A business opportunity isn't a relationship death sentence unless you make it one."

Mayor Winchell hustled past us, still berating Mr. Hoffstead about his portal experiments. "—and the goat that came through speaking Aramaic is still traumatizing the kindergarten class!"

I lowered my voice. "Five years, Zelda. In New York. That's not a weekend trip."

"I'm aware of the distance between West Virginia and New York. I did pass fifth-grade geography." She squeezed my arm. "But have you considered that maybe the reason this hurts so much is because it actually matters?"

The words landed like a punch to the gut. I opened my mouth to deliver a scathing retort, but nothing came out.

"Look," Zelda continued, softer now, "when Mac and I first got together, he was traveling constantly for work. I convinced myself it was doomed. Even told him we should end it before it got messy."

"What happened?"

"He laughed in my face and told me I was being a chickenshit." Her lips quirked into a smile. "Not his exact words, but close enough."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Lincoln's name flashed on the screen, and my heart did that stupid little flip it always did.

"That him?" Zelda asked, though she clearly knew the answer.

I nodded, staring at the phone like it might explode.

"You can run from a lot of things, Chloe," Zelda said, already backing away to give me privacy. "But eventually, you run out of places to hide from yourself."

I stared at my phone long after Zelda left, Lincoln's name still illuminated on the screen. The call had gone to voicemail. I'd deal with it later—or never. Never seemed like a solid option.

The drive home was a blur. I barely remembered pulling into my gravel driveway, the familiar crunch of stones under tires offering no comfort. My cottage stood silhouetted against the darkening sky, windows glowing with warm light. At least Frosty had remembered to turn the lights on.

I trudged up the steps, mentally rehearsing how I'd explain my funk to my nosy familiar. Maybe I could fake a migraine and retreat to my?—

"Ah, there she is!"

I froze, hand on the doorknob. That wasn't Frosty's voice.

I pushed the door open to find Augustus Sands—Lincoln's ninety-something grandfather—comfortably ensconced in my reading chair, teacup balanced on his knee, looking for all the world like he'd been waiting for the cable guy rather than making an unannounced four-hour journey to my hidden cottage.

"Mr. Sands?" I blinked rapidly, wondering if I'd finally cracked and started hallucinating distinguished elderly warlocks.

"Please, I've told you to call me Auggy or Grandpops." He set his teacup down with the precise movements of someone accustomed to handling priceless artifacts. "Your familiar makes an exceptional Earl Grey. The secret's in the temperature, you know."

Frosty strutted in from the kitchen, wearing the ridiculous chef's apron Lincoln had given him as a joke. "I told him you'd be home soon. I've prepared cucumber sandwiches and those little lemon tarts you pretend not to like but secretly devour when you think I'm not looking."

"I—what are you—how did you—" My brain short-circuited, unable to form a complete sentence.

Augustus smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I hope you don't mind the intrusion. Lincoln mentioned you were attending a town meeting, so I thought it the perfect opportunity for us to speak privately."

"About what?" I managed, still standing awkwardly in my own doorway.

"About Apex Media, of course." His golden eyes—so like Lincoln's—fixed on mine. "And about my grandson's happiness."

I stood there gaping like a teenager caught sneaking in after curfew. In my own house. This day kept getting better.

"Come in, dear, you're letting the cool air out," Augustus said, gesturing to the empty chair across from him.

My legs moved automatically. I sank into the chair, still trying to process the surreal sight of Lincoln's grandfather in my living room, calmly sipping tea like we had standing Tuesday appointments.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

Frosty appeared with a tray of perfectly arranged finger sandwiches and lemon tarts. "I'll just leave these here while you two chat about life-altering decisions and the fate of true love." He set the tray down with a flourish. "No pressure."

"Thank you, Frosty. Exquisite presentation," Augustus said, selecting a sandwich with the reverence of someone handling a rare manuscript.

I shot Frosty a death glare that promised retribution. He responded with an innocent blink before strutting away, humming what sounded suspiciously like "Here Comes the Bride."

"So," I began, trying to sound casual despite my racing heart, "you came all this way to talk about the Apex deal?"

Augustus nodded, his expression turning serious. "When Lincoln first mentioned it, I was thrilled. The offer is extraordinary—generational wealth, industry prestige, security." He paused, setting his teacup down. "The board is unanimously in favor. I initially led that charge."

"But now?" I prompted, picking at a loose thread on my chair.

"Now I find myself questioning whether it's truly right for him."

"Augustus leaned forward, his eyes—so much like Lincoln's—studying my face.

"I've spent decades in business, making decisions based on profit margins and market projections.

But watching Lincoln these past months, seeing how he lights up when he speaks of you, of this town.

.." He gestured vaguely toward my window where Assjacket lay beyond.

"I'm just one factor in a very complicated equation," I said, the words tasting bitter.

Augustus chuckled. "Oh, my dear. You're not a factor in the equation. You've changed the entire formula." He reached across and patted my hand. "So I'll ask you directly—not what you think Lincoln should do, not what you believe I want to hear—what do you think would make my grandson truly happy?"

I stared at Augustus, his question hanging in the air between us. What would make Lincoln truly happy? My mind raced through every conversation, every quiet moment, every passionate kiss we'd shared.

"Lincoln loves creating," I finally said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Not just books, but opportunities. Spaces where stories can breathe." I looked up at Augustus. "When he talks about his publishing house, his eyes light up the same way they do when he's casting a complex spell."

Augustus nodded, encouraging me to continue.

"But the Apex deal would turn him into a corporate figurehead. Five years of board meetings and shareholder reports instead of discovering new voices." I swallowed hard. "He'd be wealthy but... caged."

"And what about you? Where do you fit in this vision of his happiness?"

I flinched. "That's not for me to?"

"Indulge an old man's curiosity," Augustus said gently.

Frosty poked his head around the corner, clearly eavesdropping. I shot him another death glare.

"I just want him to be happy," I said, the words feeling inadequate. "Even if that means?—"

"Even if that means New York," Augustus finished for me.

I nodded, throat tight.

After Augustus left, I paced my cottage for hours, thoughts swirling. Finally, I grabbed my phone and dialed Lincoln's number before I could change my mind.

He answered on the second ring. "Chloe? Is everything okay?"

"We need to talk about the Apex offer," I blurted.

A pause. "I was going to call you about that tomorrow. After I'd sorted through some details."

"You should take it," I said, the words tumbling out. "It's an incredible opportunity, Lincoln. Financial security, industry recognition—everything you've worked for."

"Chloe—"

"The five years will fly by," I continued, ignoring the pain lancing through my chest. "And with the video conferencing setup, we can still see each other regularly. I can visit New York. You can come here on holidays."



The silence stretched between us. When Lincoln finally spoke, his voice sounded strange. "You seem... enthusiastic about this plan."

"I'm being practical," I said, digging my nails into my palm. "This is your career, your family legacy. I would never stand in the way of that."

"I see," Lincoln said, his tone unreadable. "And what about us?"

"We'll figure it out," I said brightly, hating how false I sounded. "People do long-distance all the time."

Another long pause. "I thought you might have... different concerns."

"I'm not some clingy girlfriend who can't handle you having a life," I said, the words sharper than intended. "You should take the deal, Lincoln. It's the smart move."

"If that's what you think is best," he said, his voice suddenly formal.

"It is," I lied, my heart breaking. "It absolutely is."

After we hung up, I sat staring at my phone, the distance between us suddenly feeling like an unbridgeable chasm.

I hung up the phone and stared at the blank screen, my finger hovering over Lincoln's name. What had I just done?

"Well, that was the stupidest thing I've ever heard, and I once listened to a rooster choir attempt Bohemian Rhapsody." Frosty stood in the doorway, wings crossed over his chest feathers.

"Not now, Frosty." I pulled my knees to my chest, curling into the corner of the

couch.

"Yes now." He marched over, his talons clicking against the hardwood. "You just gift-wrapped the man you love and handed him to corporate America with a pretty bow."

"It's what he wants," I whispered.

"Is it? Or is it what you think he should want because you don't believe you're worth staying for?"

The truth hit like a physical blow. My eyes burned as tears finally spilled over. "What am I supposed to do? Ask him to give up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Millions of dollars? His family's approval?"

"Sweet Goddess above, give me strength." Frosty paced in front of me. "For someone so smart, you're being monumentally stupid."

"Thanks for the support."

"I'm not here to support your self-destruction." He stopped pacing and fixed me with a beady-eyed glare. "You've spent your entire life expecting to be second choice. Your parents chose Jenny. Your ex chose his career. So now, you're making Lincoln's choice for him before he can disappoint you."

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it again.

"You want Lincoln to take that soul-crushing corporate deal because it proves your narrative—that you're never quite enough."

"That's not?—"

"Isn't it?" Frosty jumped onto the coffee table. "For once in your life, Chloe Woolsworth, fight for what you want instead of pushing it away and calling it nobility!"

"I'm scared," I finally admitted, my voice breaking. "What if I ask him to stay and he resents me? What if he chooses me now but regrets it later?"

"What if he doesn't? What if you're exactly what he wants?" Frosty's voice softened. "What if you're sabotaging the best thing that's ever happened to you because you're still letting your family's ghost haunt your future?"

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "When did you get so insightful?"

"I've always been this brilliant. You've just been too stubborn to notice." He hopped closer. "Call him back. Tell him the truth."

I took a deep breath. "I need to do it in person."

I spent the next hour pacing my cottage, mentally rehearsing what I'd say to Lincoln. Each practice speech sounded worse than the last. Frosty watched from his perch, offering unhelpful critiques like "less pathetic" and "maybe don't cry during that part."

A knock at the door froze me mid-step.

"Expecting someone?" Frosty asked.

"No." My heart hammered against my ribs as I smoothed my hair and straightened my oversized sweatshirt. Another knock, more insistent this time.

I opened the door to find Lincoln standing on my porch, his golden-brown eyes tired

but determined. He wore rumpled clothes that suggested he'd come straight from the airport.

"Lincoln? What are you?—"

"I need to show you something." He stepped inside, carrying a leather portfolio. "I've been working on this for weeks."

Frosty scurried over. "Well, hello to you too, Mr. Manhattan. Some of us appreciate a proper greeting after traveling."

Lincoln blinked, then smiled. "Sorry, Frosty. I brought you those fancy French seeds you like."

"All is forgiven," Frosty said, snatching the small package Lincoln pulled from his pocket.

Lincoln turned to me, his expression serious. "I'm not selling to Apex."

"What? But the board?—"

"The board works for me, not the other way around." He opened the portfolio on my coffee table, revealing architectural plans and spreadsheets. "This is my counter-proposal. A satellite office here in West Virginia."

I stared at the blueprints. "Here? In Assjacket?"

"Just outside town. Close enough for a reasonable commute." He flipped to another page showing organizational charts. "I'd restructure the company. My CFO would handle New York operations. I'd oversee creative development from here, with quarterly trips to headquarters."

My fingers traced the plans, afraid to believe what I was seeing. "But your grandfather?—"

"Actually thinks it's brilliant. The old man's been looking for an excuse to spend more time in the countryside." Lincoln's eyes never left my face. "I don't want the Apex deal, Chloe. I never did."

"But on the phone, you seemed?—"

"You were pushing me toward it. I thought that's what you wanted." He took my hands. "I've been killing myself trying to find a way to keep my company and be with you."

"I thought I had to let you go," I whispered. "I was afraid to ask you to stay."

"And I was afraid you didn't want me to." He smiled, that warm smile that made my insides melt. "I'm not choosing between my life there and my life here. I'm building our life together."

LINCOLN

I stared at my phone, watching the satellite imagery with growing concern.

The weather patterns over Assjacket weren't just unusual—they were impossible.

Swirling clouds formed perfect geometric shapes, and lightning flashed in colors that belonged in a psychedelic art exhibit, not a weather system.

"Mr. Sands, the board is waiting in conference room three," my assistant called through the intercom.

"Tell them I'll be there in ten minutes." I kept my eyes locked on the screen, zooming in on the area surrounding Chloe's cottage. The magical sensors I'd installed after our last supernatural incident were flashing red.

My phone vibrated with Zelda's name on the caller ID.

"Lincoln, are you seeing this?" Her voice carried none of its usual playful tone.

"The atmospheric anomalies? Yes. What's happening there?"

"It's a Class Four magical disruption. We haven't seen anything like this since—" Static interrupted her words. "—cottage is right in the path—" More static. "—trying to reach her now."

My stomach dropped. "Zelda, is Chloe in danger?" The line went dead.

I immediately dialed Chloe's number, my fingers trembling slightly as I pressed the screen. One ring. Two rings. Three.

"Lincoln?" Her voice sounded small, distant.

"Chloe! Are you alright?"

"Something's happening. Frosty's feathers are standing straight up, and he's running around like a headless—sorry, poor choice of words. The books are rearranging themselves, and I swear my teacups are floating."

Through the phone, I heard Frosty's panicked voice. "The barometric pressure is fluctuating wildly! My delicate constitution cannot handle these supernatural meteorological phenomena!"

"Stay inside," I said firmly. "I'm on my way."

"You're in New York! That's a seven-hour drive!"

"Not if I use the family transportation spell." I was already moving toward my private office, where I kept emergency magical supplies. "It'll drain me, but I can be there in twenty minutes."

"Lincoln, no. That spell is dangerous over long distances. The town's emergency system just activated. Zelda and the others will handle it."

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass of my office window, torn between responsibilities. The board meeting would determine the future of my company, but Chloe might be in actual danger.

"Just... keep talking to me," I said, hating the helplessness in my voice. "Tell me what

you see."

I abandoned the board meeting without a second thought.

The future of my company paled in comparison to Chloe's safety.

After performing the emergency transportation spell—and experiencing the nauseating sensation of having my molecules scattered across state lines—I materialized at the edge of Assjacket, my legs buckling beneath me.

The sky looked even worse in person. Fractal patterns of violet and green light rippled across storm clouds that moved against the wind. The air tasted metallic, charged with magical residue.

I steadied myself against a lamppost, trying to regain my equilibrium as townsfolk hurried past me toward the community center. My grandfather's voice echoed in my memory: "Long-distance transportation spells are for emergencies only, Lincoln. They take more than they give."

He wasn't wrong. My vision blurred at the edges, and my limbs felt like they were filled with sand instead of blood. But I was here.

Inside the community center, chaos reigned.

Witches, warlocks, and various magical beings crowded the main hall, their voices a cacophony of fear and speculation.

I scanned the room for Chloe, finally spotting her auburn hair near the front.

Frosty stood on a chair beside her, his feathers still at attention like tiny lightning rods.



I pushed through the crowd, ignoring the whispers that followed.

"—that's Lincoln Sands?—"

"—Chloe's fancy New York boyfriend?—"

"—heard he's just playing warlock while running his company?—"

Zelda stood at the front, her usually playful demeanor replaced with grim determination. She'd unfurled a large magical map that hovered in the air, displaying a three-dimensional representation of Assjacket. A swirling vortex of energy pulsed above the town, growing larger by the minute.

"What we're dealing with," Zelda announced, "is a dimensional rift. Something—or someone—is tearing the barrier between our reality and another."

Chloe spotted me and her eyes widened. "Lincoln! You actually came."

"I told you I would." I reached for her hand, feeling the familiar spark of our magic connecting.

"You look terrible," she whispered.

"Cross-country magical travel isn't exactly first-class."

Zelda pointed to the center of the vortex. "The rift is growing exponentially. We need to establish a containment field immediately, which will require significant magical power."

She looked around the room. "I need volunteers willing to channel raw energy. It's dangerous, and I won't lie—it will hurt."

Without hesitation, I stepped forward. "I'll do it."

A hush fell over the crowd. Chloe's grip on my hand tightened.

"Lincoln," Zelda said, surprise evident in her voice, "are you sure? This isn't publishing contracts or fancy spellwork. This is old magic."

"I'm aware." I straightened my shoulders, feeling the weight of every eye in the room. "My grandfather didn't just teach me business, Zelda."

The whispers started again, but different this time.

"—didn't know he was that kind of Sands?—"

"—thought he was just some city warlock playing at magic?—"

Zelda studied me with new appreciation. "Well then, Mr. Sands. Let's see what you're made of."

I knelt beside my travel case, feeling the weight of expectant stares. The leather-bound case—appearing to mortal eyes like an ordinary briefcase—had accompanied me to every board meeting for decades. Only now, in this crisis, would its true contents be revealed.

"Lincoln, what are you doing?" Chloe's voice carried a note of confusion I'd never heard before.

"What I should have done months ago." I flipped the brass latches and lifted the lid.

Inside, nestled in velvet compartments, lay an array of magical tools that would make any practicing warlock envious—silver athame with runes etched along the blade,

crystalline vials of rare essences, and a collection of chalk made from materials most witches only read about.

Frosty let out a low whistle. "Holy mother of egg-laying hens. That's not your average city-slicker magic kit."

I selected a piece of chalk infused with ground meteorite and dragon bone ash, then moved to the center of the room.

With practiced precision, I began drawing a complex series of interlocking symbols on the floor.

My hand moved with the muscle memory of thousands of hours of training, creating patterns that pulsed with blue light as they connected.

"Those are Macedonian protection sigils," Chloe whispered, recognition dawning in her eyes. "Those are master-level workings."

I didn't pause my work. "My grandfather insisted on classical training. Four hours daily, from age seven."

The final symbol completed the circuit. I placed my palm at the center and murmured an incantation in ancient Greek. The entire pattern lifted from the floor, expanding outward in a three-dimensional lattice of light that reached toward the ceiling.

"That should stabilize the immediate area," I said, standing and brushing chalk dust from my hands. "But it's temporary."

Zelda approached, her expression a mixture of surprise and newfound respect. "Well, Master Warlock Sands, it seems you've been holding out on us." She circled the floating spell structure. "This is eighth-level containment work."

"Ninth," I corrected automatically, then winced at how pretentious it sounded.

Chloe stared at me, her lavender eyes wide. "All this time... I thought you were just a?—"

"Publishing executive who dabbles in magic?" I finished with a wry smile. "That was easier to explain than... this." I gestured to the complex magical construct hovering above us.

"Why hide it?" she asked, hurt evident in her voice.

I took her hand. "Because people treat you differently when they know. The Sands name carries expectations I wasn't ready to bring into what we have."

"We need more than this to close the rift," Zelda interrupted, all business. "Impressive as your party trick is."

"I know." I looked toward the windows where the unnatural storm continued to intensify. "I need to access my family's grimoire. There's a sealing ritual that might work, but I need the original text."

I hurried through the crowded community center, Chloe close behind me.

Zelda had divided us into teams with ruthless efficiency, assigning positions around Assjacket's perimeter.

Our station: the town square with its infamous half-headless bear statue—a bronze monstrosity that had lost the top portion of its head to a lightning strike decades ago.

"Do you think we have enough time?" Chloe asked, her voice tight with worry as we jogged past the empty diner.

"Depends on your definition of 'enough.'" I glanced at the sky where violet and green energy ribbons twisted unnaturally. "We need to establish a containment field before I can attempt anything from the grimoire."

When we reached the square, I set my case down beside the bear statue and pulled out a small leather-bound journal.

"Another secret magical item?" Chloe's tone was sharp.

"Family protection spells. Been passed down for twelve generations." I flipped through pages covered in cramped handwriting. "These were designed specifically for dimensional anomalies."

"Convenient," she muttered.

I looked up from the book. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything. It's not exactly first-date material—'Hi, I'm Lincoln, I run a publishing house and I'm also from one of the oldest warlock lineages in North America.'"

"You could have mentioned it by the third date," she said, but the edge in her voice had softened.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

I found the page I needed. "Here—Sands Boundary Fortification. It's designed to create a magical membrane that filters out dimensional instabilities."

"Show me," Chloe said, moving closer.

I traced the spell pattern in the air, leaving trails of golden light.

Chloe studied it, then began mirroring my movements on the opposite side.

As our magic extended toward each other, something unexpected happened—the golden threads of my spell intertwined with Chloe's silver-purple energy, creating a braided lattice that pulsed with power.

"That's not supposed to—" I began, but was interrupted by a thunderous crack.

The barrier at the edge of town had fractured. Through the breach poured shimmering distortions—ordinary objects twisted into impossible shapes, birds with too many wings, flowers blooming and dying in seconds.

Without discussion, Chloe and I raised our hands simultaneously.

Our magic flowed together as if we'd practiced for years, my containment spell weaving perfectly with her stabilization magic.

A dome of golden-purple light expanded outward, intercepting the anomalies before they could reach the square.

"How are we doing this?" Chloe gasped, her eyes wide with wonder.

"I have no idea," I admitted, equally shocked by our perfect synchronization. "But whatever it is—keep doing it!"

The anomalies multiplied, warping reality around us. A park bench stretched like taffy, its wood grain swirling into impossible patterns. A flock of birds flew backward through time, aging from adult to fledgling to egg in seconds.

"We're just containing it," I shouted over the dimensional thunder. "We need to close the rift!"

Chloe's hair whipped around her face as she maintained our barrier. "How?"

I glanced at the tear in reality expanding above us, a gaping wound in the fabric of our dimension. "There's a sealing spell in the grimoire, but it needs more power than I can generate alone."

"I can amplify," Chloe said, her eyes fixed on the rift. "My specialty was always amplification."

"That might work, but—" I hesitated, looking down at the ancient grimoire in my hands. The book had been in my family for centuries, containing spells and wisdom accumulated through twelve generations of Sands warlocks. It was literally priceless, the cornerstone of our magical legacy.

And I was about to destroy it.

"But what?" Chloe demanded.

"Nothing." I made my decision instantly. "I need you to create an amplification circle.

I'll channel the spell through the grimoire itself."

Her eyes widened. "Lincoln, that will?—"

"I know." I flipped to the final pages of the grimoire where the most powerful spells were recorded. "Let's do this before I change my mind."

Chloe nodded, immediately beginning to draw a complex pattern of runes around us. Meanwhile, I placed my hands on the ancient leather cover, feeling the accumulated magic of generations humming beneath my fingertips.

"Sorry, Grandfather," I whispered.

As Chloe completed the amplification circle, the townspeople gathered at a safe distance. I caught a glimpse of Zelda's shocked face as she realized what we were attempting.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready," Chloe confirmed, placing her hands over mine on the grimoire.

I began the incantation, channeling my magic through the book. The grimoire began to glow, first with a gentle light, then with increasing intensity until it was painful to look at directly. The leather binding creaked, then smoked as centuries of preserved magic activated at once.

"Now, Chloe!"

She closed her eyes, her amplification spell surging through the circle beneath us. The grimoire shuddered in my hands, pages turning on their own, ink lifting off parchment and swirling into the air. The book was sacrificing itself, converting its



physical form into pure magical energy.

The assembled spell shot upward in a blinding column of light, striking the dimensional tear. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a sound like the universe taking a deep breath, the rift began to close.

The grimoire crumbled to ash between our fingers.

I slumped onto Chloe's couch, every muscle in my body protesting. Magical exhaustion wasn't like physical tiredness—it felt like someone had hollowed out my bones and replaced them with lead.

"Drink this," Chloe pressed a steaming mug into my hands. The liquid inside shimmered with an iridescent glow. "Restorative potion. Tastes like feet, works like a charm."

I took a sip and nearly spat it back out. "You weren't kidding about the feet part."

"Quit whining and finish it. You channeled enough magic to power Manhattan." She sat beside me, her own exhaustion evident in the shadows under her eyes. "So. Master Warlock Sands, huh? Were you ever going to mention that little detail?"

I stared into the murky potion. "It's complicated."

"Uncomplicate it."

I sighed. "The Sands family has balanced business and magic for centuries. My great-great-grandfather started as a printer of magical texts before expanding into mortal publishing. Each generation was expected to maintain both traditions."

"And you didn't think that was worth mentioning?"

"In publishing circles, being known as 'that warlock editor' doesn't exactly help with credibility. I compartmentalized—magic with family, business with colleagues." I took another revolting sip. "I've spent so long keeping those worlds separate that it became second nature."

Chloe's expression softened. "You shouldn't have to hide parts of yourself."

"Says the woman who pretended to read the dictionary when I caught her with a romance novel."

"That's different."

"Is it? We both hide the pieces of ourselves we think others won't accept." I reached for her hand, wincing as magical aftershocks rippled through my arm. "Today I watched my family's most precious heirloom turn to dust, and all I could think was: 'At least Chloe's safe.'"

"Lincoln—"

"Sweet merciful mother of chickens!" Frosty burst into the room, tiny glasses perched on his beak, a massive tome clutched in his wings. "I've been researching what happened during the rift closure, and—" He stopped, squinting at us. "Holy feathered frittata."

"What?" Chloe and I asked simultaneously.

Frosty set the book down, circling us with analytical precision. "Your auras. They're... braiding together."

"They're what now?" Chloe frowned.

"Intertwining. Merging. It's extremely rare—happens when two magical signatures are perfectly compatible." Frosty adjusted his glasses. "Last documented case was in 1897. A warlock and witch from competing covens. They eventually founded the Harmonious School of Magical Theory."

Chloe looked at me, eyes wide. "Is that why our magic amplified each other's?"

I nodded slowly. "It would explain a lot."

CHLOE

I stared at the paragraph in front of me, red pen hovering over a particularly convoluted sentence about dragon mating rituals.

Lincoln sat across from me at my kitchen table, his golden-brown eyes focused on his own stack of papers.

Sunlight streamed through the windows, catching the silver at his temples.

"This author clearly thinks semicolons are magical punctuation marks that grant wishes," I muttered, slashing through the offending sentence. "I've counted seventeen in one paragraph."

Lincoln glanced up with a half-smile. "Wait until you get to page forty-three. I believe the record is twenty-three semicolons in two sentences."

"Sweet merciful goddess." I reached for my coffee mug. "Is this what our magical imprint is going to be? Crimes against grammar disguised as literature about horny dragons?"

"The content is solid. The execution is..." Lincoln diplomatically trailed off.

"A dumpster fire of commas and run-on sentences?"

Before Lincoln could respond, a high-pitched wail cut through the cottage. The sound came from everywhere and nowhere, a magical alert that made my skin prickle with

goosebumps. The crystal orb on my bookshelf flashed urgent red, pulsing in time with the alarm.

"That's an emergency code." Lincoln was instantly on his feet, manuscripts forgotten.

The air in the center of my living room shimmered and distorted. A tall figure in charcoal gray robes materialized, the silver badge of the Supernatural Security Division gleaming on his chest. Agent Bartholomew Hayes – I recognized him from previous magical incidents in town.

"Miss Woolsworth, Mr. Sands." His voice was clipped, professional. "I apologize for the intrusion, but we have a situation that concerns you directly."

My stomach dropped. Nothing good ever followed those words.

Hayes flicked his wrist, and a shimmering image appeared in the air between us. Blonde curls wild around a face I knew all too well. Purple eyes – my eyes, but colder, harder – glowing with malevolent energy.

"Jenny," I whispered, my voice catching.

"Your sister escaped the Magical Pokey at 0300 hours this morning," Hayes confirmed. "She overpowered two guards and disabled the containment wards. We have reason to believe she's headed this way."

A streak of white and red feathers shot across the room as Frosty positioned himself between me and the floating image. His normally sleek feathers stood on end, crackling with protective magic.

"That psychotic blonde nightmare isn't getting within ten feet of Chloe," Frosty declared, his wings spread in a defensive posture I recognized from his martial arts

practice. "Not while I'm breathing."

Lincoln moved to my side, his hand finding mine. "What's being done to recapture her?"

I stared at Jenny's image hovering in the air, those familiar purple eyes—my eyes—glaring with malice. My hands trembled so badly I had to set down my coffee mug before I dropped it.

"We've increased patrols around Assjacket's perimeter," Agent Hayes continued. "But given your sister's... unique abilities, we recommend additional personal protection."

"How?" My voice cracked. "Last time she got through every ward I had."

Lincoln squeezed my hand. "We'll strengthen your protections. Together."

After Hayes departed with promises of regular updates, Lincoln and I moved methodically through my cottage. I pulled my grimoire from its hidden shelf while Lincoln retrieved a worn leather pouch from his jacket.

"Family protection powders," he explained, sprinkling silvery dust along my windowsills. "Been in the Sands grimoire for twelve generations."

I traced protection sigils beside my doorframe, the memory of Jenny's last attack flooding back unbidden.

"She made a voodoo doll of me," I whispered, my fingers faltering on a complex symbol. "Used my hair, blood she stole while I slept."

Lincoln paused, his hand suspended mid-spell. "She what?"

The memory played like a horror film behind my eyes. "I woke up one night feeling like my insides were on fire. Found her in the basement with a doll that had my face. She'd stuck pins—" I swallowed hard. "She said she was just trying to make me stronger through pain."

I moved to the kitchen window, avoiding Lincoln's gaze. "Then last year, she came to Assjacket. Impersonated me. Used black magic on townspeople who were kind to me."

"That's why everyone was so wary when you first introduced me," Lincoln said softly.

I nodded, shame burning my cheeks. "They thought I might be Jenny again. Or that you might be another of her tricks."

"Chloe, look at me."

I turned reluctantly, expecting disgust or worse—pity.

Instead, Lincoln's eyes blazed with protective intensity. He pulled a small, ancient-looking book from his pocket.

"These are the Sands family blood wards. They're only used for family and those we—" he paused, a flush spreading across his cheeks, "—those we consider our heart's chosen."

He knelt on my kitchen floor, opening the book to reveal symbols I'd never seen before.

"Your sister's cruelty doesn't change how I feel about you, Chloe. It only makes me more determined to protect what we're building together."

Frosty made a suspicious sniffing sound from across the room. "Damn magical dust in the air," he muttered, wiping his eyes with a wing tip.

I stood in the town hall, fighting the urge to shrink into the corner as dozens of eyes flickered between me and the magical projection of Jenny hovering above the central table.

The resemblance between us was unmistakable—same lavender eyes, similar bone structure—though her wild blonde curls contrasted sharply with my straight brown hair.

"I want to make something perfectly clear," Zelda announced, her auburn curls practically crackling with magical energy as she addressed the packed room. "This is Chloe. That—" she jabbed a finger at Jenny's image, "—is the threat."

Lincoln stood beside me, his shoulder pressed reassuringly against mine. I focused on his warmth instead of the whispers rippling through the crowd.

"Last time she was here," DeeDee from the diner spoke up, "she ordered blueberry pancakes with extra whipped cream." She looked at me apologetically. "That's how I knew something was wrong when the real Chloe came in later. You're allergic to blueberries."

"She borrowed my pruning shears," Old Man Wilkins added, "returned them with a thank-you pie. Should've known something was fishy—real Chloe would sooner eat glass than bake."

"Thanks for the character assessment," I muttered.

Zelda rapped her knuckles on the table. "Jenny Woolsworth used blood magic to impersonate Chloe and manipulate several of you. Standard magical barriers won't



stop her."

Security Officer Martinez stepped forward, his uniform adorned with mystical symbols. "Blood magic creates a biological passkey. She can essentially walk through any protection tied to Chloe's magical signature."

The room erupted in panicked murmurs.

"Not if we implement a Sands Reflection Ward," Lincoln's voice cut through the noise. All eyes turned to him. "It's an ancient warlock technique. Instead of keeping specific people out, it creates a mirror effect—reflecting the caster's intentions back upon them."

"So if Jenny comes with harmful intent..." Zelda began.

"She'll feel whatever she attempts to inflict," Lincoln finished. "But it requires coordinated casting from at least twelve magical anchors positioned around town."

"I've seen your work during the rift crisis," Zelda nodded. "Let's do it."

The room organized into teams with surprising efficiency. I found myself assigned to the town square with Lincoln, Zelda, and Marigold.

"Don't worry, honey," Marigold squeezed my hand. "We won't let Crazy Curls get to you this time."

"Last time she convinced half the town I was the evil twin," I said quietly. "Some people still look at me sideways."

"Well," Frosty piped up from his perch on my shoulder, "you are rather prickly. It's not entirely implausible."

I shot him a glare.

"What? Just providing some levity in these trying times."

I stood frozen as the town hall lights flickered, plunging us momentarily into darkness before surging back with an unnatural brightness. The magical maps and projections on the walls distorted, warping into twisted shapes.

"That's not supposed to happen," I whispered to Lincoln, whose expression had shifted from strategic to alarmed.

Blood-red energy crackled across the ceiling, forming spiderweb patterns that pulsed with malevolent intent. The temperature dropped twenty degrees in seconds, my breath fogging in the suddenly frigid air.

"Everyone, defensive positions!" Zelda shouted, raising her hands to form a protective barrier.

Too late.

The center of the room erupted in a column of crimson light that forced everyone to shield their eyes.

When the blinding flash subsided, my sister stood there, looking like she'd stuck her finger in a magical socket.

Her blonde curls floated around her head as though underwater, crackling with static electricity.

Her purple eyes—identical to mine in color but nothing else—glowed with an unnatural luminescence.

"Hello, sister dear," Jenny said, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "Did you miss me?"

Frosty's feathers bristled against my neck. "Sweet merciful poultry gods," he muttered.

Lincoln moved slightly in front of me, his stance protective but not possessive. I appreciated the gesture but stepped forward to stand beside him instead.

"Jenny," I said flatly. "Prison orange would have suited you better than whatever this electrical hazard aesthetic is."

She laughed, the sound like wind chimes made of icicles. "Always the comedian, Chloe. Is that any way to greet your only sister?"

"You tried to murder me with a voodoo doll," I reminded her.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

Jenny waved her hand dismissively. "Ancient history. I've had time to reflect in that barbaric magical containment facility." Her gaze swept the room, landing on several townspeople who shifted uncomfortably. "I've come to make amends. To reconcile."

I recognized the honeyed tone immediately—the same one she'd used when convincing our parents that I had destroyed mother's antique vase when we were children. The same voice that had charmed half the magical community of Assjacket while wearing my face.

"Reconcile?" I said. "Like you reconciled my garden shears with my stomach last time?"

Jenny took a step toward me, arms extended like we were in some twisted family reunion commercial.

"Chloe, sweetie," she cooed, "I know we've had our... misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings?" I backed up a step. "You literally tried to replace me and take over my life."

Jenny's face arranged itself into a practiced expression of remorse that didn't reach her glowing eyes. "We were both victims of our upbringing. Remember how Mother always made me perform at their dinner parties? How Father paraded me around like a show pony?"

I felt the familiar twist in my stomach—the childhood memories I'd spent years trying to bury. The dinner parties where Jenny sparkled while I hid in corners with books.

The constant refrain: "Why can't you be more like your sister?"

"You were always their favorite," Jenny continued, her voice taking on a wounded quality. "The quiet one. The smart one. They never pushed you to be perfect."

I laughed, the sound harsh even to my own ears. "That's some creative revisionist history. They barely noticed I existed unless they needed someone to compare you to."

Frosty huffed beside me. "Is gaslighting a family tradition, or just her specialty?"

Jenny's smile tightened. "Our parents loved you in their way. They just understood my potential better." She took another step forward. "We're the only family each other has left, Chloe. Don't you want to heal those wounds?"

Lincoln shifted beside me, his eyes narrowed. I felt rather than saw his magic unfurling, sensing something I couldn't.

"Interesting," he murmured. "Her aura keeps fluctuating. The black magic signature intensifies whenever she mentions family."

Jenny's gaze snapped to Lincoln, her expression flickering with annoyance before smoothing back into saccharine sweetness. "And you must be the boyfriend. How lovely that my sister finally found someone who tolerates her... peculiarities."

"What do you really want, Jenny?" I asked, cutting through the performance.

Her facade cracked slightly. "Can't a sister just want reconciliation?"

"Not when that sister is you."

Jenny's patience visibly thinned. Her floating hair began to crackle more intensely, small sparks jumping between curls.

"Fine. Always so boring, Chloe. So practical." Her voice hardened. "I need your magical signature. Just a little piece of it for a ritual. Nothing you'd miss."

"And why would I give you that?"

"Because I'm special," she hissed, mask fully slipping. "I've always been special. You were the afterthought, the plain one they kept around to make me look better. And yet somehow, you got the more powerful magical signature."

Lincoln stepped between us, his entire demeanor transforming. The polite editor vanished, replaced by something ancient and formidable. Power radiated from him in waves that made the air shimmer.

"That's quite enough," he said, his voice resonating with authority that made even Jenny take a step back.

I watched as Jenny's face contorted with rage, her glamorous mask crumbling completely. The air around her fingertips darkened, condensing into swirling orbs of malevolent energy.

"You always were stubborn," she snarled. "If you won't give it willingly?—"

She thrust her hands forward. Black lightning exploded toward me, crackling with destructive intent.

Lincoln moved with shocking speed. His hands traced ancient symbols in the air, golden light streaming from his fingertips. A translucent shield materialized between us and Jenny's attack. The black energy slammed against it, spreading like oil across

water.

"Family grimoire has its uses," Lincoln grunted, strain evident in his voice.

Jenny shrieked in frustration, hurling bolt after bolt. Each impact made Lincoln's shield flicker dangerously.

"Jezfucnubooles!" I ducked as a stray tendril of dark magic singed the air above my head. "That was my favorite t-shirt!"

A white-and-red blur shot past me. Frosty, wings extended, launched himself directly at Jenny's face, his battle cry somewhere between a crow and a war whoop.

"BAWK-YAAAAAH! TASTE THE FURY OF THE FEATHERED FIST!"

Jenny screamed as three feet of enraged rooster attacked her perfectly styled hair, talons tangling in her blonde curls. Her concentration broke, the dark energy dissipating as she batted wildly at Frosty.

Around the perimeter of the town hall, Zelda directed a circle of witches. They began a low, harmonious chant, their combined magic creating a shimmering barrier that slowly contracted inward.

"Containment spell's almost ready," Zelda called. "Just need thirty more seconds!"

Jenny finally dislodged Frosty with a blast of magic that sent him tumbling through the air. Lincoln caught him with a cushioning spell before he hit the wall.

"You think these... these small-town nobodies are your family?" Jenny spat, her eyes wild as she noticed the closing circle. "They'll never understand you like I do. We share blood, Chloe!"

I stepped forward, no longer cowering. The years of feeling inferior, of shrinking myself to avoid her shadow—they fell away like an old, ill-fitting coat.

"Blood doesn't make family, Jenny. These people—" I gestured around the room, "—they've shown me more love and acceptance in two years than our parents did my entire life. They see me. The real me."

Jenny's face twisted with hatred. "Then you can all disappear together!" She raised her arms, drawing power from somewhere dark and forbidden. The air crackled with chaotic energy as a magical storm began forming above our heads, ripping at the ceiling.

Lincoln grabbed my hand. "Together?" he asked.

I nodded, feeling our magical signatures sync and amplify. "Together."

I gripped Lincoln's hand, feeling our magical energies intertwine. The sensation never failed to amaze me—like electricity and honey flowing between us, powerful yet comforting.

"I hope you have a plan beyond hand-holding," I muttered, watching Jenny's storm grow. "Because she looks extra murderous today."

Lincoln's eyes gleamed with determination. "Remember that portal spell from the Sands grimoire?"

"The one that almost turned your office into a black hole last month?"

"I've refined it." His thumb traced circles on my palm. "But I need your containment magic to stabilize it."



Frosty staggered to his feet, feathers askew. "Whatever you're planning, do it fast! My beautiful tail feathers can't take another magical singeing!"

Jenny's storm tore chunks from the ceiling. Plaster rained down as townspeople scrambled for cover.

"On three," Lincoln whispered, guiding my free hand into position. "One..."

I visualized the spell structure, feeling our magics mesh.

"Two..."

Jenny spotted our joined hands. "How sweet," she sneered. "I'll send you both to oblivion together!"

"Three!"

We moved in perfect synchronicity, our hands tracing complex patterns. Where Lincoln's magic formed a swirling vortex of golden energy, mine created a stabilizing framework of lavender light. The spells intertwined, expanding into a shimmering portal directly behind Jenny.

"What is this?" Jenny shrieked, sensing the power building behind her.

"Express delivery back to Magical Pokey," I called. "One-way ticket!"

Zelda seized the moment, shouting to her circle of witches. "Now! Push her in!"

Their combined magic surged forward like an invisible wave. Jenny's feet slid backward toward the portal despite her desperate resistance.

"You can't do this! I'm your sister!" Her nails dug into the floorboards, leaving gouges.

"You tried to kill me. Twice." I maintained my focus on the portal. "That's not very sisterly."

As Jenny reached the portal's edge, Lincoln added a final flourish to our spell—an intricate binding pattern that glowed with ancient power.

"Special delivery with extra security measures," he said grimly. "The wardens will find you can't access your blood magic anymore."

Jenny's eyes widened in horror as she realized what we'd done. With a final shriek of rage, she tumbled backward into the portal. The vortex collapsed with a thunderclap, leaving nothing but a scorch mark on the floor.

I collapsed into the nearest chair as the portal closed, my hands shaking with a mixture of adrenaline and magical exhaustion. The town hall buzzed with activity, but it all seemed distant, like I was watching through foggy glass.

"You okay?" Lincoln knelt beside me, his golden-brown eyes searching my face.

Before I could answer, the air shimmered near the scorch mark where Jenny had disappeared. Three figures in midnight-blue uniforms materialized, their badges glowing with official Supernatural Security Division insignia.

"Containment team, on site." The lead officer, a stern-faced woman with silver hair cropped close to her scalp, surveyed the damage. "Woolsworth situation neutralized?"

"She's back where she belongs," Zelda confirmed, approaching with dignity despite her disheveled appearance. "Though your 'secure facility' seems to have a Jenny-

shaped hole in it."

The officer winced. "We've been tracking her magical signature since the escape. Unfortunately, her powers grew exponentially during confinement."

"How is that possible?" Lincoln asked, his hand still protectively on my shoulder.

"Blood magic feeds on negative emotion," the officer explained, directing her team to begin repair work on our magical barriers. "And your sister—" she glanced at me, "—has an abundance of rage and resentment to fuel it."

Frosty limped over, his feathers still smoking slightly. "Next time, maybe try a facility that doesn't double as a dark magic gym, hmm?"

The officer ignored him, pulling out an official-looking scroll that unfurled itself in midair.

"Chloe Woolsworth, this serves as official notification that Jennifer Woolsworth's magical privileges have been permanently revoked.

The Supernatural Security Council has implemented blood-binding restrictions that will prevent her from accessing her powers, regardless of emotional state. "

I nodded numbly, watching as the scroll vanished in a puff of blue smoke.

"We'll strengthen your town barriers before departure," she added, then turned to coordinate her team.

The hall gradually emptied as townspeople returned to their homes and businesses. Lincoln stayed beside me, silent but present, until we were alone except for Frosty, who was attempting to preen his disheveled feathers back into order.

"She's gone," I whispered, the reality finally sinking in. "She's really gone."

And then, to my horror, I burst into tears.

Lincoln gathered me into his arms without hesitation, holding me against his chest as years of pent-up emotion poured out.

I'd never allowed myself this release before—not when Jenny had tormented me as a child, not when she'd tried to kill me the first time, not even when I'd discovered her impersonating me in Assjacket.

"I used to hide in our family library," I choked out between sobs. "Behind the encyclopedias where nobody ever looked. I'd stay there for hours while Jenny performed magic tricks for our parents' friends. They'd applaud and praise her, never once asking where I was."

Lincoln's arms tightened around me. "Their loss," he murmured into my hair.

"One Christmas, I spent three days making a special snow globe with real magic—tiny figures that danced and sang.

When I gave it to my mother, she thanked me and put it aside.

Ten minutes later, Jenny handed her a crudely wrapped package with a dead butterfly inside, and my mother cried with joy over her 'artistic sensitivity. '"

I felt Lincoln's jaw tighten against my head, but he remained silent, letting me purge the poison of those memories.

"She's the worst back-up act ever," Frosty announced, breaking the heavy silence. "I mean, seriously—purple eyes and blonde curls? So last season. You got the better

genetics, Woolsworth. Plus, your familiar is devastatingly handsome and skilled in multiple martial arts."

A watery laugh escaped me. Lincoln's chest rumbled with his own chuckle. Soon all three of us were laughing—perhaps with an edge of hysteria, but laughing nonetheless.

CHLOE

I stared at Lincoln, my mouth slightly open, my tongue apparently on strike. Words—my lifelong friends, my weapons of choice, my shields—had completely abandoned me. Traitors.

Lincoln remained on one knee, ring box open, his expression hovering somewhere between hope and concern. The silver band nestled inside caught the light from my cottage windows, sending tiny prisms dancing across the hardwood floor.

"Chloe?" Lincoln's voice was gentle. "You don't have to answer right now."

My brain flashed back to our first meeting at the Bed and Breakfast, when he'd spilled coffee on my favorite book and I'd called him every invented curse word in my arsenal. Fuzzleprickleshit . That was the first one. His surprised laugh had caught me off guard.

Then to our first kiss outside the Bed and Breakfast, when the streetlights had flickered in response to our magic connecting. The way he'd looked at me afterward, like I was the most fascinating text he'd ever encountered.

The night he'd sacrificed his family grimoire to save Assjacket. The moment he'd stood between me and Jenny without hesitation.

All around us, the cottage seemed to hold its breath.

My collection of crystals on the windowsill began to glow softly, responding to the

emotional surge I couldn't contain.

The flowers in the vase on my coffee table—ones Lincoln had brought yesterday—suddenly bloomed fuller, petals unfurling in accelerated motion.

From the kitchen came a suspicious clatter, followed by the unmistakable sound of Frosty pretending he wasn't eavesdropping.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Lincoln reached for my hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. "I've seen you face down dimensional rifts, your psychotic sister, and Roger's inappropriate artwork collection without blinking. I didn't think this would be the thing that finally rendered Chloe Woolsworth speechless."

A small laugh escaped me, breaking through the emotional logjam. Tears pricked at my eyes—actual tears. I hadn't cried since my meltdown after returning Jenny back to the magical pokey.

"I—" I managed, then stopped again as the cottage lights dimmed and brightened in rhythm with my heartbeat.

Lincoln waited, still holding my hand, still on one knee, still looking at me like I was the answer to a question he'd been asking his entire life.

I tried to speak again, but instead of words, memories flooded through me like a magical current.

"Remember when you kissed me the first time?" I finally managed. "You looked so shocked when the lights went haywire."

"I was more shocked you didn't hex me on the spot," Lincoln said, still kneeling. "You'd spent the previous hour explaining why romance was, and I quote, 'a conspiracy created by greeting card companies and chocolate manufacturers.'"

The memory of his family grimoire disintegrating into golden dust as he channeled its ancient power through me to save Assjacket.

The centuries of Sands family history sacrificed without hesitation.

The way he'd collapsed afterward, magically drained, yet still reached for my hand to make sure I was okay.

"You gave up your family's most precious heirloom for this town," I whispered. "For me."

"Books can be replaced," Lincoln said softly. "You can't."

Jenny's face contorted with rage as Lincoln stood between us, his magic a golden shield against her darkness. The absolute certainty in his stance—not a hint of hesitation or fear. Just protection, fierce and unwavering.

"You faced down my psychotic sister without blinking."

"To be fair, I was blinking quite a lot. Her hair was doing that static electricity thing. It was rather distracting."

I laughed despite myself, remembering the countless evenings spent side by side on my couch, manuscripts spread between us, Frosty bringing us tea and making increasingly unsubtle comments about "how nice it is to see two people who clearly belong together."



All these moments—puzzle pieces of a life I never thought I'd have, never thought I deserved.

"I'm not afraid anymore," I said, the realization dawning as the words left my mouth.

I stared at Lincoln, my heart doing gymnastics my body never could. His hopeful expression wavered slightly as my silence stretched on.

"I'm not afraid anymore," I repeated, stronger this time. "And that's... terrifying."

Lincoln's mouth quirked into that half-smile I'd fallen for. "Only you could make fearlessness sound frightening."

A rustling sound from the nearby bushes caught my attention. I turned to see foliage shaking violently, followed by muffled cursing that sounded suspiciously like "feather-catching branches" and "nature's conspiracy against poultry."

Frosty emerged with all the dignity of royalty, despite leaves clinging to his feathers. He wore a miniature tuxedo with a slightly crooked bow tie. The formal outfit might have been the most ridiculous thing I'd ever seen, if not for the tiny satin-lined box he carried in his wing.

"Timing, Featherbutt," I hissed. "We've discussed this."

"Excuse me for wanting to witness the culmination of my exceptional matchmaking skills," Frosty replied, brushing leaves from his tuxedo. "Do you know how difficult it is to find formal attire in my size? I had to threaten Marigold's enchanted sewing machine."

Lincoln, still on one knee, looked between us with amusement. "I see you were confident in her answer."

"More confident than she is," Frosty said, waddling closer. He extended his wing toward me in what I recognized as his version of a thumbs-up.

Our eyes met, and in that moment, all the sarcastic banter fell away. Frosty had been there through everything—my self-imposed isolation, my fears, my gradual opening to Lincoln and the possibility of happiness. He'd seen me at my worst and pushed me toward my best.

His small nod conveyed volumes. It's okay to be happy. It's okay to say yes.

"You know," I said, looking back at Lincoln, "when the Goddess sent me Frosty, I thought she was punishing me with the world's most annoying alarm clock. Turns out she was giving me family."

Frosty cleared his throat, which sounded suspiciously like he was covering emotion. "Less backstory, more answering the nice warlock before his knee gives out."

I looked at Lincoln, still patiently kneeling before me, and at the ring that caught the light in ways no ordinary diamond should. My chest felt too small for my heart, which was both terrifying and exhilarating.

"You know," I said, finding my voice at last, "someone's going to have to keep your magical grammar in check. Your last manuscript had three misplaced incantation commas that could've summoned a demonic hamster instead of a protection spell."

Lincoln's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Is that a yes?"

"It's a professional observation," I replied, my voice softening. "But yes, Lincoln. Yes to all of it. The editing, the magic, the life together. Even the inevitable arguments about Oxford commas."

Relief and joy transformed his face. He took the ring from its velvet nest and slid it onto my finger. The moment it touched my skin, the band constricted slightly, sizing itself perfectly. A soft golden glow emanated from the stone, spreading warmth through my hand and up my arm.

"My grandmother said the ring would know its rightful owner," Lincoln explained. "It's accepting you."

"That's convenient," I said, examining the perfectly fitted ring. "Saves a trip to the jeweler."

Frosty sniffled dramatically. "I'm not crying. It's pollen. From the romantic atmosphere."

Lincoln rose to his feet and pulled me into his arms. When our lips met, I felt a surge of magic circle around us, our auras intertwining in a visible dance of light. My hair lifted slightly in the magical current, and Lincoln's shirt rippled as though caught in a gentle breeze.

"Show-offs," Frosty muttered, but I could hear the happiness in his voice.

I pulled back just enough to look into Lincoln's eyes. "You realize the entire town probably felt that magical surge. We'll have company in about thirty seconds."

"Worth it," Lincoln whispered, kissing me again.

I barely had time to catch my breath before the air around us shimmered and rippled like heat waves over asphalt. The concealment spells dissolved, revealing what seemed like the entire population of Assjacket strategically positioned around the town square.

"Jezfucnuboobles!" I yelped, nearly jumping out of my skin. "Were you all just... watching us?"

Marigold materialized first, somehow already holding two perfectly poured champagne flutes. "We weren't spying! We were... participating from a respectful distance."

"With invisibility spells," I deadpanned.

"It's more romantic that way," she insisted, thrusting the champagne into our hands. Her eyes were suspiciously wet as she bounced on her toes. "I knew it! I just knew it! Didn't I tell everyone?"

Lincoln squeezed my hand, looking equally surprised but considerably less mortified than I felt. "I had no idea we had an audience."

"Please," Frosty scoffed, adjusting his tiny bow tie. "Why do you think I wore formal attire? For my health?"

The sky above suddenly erupted with magical fireworks, forming shapes of books, quills, and what appeared to be a rather anatomically correct rooster. I looked over to see Zelda with her arms raised, directing the display with elegant finger movements.

"Congratulations, you beautiful nerds!" she called out, sending a cascade of golden sparkles raining down around us. The sparkles smelled like old books and lavender—my favorite scents.

Joanna emerged from behind the half-headless bear statue, carrying what could only be described as a three-tiered engagement cake. "I've had this ready for two weeks," she admitted shamelessly. "Been keeping it under a preservation spell."

"Two weeks?" I sputtered. "Lincoln just proposed five minutes ago!"

"Oh honey," DeeDee patted my arm. "We all knew it was happening. Lincoln here asked the town council for permission to incorporate magical elements in the proposal. Standard procedure."

I turned to Lincoln with narrowed eyes. "You asked the town council before asking me?"

He had the grace to look sheepish. "Magical protocol. Apparently there's a bylaw about public displays of affection involving dimensional energy."

"There is no such bylaw!" I protested.

Marigold giggled. "No, but it gave us time to plan all this."

I stared at the growing celebration around us, my fingers still tingling where Lincoln's ring had settled perfectly against my skin.

The crowd of Assjacket residents swarmed around us with congratulations and knowing looks, but all I could focus on was the ridiculous fact that our most intimate moment had been witnessed by what appeared to be the entire supernatural population of West Virginia.

"I can't believe you all conspired behind my back," I said, but couldn't muster any real annoyance. The champagne Marigold had thrust into my hand was excellent—probably magically enhanced.

"Conspired is such a harsh word," Lincoln murmured against my ear. "I prefer 'collaboratively ensured your happiness.'"

"Semantics from the editor," I shot back, but leaned into him anyway.

Three hours later, after we'd finally escaped the impromptu engagement party, Lincoln, Frosty, and I collapsed onto the porch swing at my cottage. The night air carried the scent of my garden herbs, and the magical fairy lights strung along the eaves cast a gentle glow over us.

"Well, that was..." I trailed off, watching the ring catch the light as I flexed my fingers.

"Magical?" Lincoln suggested, his arm warm around my shoulders.

"I was going to say 'exhausting,' but sure, we can go with magical."

Frosty paced the porch railing, his tiny tuxedo now slightly rumpled. "I've already started a list of potential venues. I'm thinking a winter solstice ceremony—the magical convergence will enhance your bond, plus the lighting will be spectacular for photographs."

I nearly choked on my breath. "You've appointed yourself wedding planner?"

"Who else has my impeccable taste and organizational skills?" Frosty puffed out his feathered chest. "Plus, I've been collecting wedding magazines since your third date. I have a vision."

Lincoln laughed, the sound vibrating through his chest against my ear. "Speaking of visions," he said, reaching into his jacket pocket to pull out a folded document. "I wanted to share this with you when we were alone."

I unfolded the papers to find architectural drawings and a business plan. "What am I looking at?"

"The Assjacket branch of Sands Publishing," Lincoln said softly. "With a specialized magical division headed by one Chloe Woolsworth, soon to be Sands."

My fingers traced over the detailed plans. "A publishing house for supernatural authors?"

"Where magical beings can tell their authentic stories without hiding behind metaphors and allegories," Lincoln confirmed. "I thought you might like to build something that bridges our worlds—together."

Frosty hopped down from the railing to peer at the plans. "Does this include a private office for the editorial consultant? With a custom perch?"

"Second floor, eastern exposure for morning sun," Lincoln pointed to a spot on the blueprint.

I looked between the plans and Lincoln's hopeful face, feeling something unfamiliar settle in my chest—something that felt suspiciously like belonging.

CHLOE

I stared at my reflection in the full-length mirror, barely recognizing the woman looking back at me. Two years ago, I'd have sooner wrestled a basilisk than wear white lace and a veil.

"Hold still or I'll accidentally stab you with this pin," Marigold warned, her mouth full of pearl-headed fasteners as she knelt at the hem of my dress. "And I refuse to explain to Lincoln why his bride has blood on her wedding gown."

"At least it would make this whole affair less... conventional," I muttered, trying not to fidget.

The bridal suite at Carpe Diem was almost unrecognizable from the quaint bed and breakfast room it had once been.

Lincoln and I had funded the renovations last year, expanding the entire east wing into an event space that blended magical and mortal architectural elements.

The enchanted stained glass windows shifted colors with my mood—currently a nervous swirl of blues and purples.

"Two years," I whispered, more to myself than Marigold. "I still can't believe we waited two years."

"Best decision you ever made," Marigold said, rising to adjust my bodice. "Besides saying yes in the first place."



She wasn't wrong. Those years had given me time to grow into the idea of forever without panicking.

They'd allowed us to build the publishing company's dual headquarters—the mortal-facing office in New York and our magical imprint based right here in Assjacket.

Our supernatural literature division had become the go-to publisher for authentic magical voices, with manuscripts arriving daily via everything from enchanted scrolls to messenger bats.

"You're doing that thing again," Marigold said, waving her hand in front of my face.

"What thing?"

"That 'I'm mentally reviewing quarterly sales figures on my wedding day' thing."

I rolled my eyes. "I was not. I was thinking about how far we've come."

A knock at the door interrupted us, followed by Zelda's distinctive voice. "Is the bride decent or is she trying to escape through the window?"

"Door's unlocked, and all escape routes have been magically sealed," Marigold called back.

Zelda swept in wearing a dress that somehow managed to be both elegant and slightly chaotic—much like her personality. Her eyes widened when she saw me.

"Jezfucnububbles," I muttered, using one of my made-up curse words. "Is it that bad?"

"Bad? Chloe Woolsworth, you're absolutely radiant," Zelda said, her voice unusually

soft. She approached with her hands cupped around something that emitted a gentle glow. "I've brought you something borrowed."

She opened her palms to reveal an ancient amulet, its surface etched with symbols I recognized from my research into protective enchantments.

"This has been in my family for seven generations," Zelda explained. "It brings protection and happiness to any union blessed with its presence."

I clutched the amulet in my palm, feeling its gentle warmth pulsing against my skin. "Zelda, I?—"

"Don't you dare cry yet," Marigold warned, brandishing a makeup brush like a weapon. "I spent forty-five minutes on those eyes."

A sharp rap at the door saved me from an emotional meltdown. Frosty strutted in wearing a miniature tuxedo with a bowtie that somehow matched the exact shade of Lincoln's cummerbund. My familiar had taken his role as "bird of honor" with characteristic seriousness.

"Package delivery for the bride who's definitely not having second thoughts," he announced, struggling to balance a white gift box between his wings.

"I'm not having second thoughts," I protested, accepting the box. "Third and fourth thoughts, maybe, but those are just standard Chloe anxiety."

Frosty snorted. "Open it already. The suspense is killing me, and I've been sworn to secrecy under pain of no kitchen privileges for a month."

I carefully lifted the lid to reveal a necklace nestled on black velvet. A perfect teardrop moonstone set in delicate silver filigree caught the light, sending prism

rainbows dancing across my dress.

"There's a note," Marigold whispered, already tearing up.

I unfolded the heavy cream stationery, recognizing Lincoln's elegant handwriting immediately:

My dearest Chloe,

This belonged to my grandmother, who wore it every day of her 53-year marriage. She told me to give it only to the woman who made me feel both completely myself and somehow better than I ever thought I could be. That's you, in case there was any doubt.

I'll be the one at the altar looking terrified and overjoyed simultaneously.

All my love,

Lincoln

"Well, shit," I whispered, feeling the careful wall of composure I'd built crumbling. "This is..."

"Beautiful," Zelda finished, gently taking the necklace. "Let's put it on you."

Marigold dabbed at her eyes. "It's perfect with your dress—like it was made for you."

I stood still as they fastened it around my neck, the moonstone settling perfectly at the hollow of my throat.

Two years ago, I'd been hiding in my cottage with only Frosty for company,

convinced that isolation was the only way to protect myself.

Now I stood surrounded by friends who had become family, about to marry a man who had seen through every defense I'd constructed.

"Look at you," Frosty said softly, his usual snark absent. "Our little misanthrope, all grown up and willingly participating in a public ceremony."

I stared at my reflection one final time, barely recognizing the woman looking back at me. The vintage lace dress hugged my figure before flowing into a modest train, and Lincoln's grandmother's moonstone seemed to glow against my skin.

"Ready?" Augustus asked, appearing in the doorway. Lincoln's grandfather had insisted on escorting me down the aisle when I'd mentioned my parents wouldn't be attending. Over the years, he'd become more father to me than my actual father ever was.

"As I'll ever be," I replied, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from my dress. "Is it too late to elope?"

Augustus chuckled. "Lincoln would follow you to Vegas if that's what you wanted. But I think you'd miss out on quite the spectacle." He offered his arm, his eyes twinkling with mischief that reminded me so much of his grandson.

When the chapel doors opened, I gasped. What had once been a simple town gathering place had transformed into a magical wonderland.

Books floated gently near the ceiling, their pages fluttering like butterfly wings.

Fairy lights twinkled between ancient leather-bound tomes and modern paperbacks—titles I recognized from both our collections.

Magical symbols glowed softly along the aisle runner, shifting and changing as if alive.

Frosty strutted ahead of us, his rooster tuxedo complete with tails that dragged slightly behind him. The custom-made ring pillow balanced precariously between his wings as he shot me a look that clearly said, "Don't you dare trip and make me drop these."

As Augustus and I began our walk, the assembled townspeople turned to watch. Marigold dabbed at her eyes while Zelda stood tall and proud beside her. Roger gave me a subtle thumbs-up, his therapy office's inappropriate artwork thankfully absent from this venue.

And then I saw Lincoln.

He stood waiting at the altar, his expression shifting from nervous anticipation to pure, unfiltered adoration. The look hit me like a physical force, and I nearly stumbled. Augustus squeezed my arm gently.

"He's looked at you that way since the first day he brought you to meet me," he whispered. "Some things never change."

When we reached the altar, Frosty cleared his throat dramatically. "Who gives this witch to be married to this warlock?" he asked in his most official voice.

"I do," Augustus replied, placing my hand in Lincoln's before stepping back.

Lincoln's fingers trembled slightly against mine. "You look..." he started, then shook his head. "There aren't words."

"Speechless? That's a first for an editor," I whispered, my sarcasm a familiar shield

against overwhelming emotion.

Lincoln's smile widened. "I saved all my words for my vows."

Lincoln's hand held mine like a lifeline as the ceremony began.

Behind him, the wall of magical books continued to flutter, their pages ruffling in an invisible breeze.

I caught sight of one particular romance novel—one I'd edited for our supernatural imprint—with its pages forming what looked suspiciously like a heart shape.

"Is that...?" I whispered, nodding toward the book.

Lincoln glanced over his shoulder and smirked. "Marigold's idea. She insisted our love story deserved to be surrounded by other love stories."

"Sweet Jezfucnuboobles," I muttered. "Next she'll be writing our biography."

"Already pitched it to marketing," he whispered back. "Working title: 'The Witch, The Warlock, and The Wardrobe-Sized Rooster.'"

From his position beside Lincoln, Frosty made an indignant clucking sound. "I heard that. And I'm svelte, thank you very much. It's all muscle from martial arts."

The officiant—a venerable witch from three towns over—cleared her throat pointedly.

"Sorry," I whispered, not sorry at all.

As the ceremony continued, I caught sight of Zelda in the front row, her fingers

subtly weaving a protection spell around the venue.

Ever since Jenny's attack, she'd been extra vigilant about security at town gatherings.

Beside her sat Roger, who gave me an exaggerated wink when our eyes met.

My therapist had insisted that attending my wedding was "essential to witness the culmination of our therapeutic journey," which I suspected was code for "free cake and booze. "

When it came time for vows, Lincoln pulled a small, worn notebook from his pocket. My heart clenched—I recognized it as the journal he'd kept since our first meeting.

"Chloe Woolsworth," he began, his voice steady despite the emotion in his eyes. "Two years ago, you told me relationships were overrated and you'd rather be left alone with your books and your rooster."

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A ripple of laughter moved through the guests.

"And yet," he continued, "here we are. I promised to never rush you, to give you all the time and space you needed. In return, you've given me something I never expected to find—a home that exists wherever you are."

I swallowed hard as Lincoln continued reading from his journal, my eyes fixed on his face. His words washed over me, each one hitting with precision, like he'd spent years perfecting them just for this moment.

"You've taught me that family isn't always blood—sometimes it's a sarcastic witch and a martial arts-practicing rooster who makes the world's best biscuits and gravy."

Frosty puffed up his chest feathers, nearly dislodging the rings from his pillow. I shot him a warning glance.

Lincoln flipped to another page. "You showed me courage when you faced your sister, strength when you built our publishing imprint from nothing, and patience when I spent those months in New York."

My mind flashed to those long-distance video calls, the late nights editing manuscripts just to feel connected to him.

"But most importantly," Lincoln's voice softened, "you taught me that love doesn't have to be loud or showy to be real. Sometimes it's just showing up, day after day, even when it's terrifying."



Damn it. I promised myself I wouldn't cry. I blinked rapidly, refusing to let the tears fall.

"Your turn," the officiant prompted gently.

I reached into a hidden pocket Marigold had insisted on sewing into my dress. "I didn't write anything down," I admitted, pulling out a dog-eared copy of one of our first published books. "But I edited this."

Lincoln's eyes widened in recognition—it was the fantasy novel he'd sent as my first editing project.

"Page forty-three," I said, handing it to him.

He opened to the marked page, where I'd circled a passage and written in the margin: This is us. This is how I feel about you. I couldn't say it better myself.

Lincoln read aloud: "'She never believed in fate until she met him—not because he swept her off her feet, but because for the first time, standing on her own felt stronger with someone beside her.'"

From somewhere behind me, I heard Marigold's muffled sob. Roger was probably taking mental notes for our next session.

"Also," I added, finding my voice, "I promise to stop pretending I don't read romance novels. But only to you. Everyone else can continue thinking I'm a literary snob."

Lincoln's eyes locked with mine, a mix of love and amusement dancing in their light golden-brown depths. The gathered crowd seemed to fade away as we stood there, our words hanging in the air between us.

"I knew you secretly loved those romance novels," he whispered, just loud enough for me to hear.

"If you tell anyone, I'll hex your coffee to taste like Frosty's molt water for a month," I threatened, but couldn't keep the smile from my face.

Speaking of my feathered familiar, Frosty chose that moment to clear his throat dramatically. "The rings, if you please," he announced in his most dignified voice. "Before my wings fall asleep and these precious symbols of eternal bondage tumble to the ground."

"It's 'bonding,' not 'bondage,'" I hissed.

"I know what I said," Frosty replied with a wink that sent ripples of laughter through the guests.

As Lincoln slid the ring onto my finger, I felt a surge of magic pulse between us. The moonstone at my neck seemed to respond, glowing with an inner light that matched the magical symbols beneath our feet.

"Did you enchant this?" I asked, examining the platinum band now nestled against my engagement ring.

"Not intentionally," Lincoln admitted. "But apparently our magic has other ideas."

From the front row, Zelda nodded knowingly. "Your auras have fully intertwined," she called out, abandoning any pretense that this was a normal wedding. "It's rare, but when two magical signatures are truly compatible, their magic becomes... enthusiastic."

"Enthusiastic magic. Great. That's all we need," I muttered, remembering the last time

our combined powers had gotten 'enthusiastic' and accidentally turned all the town's streetlights into floating jellyfish for a week.

Roger leaned forward in his seat. "This is fascinating material for our next session, Chloe. The symbolic merging of identities while maintaining individual autonomy?—"

"Not now, Roger," I interrupted, fighting a smile.

Marigold bounced in her seat, practically vibrating with excitement. "I knew it! I knew from the first moment you two were meant to be! Remember when I accidentally-on-purpose scheduled Lincoln to stay in the room right next to yours?"

"Accidentally-on-purpose?" Lincoln raised an eyebrow.

"I might have manipulated the reservation system," Marigold admitted, not looking remotely sorry. "Best matchmaking I ever did."

The officiant cleared her throat, drawing our attention back to the ceremony after Marigold's matchmaking confession.

"By the power vested in me by the Magical Council of West Virginia and the mundane state government," she announced with a flourish of her hands that sent tiny sparkles drifting through the air, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." She turned to Lincoln with a smile. "You may kiss your bride."

Lincoln's eyes locked with mine, a mixture of disbelief and pure joy radiating from him. He leaned in close, his voice barely a whisper.

"Ready for this, Mrs. Sands?"

"That's Mrs. Woolsworth-Sands to you," I whispered back. "I didn't spend two years building my editorial reputation to?—"

His lips found mine, cutting off my sarcasm mid-sentence.

The kiss was gentle at first, then deepened with a sudden surge of emotion that sent a ripple of magic pulsing outward from where we stood.

The floating books above us fluttered their pages more frantically, and the moonstone at my neck grew warm against my skin.

When we finally broke apart, the room erupted in applause and cheers. Frosty strutted in circles around our feet, his chest puffed out so far I worried his tuxedo buttons might pop.

"That's my witch!" he crowed proudly. "I raised her right!"

"You did not raise me," I muttered, but couldn't stop smiling.

"I most certainly did," Frosty countered. "Who taught you to make a proper cup of tea? Who explained the birds and the bees?"

"Sweet Jezfucnubooles, please stop talking," I hissed, feeling heat rise to my cheeks as Lincoln laughed beside me.

From the back of the chapel, a crash sounded. We all turned to see DeeDee from the diner standing over a toppled ice sculpture, her hands covered in what looked suspiciously like frosting.

"Sorry!" she called out. "I was just checking if the cake was properly chilled and... well, it wasn't the cake."

Zelda waved her hand dismissively, and the ice sculpture—which I now recognized as a rather impressive rendering of Frosty in his martial arts pose—reassembled itself.

"I commissioned that," Frosty announced proudly. "Thought we needed some proper art in here."

Lincoln squeezed my hand, leaning close to my ear. "Still want to elope?"

I surveyed the room—my chosen family in all their chaotic, magical glory—and shook my head. "Strangely enough, no. This is exactly where I want to be."

Lincoln led me through the crowd, his hand warm and steady in mine.

The renovated town square sparkled with fairy lights that hovered without visible support, casting a golden glow over the celebration.

Someone had transformed the infamous half-headless bear statue into a bizarre centerpiece, wreathing its remaining ear in enchanted flowers that changed colors with the music.

"Is that bear... winking at us?" Lincoln asked, squinting at the statue.

"Marigold's idea of wedding decor. She thought it would be 'whimsically appropriate' since you proposed right next to it."

"I still maintain the bear nodded approvingly when you said yes."

I snorted. "That's because Zelda enchanted it as a backup plan in case I froze up again."

The dance floor pulsed with supernatural energy—literally.

With each beat, the wooden planks glowed faintly beneath the dancers' feet.

I spotted Penelope Nightshade, our bestselling author of paranormal romance, demonstrating some kind of elaborate floating waltz with her vampire husband.

Nearby, Roger attempted to explain the psychological implications of dance to a bored-looking woodland sprite.

"Your publishing empire is well-represented," I noted, nodding toward the cluster of authors from our magical imprint. "Theo Blackwood actually put on a tie."

"Only because Augustus threatened to turn his next manuscript into actual fire if he showed up in ripped jeans."

We reached the edge of the square, slipping into the shadows beneath an ancient oak tree. The sounds of celebration faded to a pleasant background hum. Lincoln pulled me close, his forehead resting against mine.

"Mrs. Woolsworth-Sands," he murmured. "I still can't believe you're actually my wife."

"Believe it," I said, reaching into the hidden pocket Marigold had insisted on adding to my dress. "I have something for you."

"A wedding gift? I thought we agreed?—"

"You agreed. I nodded noncommittally."

I pressed a small, leather-bound journal into his hands. The cover was weathered, the pages visibly aged.

"Open it," I urged.

Lincoln's fingers traced the embossed initials on the cover—E.S.—before carefully opening to the first page.

"This is..." His voice faltered.

"Your grandfather found it in the attic. It's your great-grandmother Eliza's journal. The one where she documented her spell experiments for preserving magical texts."

His eyes widened. "The missing grimoire pages? The ones that were supposedly destroyed in the fire?"

"Not destroyed. Just hidden, waiting for the right publisher to find them."

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Lincoln's fingers trembled as he flipped through the journal pages, his expression shifting from disbelief to wonder. The golden-brown of his eyes deepened with emotion as he traced the elegant script of his ancestor.

"Chloe... this is incredible. These spells could revolutionize magical text preservation." He looked up, moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes. "How did you?—"

"I have another surprise," I interrupted, my heart hammering against my ribs. I reached back into my hidden pocket and pulled out a small box wrapped in midnight blue paper with tiny silver stars that actually twinkled.

Lincoln raised an eyebrow. "Two gifts? You're really breaking all our agreements today."

"It's my wedding day. I'm allowed to be unpredictable." My voice came out steadier than I felt. Two years together, and he could still make my stomach flip with nervous anticipation.

He unwrapped the package carefully, preserving the enchanted paper—typical Lincoln, always the preservationist. When he lifted the lid, he froze, staring at the contents.

Inside lay a simple white plastic stick with two very distinct pink lines.

"Is this..." His voice cracked.



I nodded, suddenly unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

"We're having a baby?" Lincoln whispered, his voice filled with awe.

"Around winter solstice, according to Zelda's calculations."

Lincoln's face transformed with such pure joy that my carefully constructed emotional walls—the ones I'd spent a lifetime building—crumbled completely. He pulled me into his arms, lifting me off the ground in a spinning embrace that sent my vintage dress swirling around us.

"Jezfucnuboobles, Lincoln! Put me down before I hurl on your fancy suit!" I laughed through happy tears.

"We're having a baby," he repeated, setting me gently on my feet but keeping his arms firmly around me. "A little witch or warlock."

"Or both. Twins run in my family."

Lincoln's face went comically pale.

Before he could respond, a familiar feathery form burst through the nearby bushes, leaves stuck to his tuxedo.

"SHE TOLD YOU?" Frosty squawked, practically vibrating with excitement. "I've been keeping this secret for THREE WHOLE DAYS. Do you know what that's like for someone with my communication skills?"

"You knew?" Lincoln asked.

"Of course I knew! Who do you think held her hair back during morning sickness? Who's been secretly reading 'What to Expect When You're Expecting a Magical

Baby' under the covers at night?"

I watched Lincoln's face cycle through every emotion in the human spectrum—joy, disbelief, terror, back to joy—all in the span of thirty seconds. It was like watching a slideshow of facial expressions set to fast-forward.

"Twins?" he whispered, the color slowly returning to his face. "That's... that's..."

"Twice the diapers, twice the college tuition, twice the magical mishaps," I supplied helpfully.

Lincoln laughed, the rich sound washing over me like warm honey. He knelt down suddenly, placing his hand gently on my stomach. Through the vintage lace of my wedding dress, I felt the warmth of his palm, the slight magical tingle that always accompanied his touch.

"Hello in there, little Sands," he murmured.

"Woolsworth-Sands," I corrected automatically. "I hyphenated, remember?"

"Of course. Hello, little Woolsworth-Sands," he amended, looking up at me with that crooked smile that still made my heart skip. "I'm your dad."

"And I'm your GODROOSTER!" Frosty interjected, puffing out his feathered chest. "I'll teach you everything—martial arts, gourmet cooking, advanced sarcasm techniques?—"

"They'll need to be born first, Frosty," I reminded him, but couldn't help smiling at his enthusiasm.

"I've already started knitting tiny booties," Frosty confessed. "And researching the best organic baby food recipes."

Lincoln stood, keeping his hand protectively over my stomach. "Remember when you wouldn't even let me leave a toothbrush at your cottage?"

"I was protecting my independence," I said, leaning into him despite myself.

"And now?"

"Now I'm wondering where we're going to fit a nursery. Or two." I looked around at the twinkling lights of Assjacket town square, at the faces of people who had become family when I'd sworn I didn't need one.

We wandered away from the reception, finding a quiet spot near the edge of town where the magical barrier shimmered almost invisibly against the night sky. Stars scattered across the darkness like spilled glitter—probably Marigold's doing, enhancing the night for our wedding.

Lincoln wrapped his arms around me from behind, his chin resting on my head. Frosty settled at our feet, uncharacteristically quiet.

"From hermit witch to married mother," I mused. "My twenty-year-old self would be horrified."

"Best town," Lincoln whispered into my hair, echoing the words he'd said to me on our first real date. "Best witch."

THE END