



Brews and Banishments

(Mystery In A Bottle #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: What's a witch to do when a tricky spell throws her small town life into magical chaos...?

Daisy Fields, and her best friend Tessa Hale, happily run the town herbal shop, creating spells and tonics for humans and fellow witches alike. Daisy loves her life, even though she's been a bit lonely since her husband's passing several years ago. Her days are fun, if a bit mundane.

But when she accidentally spills a spell on herself that leaves behind nothing but a haunting note about her, "finally getting what she deserves," everything changes.

Now, Daisy and Tessa are on an adventure to discover who cursed Daisy before the magical troublesome things around her get too out-of-control. They're desperate to fix things. Even if the magic has somehow brought the cute man Daisy has had her eye on into her life, she knows better than to take advantage of a man under a spell.

Except, what if this spell is more than it seems? And what if the magic in the air is just the beginning of the changes in Daisy's life?

BREWS AND BANISHMENT is the first book in an exciting new series that takes place in a sleepy little town called Willowbrook. There will be laughter, fun, friendship, mysterious circumstances, and a sprinkle of romance.

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Daisy

“Yeah, uh, huh, uh, huh. Yeah!”

The music rang through Fields’ Herbals loudly, the boombox radio nestled within the shelves vibrating as the bass grew even more.

On early Monday mornings, not a soul in Willowbrook found themselves creeping into the store.

Despite being located in the heart of town, surrounded by aged bookstores and smoldering coffee shops, Mondays were for going to work and heading home.

Even the handfuls of tourists Willowbrook normally had lingered on by the shop, peering into the wide, squared windows then giving each other a shrug before going on their way.

But if they were to look inside, they would see a private dance party going on.

Daisy Fields, owner and master spellmaker, twirled between the aisles, her long and slender arms erected up above her.

The wooden floor beneath her thin shoes creaked and moaned with age, the bookcases and series of shelves shuddering from the movement.

She bumped a boney hip against a shelf, ignoring how the vials and glass bottles clinked against each other.

Mondays were for dancing, it seemed, and Daisy had no intentions of slowing down.

Across the room, dancing in an untimely similar fashion, was Tessa Hala.

She had cut her hair pixie short after her husband first began traveling for work.

Ever since then, Tessa insisted on keeping her brown locks short, and quickly started to look like a fairytale creature that sprung right out of a nursery rhyme book.

Tessa, who stood a head or two taller than Daisy, could be seen swaying between the aisles, her arms spread out and her eyes fluttering shut.

Daisy sang the lyrics as loud as she could, her singing drowning out the music.

“Who says you need a microphone to sing?” Tessa called out, her sharp laugh filling the air afterwards.

“Not me!” Daisy kept her voice high pitched and sing-songy.

Daisy was glad to be distracted by the music, because she was having an off day.

That morning, before the sun rose and while the moon still hung above the horizon, Daisy awoke with the feeling of something unusual coming her way.

As a skilled and proficient spellmaker, Daisy trusted her instincts more than anything else.

When they told her to jump, she asked how high.

As she brewed her first cup of coffee, slipping in a tonic to put her mind at ease, Daisy stared out the window with a furlong expression.

The feeling, however small or forgettable it seemed, remained with her still.

Even then, during her dance, Daisy felt tempted to slip into a reverie, fully aware that the last time she had a feeling like that, she...well, she was not in any hurry to think it over again.

Slam!

Daisy flung around one of the aisles. "Blessed be, Tessa," she cooed with a shake of her head. "You're as clumsy as a child, aren't you?" Laughter ensued as she looked over the mess on the shop's floor.

Sprawled across the old wood, Tessa was covered with every single scarf that once hung in a neat fashion beside the checkout counter.

They were in an array of colors, each handmade and personally delivered by the local knitting club.

The hooks they had been displayed on were now scattered across the floor, a few slipping too far beneath the counter for Daisy to even spend a moment thinking about how she'd get them back.

How could she consider cleanup when her best friend was crying from laughing so hard?

It was a typical, beautiful Monday.

Daisy knelt beside her, gently tugging the scarves out from beneath Tessa's flailing arms. "One day," she said, "you'll need to tell me how Maverick manages to find you in one piece whenever he gets back from his work trips!"

“ Please, ” Tessa replied in a drawling tone. “You say it as if you aren’t as clumsy or even worse than me.”

“Since when?”

Tessa rolled her eyes playfully, tugging a scarf out from beneath her bottom. “I think I’ve known you long enough to make that assumption myself.”

Slipping an arm beneath Tessa’s back, Daisy hoisted her up, yanking out a scarf that managed to find its way into her pockets. “We’re getting too old to be so clumsy,” Daisy teased, knowing that bringing up age would push her best friend’s buttons.

“Now, you hold on there,” Tessa snapped.

Daisy grinned. “Here we go.”

“Just because you’re fifty-one -”

“Fifty- two , Tess.”

Tessa rolled her eyes again. “Whatever,” she said with a wave of her hand. “And I’m fifty, does not make us old. Does it?”

“In the simplest sense of the term, we -”

Tessa snapped her fingers. “You’re lucky I can’t remember where my de-aging recipe went. I’d slip a drop or two in your morning coffee and you wouldn’t even know it.”

Daisy laughed as she leaned against the counter, the fallen scarves now stacked in her hands.

The de-aging recipe sat where it had always sat: in the thick spellbook in the attic.

The building for Fields' Herbals had sat in Willowbrook's town center since its founding.

Every Fields woman who owned the building kept their grimoire of spells, tonics, and brews in the attic, where it could be safely stored and never misplaced.

When Tessa had started to work alongside her in the shop, they began combining recipes and ideas.

Daisy didn't have the heart to tell Tessa that she had begun misplacing her 'recipes' the year after she turned forty-five. At least any recipe that had to do with her age. Tessa didn't need to start messing around with such dangerous spells, especially not for vanity.

The familiar doorbell chimed as a customer slipped inside the store.

Daisy looked toward the door, surprised by such an early morning customer.

Dressed in a long trench coat, the patron stepped further in but hesitated, wrapping the edges of the coat further around her body.

She lifted her head, the hat she wore casting a dark shadow across her face.

Daisy left the scarves on the counter and walked around an aisle to get a good look at her. Something about the customer looked familiar, but the added trench coat and shadowy hat shrouding her face left her more confused than she wanted to be.

"Good morning," Daisy called out. "Can we help you?"

The woman stepped further into the light. “I-I’m sorry to burst in like this.”

“Diana?” Daisy asked. “I could hardly recognize you with that get-up! What’s going on, are you -”

The regular patron stuck her hand out from within the trench coat.

Instantly, Daisy and Tessa jerked backwards in surprise.

Diana’s hand was three times the size it should’ve been, the skin plumped and tight, as if her muscles would surge out from within and tear her skin like paper. Even her nails, which were painted a deep purple, were much larger than a human’s hand ever should have been.

“Do you remember the lip plumping spell?” Diana asked.

Daisy winced. “Oh, you poor girl. Don’t tell me you split it on your hand?”

“Every last drop,” she cried out. “I have a huge interview this afternoon, Daisy. Tell me you can fix this!”

Daisy snatched up the boombox remote, pausing the music and growing serious within a second. “Don’t even think about worrying, Diana,” she said as she moved across the store. “We’ll have you right as rain in no time.”

Pride flared in Daisy’s chest. After so many years, this was the exact thing that reminded her why she loved the life she had been blessed with.

Hardship came and went, as it always did, but there was nothing more rewarding than solving a person’s mistake, healing a misfortune, putting a blunder to rest. Every single thing in her shop was concocted to bring a smile to someone’s face.

Even when it dared to go wrong, like it did in Diana's case, Daisy was ready and prepared to fix it.

Daisy ran her hand along one of the shelves against the wall, her lips moving as she searched for a particular vial. She passed by a series of them.

De-shrinking, de-flowering, de-magnifying, de-growing?

Daisy snapped her fingers. "That ought to do it," she whispered to herself, snatching up the de-growing vial.

There was a shimmering purple liquid inside, the light reflecting off it and sending a kaleidoscope across the floor.

"Hold out your hand, Diana," she said as she curved back around the aisles.

Diana pulled up her sleeve, holding her enlarged hand out in between them.

All it took was a few simple drops, and Diana's skin moved and shrunk before their eyes.

After just a few blinks of an eye, Diana looked as normal as Daisy remembered her.

Diana knew her well, having helped her with everything from preparing for a big project to getting ready for a spontaneous date.

Diana breathed a sigh of relief as she held her hand up to the light. The purple liquid had sunk into her skin, no remnants of the disaster remaining. "Have I told you how much of a life saver you are, Daisy?"

"You have," she replied with a cheesy grin. "But I'll hear it again, all the same."

“Then you’re a lifesaver,” Diana breathed, not waiting another second to throw her arms around Daisy’s thin neck. “I can’t thank you enough.” Pulling back, she dug through her coat to retrieve her wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

Daisy raised her hand. “Not a thing.”

“But -”

“A mistake is a mistake,” Daisy interjected as she shrugged. “No need to pay for an accident.”

Tessa cleared her throat from behind the counter, still trying to sort all the fallen scarves. “You can pay through recommending the shop to your girlfriends, Diana.”

“Now, now,” Daisy said, giving Tessa a pointed stare. “She doesn’t need -”

Diana snatched onto her wrist. “That reminds me,” she said. “I’ve got family coming into town in a few weeks, and I need sleep aids.”

“Are they that bad?”

“Oh, not for me,” Diana replied.

Daisy raised a slender brow.

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“The sooner I can get my old folks and aunties to sleep, the better it’ll be for me,” she explained.

Daisy raised her hands, stifling a laugh. “Whatever you say, Diana. We’ve got plenty of sleep aids for sale whenever you’re ready to get them.”

“Well, I’m curious,” Tessa said. “Any handsome relatives coming in?”

“Tessa!” Daisy chuckled with a shake of her head. “What if Maverick knew you were asking that?”

She waved an absentminded hand at her. “Not for me, silly.” Tessa held her ring finger up to Diana for her to see the sterling silver symbols etched on her golden band. “I meant for Daisy, of course.”

“Tess -”

“He has to be single, obviously,” she continued, her attention focused on Diana, “and older than thirty.”

Daisy’s eyes popped open wider. “Thirty, Tess?”

“Alright, alright. Older than thirty-five.”

Diana laughed. “Well, I have a few cousins who -”

The doorbell chimed again as the mailman stepped inside the shop.

As the morning trudged on, more and more people would begin to filter onto Willowbrook's streets.

Daisy stepped around the counter, leaving the gossiping pair behind her to greet the mailman.

He carried a package, simply taped and postaged.

"Daisy Fields?" he asked.

She nodded with a smile. "Package for me?"

"Exactly right." The mailman held up a form. "Sign here, Mrs. Fields."

Daisy pressed her lips together. "It's 'Ms.' not 'Mrs.'"

The mailman bowed his head. "Apologies, Ms. Fields."

Taking the package from him, Daisy held the door for the mailman to leave before slowly walking back towards the counter. Diana and Tessa were talking lively about relationships and single men, not bothering to hold back even though they were mentioning Daisy as if she wasn't there.

By that point, Tessa had been trying to set Daisy up for years.

But, as Tessa would so lovingly point out, trying to set up a widow with a handsome bachelor only became harder with every passing day.

Daisy didn't need to be told that fact, as she knew it herself quite well, but she had no qualms with it.

Sure, she had gone on a date or two since she lost her husband at twenty-five, but she was over fifty, and she found more accomplishment in her brews and tonics than searching the streets of Willowbrook for an interested man.

Daisy stepped back behind the counter, setting the package down beside the register, while Diana was beginning to leave. She left a few cards on the counter, each with a different man's name and number written on them. Diana gave Daisy a suggestive wink.

"I'll see you two soon!" Diana called out over her shoulder before slipping out of Fields' Herbals .

Tessa tucked the cards into Daisy's breast pocket. "For safekeeping."

"Very funny," Daisy teased. "When will you give up on me?"

"I wouldn't ever dare."

"Not even when we're both old and wrinkly? And I'll be alone, of course, so you and Maverick will have to build me a room in your house." Daisy smirked. "You wouldn't give up on me then?"

"Of course not," Tessa continued. "Maverick will just have to deal with two wives instead of one."

Daisy burst into laughter.

The music turned back on with a wave of Tessa's hand, and then they were back to dancing and cleaning the store. Tessa arranged the scarves once more, and Daisy dusted. They worked meticulously to prepare the shop for the busier days of the week that were to come.

When early afternoon came, they had finally finished. Tessa grabbed her coat and keys from the hooks behind the counter, and Daisy didn't even need to ask to know where she was heading.

"I've been craving sandwiches from Ronald's place down the block," Tessa said as she neared the front door. "How does that sound for lunch?"

Daisy glanced at the clock, swiping a stray tear off of her cheek. "It's still a little early."

"The line stretches out as far as the CD shop," Tessa replied. "Each time I've gone recently, I've waited for nearly an hour."

"Smart thinking. I'll be hungry by the time you get back."

Tessa finger gunned her before slipping out the door, almost tripping on the threshold step on her way out.

Daisy ran her fingers over the package. Now that she looked at it closer, she couldn't find a return address or any indication as to where it might've come from.

The box itself was neatly sealed, just a simple cardboard box.

She was moments away from lifting it and rattling the contents beside her ear like a child when movement out the window caught her eyes instead.

"By all that is good and holy," Daisy muttered, her attention stuck on the man nearing the door.

Ethan Walker was the epitome of the boy next door, though Daisy hated that thought.

The both of them were well over forty years old, not at all near the age of the teenage heartthrobs who carried on and on about the handsome bachelor living beside them.

Even so, Daisy's eyes widened as she watched him.

The sunlight shone down on him gracefully, lighting up his chestnut-colored eyes and hair that was speckled with streaks of silvery grey.

Ever since they were kids, Ethan's skin had looked the same shade as the inside of a tree, rustic and deeply tanned.

He always tended to keep his hair on the longer side, pushing the strands behind his ears and down his neck.

The smile he wore could light up an entire room in the middle of the night, the same smile he graced his two children with.

Daisy knew Ethan very well, even if he didn't remember her in the same fashion.

They had gone to school together, since they both grew up in Willowbrook, and they went their separate ways like most other teens did.

Eventually, he married. She married. And fate somehow left both of them alone.

Soon, they both found themselves living and working side by side, Ethan with his successful lawyer career and Daisy with her prominent store front.

She glanced at his hands as he reached for the front door of Fields' Herbals .

Ethan, like many in Willowbrook, was a proficient warlock, capable of minor illusions and spells. Daisy hadn't seen him in action often, but when she had, she was

as starstruck as she was just then.

“Oh, sugar,” Daisy muttered when she finally realized he was seconds away from entering the shop. She fumbled, placing the package on the edge of the counter.

When was the last time she saw him in the shop?

Perhaps it was two days ago, or the week before.

Ethan tended to stop by in the mornings every now and then, but Daisy was embarrassed to admit she saw him plenty more than that.

While some - and by some she meant Tessa - might've called her obsessed, Daisy had a perfect view of his office from her window in the back of the shop.

As she brewed her potions and restocked her herbs, Daisy watched him from afar, her heart at ease.

The doorbell chimed as Ethan stepped inside.

“Morning,” Ethan called out as he pressed further into the shop. “I’m surprised you’re not packed full of people already.”

Daisy meant to laugh but the sound that came out of her resembled a balloon losing all of its air. She smiled instead. “Mondays,” she replied with a shrug.

Ethan nodded, lifting his head as he glanced around.

Looking away, Daisy bit down on the inside of her mouth, the embarrassment rising up her throat.

She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror on the opposite wall.

Long brown hair hung wildly down her back, frizzy strands poking up every which way.

Every time she managed to look at her reflection, Daisy was surprised by how wide her eyes looked.

Most relatives and family friends went on to compliment her eyes, mentioning how much she looked like her mother and how she seemed to take everything in all the time.

Now, as Daisy peered back over the aisles at Ethan, she wished to look more normal, more like the average woman.

Ethan was about to step out from one of the narrow aisles when his broad shoulder bumped into a shelf, rattling the wood and the series of vials within.

He winced, jumping around to make sure nothing fell before knocking into the other shelf at the same time.

He went incredibly still, not moving till the shelves went still.

“Sorry,” he muttered, an awkward smile stretched across his face.

Daisy couldn’t help but focus in on the stubble growing along his jaw, hardly noticing the way he barely fit through the aisles. “I-I do it all the time,” she blurted. “Knock into things, I mean.”

He pressed his lips together while slowly approaching the counter. “Could I get a tea, Daisy?”

Heat rose to her face. All he did was say her name, but it sent her heart hammering ballistically against her chest. Daisy cleared her throat. “Of course,” she replied. “Any ailment?” She studied his face as she would with any customer. “You’ve got some bags.”

Ethan blinked. “Bags?”

“I-I mean -” She raised a finger, pointing to her own eyes. “Like below your eyes.”

He laughed lightly. “Right. I haven’t been sleeping the best.”

“Would you like an energy tonic in the tea?”

Ethan smiled broadly, showing pearly white teeth. “That would be perfect, Daisy.”

She flung around, taking a few steps to where a small hot plate sat on a short counter.

A tea set was beside it, with a few takeaway cups alongside it.

Daisy prepped the water, already making a mess, her hands trembling in a way they never had before.

Behind her, Ethan patiently waited, his attention pulled to the shelves rather than honing in on her.

She swallowed as heat engulfed her entire body as she tried to make the tea as calmly as possible.

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Anyone with eyes would notice how much Daisy happened to like Ethan.

While Tessa went on and on about setting her up with young bachelors passing through Willowbrook or residing in the nearby city, all Daisy could wonder was what Ethan happened to be doing.

A million and one questions rested in the back of her mind at all times.

Did Ethan have a girlfriend?

Could a well-off lawyer with college-age kids even be interested in dating?

Better yet: would Ethan even find any attraction in a middle-aged widow like Daisy?

It wasn't like Ethan had made any moves himself over the past few years.

They merely resided beside each other, having multiple interactions within a week and going on about their lives.

Daisy poured the steaming water into a cup, a tea bag resting in the bottom.

Before handing it over, she snatched a vial behind the counter, dropping a few drops into the swirling tea.

Tessa had suggested slipping Ethan a love tonic every now and then. Not too much to entirely devote him to her, but just a simple sway whenever he happened to see her. Perhaps enough to keep her as a lingering thought in the back of his mind.

Daisy shook her head as she stirred the tea. That was the exact opposite of what she wanted. And besides, he was far too sweet to trick. The guilt would hang over her like a storm cloud if she ever dared to do such a thing.

Daisy turned around and rested the cup on the counter. "One herbal tea with energy tonic."

"It smells divine," Ethan commented, leaning over the steam. "What is that - lavender?"

The corner of her lip curled up. "Very good!"

Ethan rubbed his hand against the back of his neck, not meeting her gaze. "Well, you know," he muttered, biting down on his lip. Quickly, as if he was suddenly in a hurry, Ethan fished through his pocket and pulled out a few paper bills. "Keep the change, Daisy."

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Well," he said again, looking over the counter at her with a small smile.

Daisy raised her shoulders. "Well."

For a moment, he held her gaze in silence.

Nothing but air passed between them, a gentle quiet overtaking the shop.

Daisy swallowed her growing smile as she became more and more desperate to know what he was thinking.

Ethan's warm gaze stuck to her a moment longer before he sighed, his head tilting.

“I might need another cup tomorrow,” he suddenly said.

Daisy’s mouth opened and closed like a fish for a moment before she found the strength to speak again. “I’ll be here.”

“Alright,” Ethan said. He took his cup, holding it gingerly, and began to walk towards the front door. He paused with one hand around the handle, then glanced over his shoulder with a smile spreading across his lips. “See you tomorrow, Daisy.”

She raised her hand in a wave, and he was gone, the bell chiming once more.

The shop became still again. Daisy only stared at the place where Ethan once had been, his words circling through her head like a prayer.

They were barely anything, nothing crazy, and yet she clung to them as though they were her lifeline.

Daisy pressed a hand to her chest. Beneath her skin, her aching heart pounded and beat relentlessly.

If that wasn’t a telltale sign of an irreversible attachment, Daisy didn’t know what else it could be.

She was lovesick, and the clock had barely struck noon.

Turning her attention back to the package, Daisy slipped a box cutter beneath the tape with trembling hands.

It would take a few minutes to wear off, something she had become very familiar with through her infrequent meetings with Ethan.

Her mind was so preoccupied that she never noticed how the bottom of the box was already frayed and loose, the contents beginning to slip out before she could even think about stopping it.

Crash!

An oddly shaped potion dropped onto the floor, smashing into pieces instantly. The emerald green liquid inside splashed upwards, catching onto her bare legs and staining her clothes and shoes.

“Crap !” Daisy hissed, dropping to her knees quickly and making sure to avoid the glass shards. She reached into her back pocket, retrieving an already torn rag and swiping up the fallen mess. There was a peculiar stench coming from the unknown potion, a sign that sent a chill down her back.

As a child, Daisy’s mother used to say one thing almost every day while working in Fields’ Herbals : ‘Never trust a potion with a strange smell.’

Not that Daisy ever found proof to line up with the warning, but she followed it all the same.

Lots of potions had a certain scent to them, but Daisy tended to trust her gut feelings before anything else.

And there was something odd about the stench.

It was almost familiar, but not in the way freshly baked cookies happened to be familiar.

Daisy snatched the box, putting the fragmented pieces of glass back within it.

When she put the second large piece within, her fingers brushed by something wispy, like paper.

She reached, pulling out a torn sheet of unlined paper.

A few simple words had been written on it.

Simple words, yet haunting all the same.

Now you'll get what you deserve.

Daisy remained crouched behind the counter, her heart beating in a different way than before.

Her lips moved absentmindedly as she reread the note again and again.

That morning, long before she ever arrived at the shop, Daisy woke with a peculiarly off feeling, as though something unsettling hung on the horizon.

She hated to be proved right.

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Daisy

“You’re kidding.”

Tessa shook her head, speaking through a mouthful of food.

“Seriously,” she said. “There wasn’t even a line.

Isn’t that crazy? At first,” she paused to take another bite of her sandwich, the creamy aioli slipping down the corner of her lip, “I thought something else was going on in town, but when is there ever anything going on in Willowbrook?”

Daisy leaned back in her chair. They were eating their early lunch in Daisy’s office, the door pushed wide open with a doorstop to keep a close eye on the front door.

Ronald’s sandwich shop was usually packed full of people by that point in the day, the lunch rush spanning from early in the morning all the way until three in the afternoon.

Daisy hadn’t expected to see Tessa for at least an hour, but she had arrived back at Fields’ Herbals right when the mess behind the counter had been cleaned up.

Daisy glanced out the door, her eyes stuck on the spot where the green potion had once been spilled.

There wasn’t a bit of it left on the floor - Daisy made certain to clean up every last drop.

And yet, she had the nagging sensation of someone watching her.

For extra safety, Daisy lit one of her smudging sticks that was full of dried sage and brushed the smoke all around the counter before letting it burn beside the front door.

The act was meant to comfort her, and to remove the remnants of that strangely peculiar smell, but all of it remained. The smell and her anxiety.

She shuddered.

“What’s got you so quiet?”

Daisy blinked, turning her attention back to Tessa. “I’m not quiet.”

“Sure,” Tessa teased. “If you’re not quiet, then I’m not clumsy.”

“Well, that’s just an outright lie.”

Tessa lowered her sandwich, leaning forward to place a steady hand over Daisy’s knee. “Seriously,” she said, “what’s going on? You seem off. Did something happen?”

Daisy hesitated. There wasn’t much either one of them could do in regards to the mysterious potion, other than worry over it.

Daisy gave her friend the widest smile she could muster.

The last thing she wanted was to make her worry about something out of their hands.

Besides, the note seemed pretty obviously aimed towards Daisy.

What if telling Tessa about it meant bringing her into the fold, having the same peculiar fate fall upon her?

She wouldn't dare to do such a thing if she had a say in the matter.

"Ethan came into the shop after you left."

Tessa gaped. "You don't mean Ethan, Ethan, do you?"

"What Ethan are you talking about?"

"Do you mean money broker Ethan, or lawyer and divorced single dad Ethan?"

Daisy burst into laughter, her half-eaten sandwich almost falling off her lap. "I meant the latter, Tess."

She squealed, throwing her food onto the small desk and leaping into the air. Her short, pixie cut hair bounced as she danced around, her excitement causing the floor to shake and creak beneath her feet.

Daisy could only watch, moving her food onto the desk as well. "I don't know what's got you so excited," she finally said. "He ordered tea and left. If anything, he might not come back another time."

Tessa frowned, pausing with her arms up in the air above her head. "What makes you say that?" She fell back into her seat, eyes narrowing. "What'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything!"

Tessa raised a slender brow, her head tilting. "Then why don't I believe you?" She crossed her arms. "You know, Daisy, I am a very skilled empath, and -"

“Oh, here we go again!”

“What? I am an empath!”

Daisy chuckled. “You’re hardly an expert. I thought just last week you were going over your studies in that particular skill!”

Tessa pressed her lips together before falling back into her seat. “You know what my empath skills are telling me?”

“I wouldn’t have a clue.”

Tessa reached into the brown paper bag from Ronald’s shop and pulled out two takeaway boxes. She placed one down on Daisy’s lap. “That I got you a surprise. Open it up!”

Daisy eyed her. “You didn’t have to get me anything special, Tess.”

“Just open it!”

Popping open the seal, Daisy peered into the white box and gaped.

In the box were two neatly sliced pieces of cherry pie.

The red filling held itself within the slices, not falling over the bottom of the box or making a mess.

They were perfect and large, just how Daisy preferred them.

Her mother used to bake pies for the entire neighborhood, and she would let them rest on the windowsill, the sweet smell of ripe fruits mixed with sugar filling the spring

air. Cherries were always her favorite.

“They never have the cherry pie at Ronald’s,” Daisy said, her voice quiet.

Tessa grinned. “I know! I had to grab it when I realized.”

“But two slices? Let me at least pay you back, Tess!”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t bother. They slipped them in for free. I didn’t notice till I got back.”

Daisy glanced back down at the box. She couldn’t resist. She slipped a finger through the bright red syrup and popped it in her mouth.

The bright taste mixed with a strong tartness brought a warmth to her chest. It was everything she loved all at once: summer and cherries.

But as the taste sunk into her stomach, Daisy couldn’t ignore the swirling pit of nerves that rested deep within her.

It was lucky for Tessa to have been at Ronald’s right when they happened to have cherry pies.

But, eventually, luck would always run out.

Daisy closed the lid of the box, suddenly losing her appetite.

“You wouldn’t believe what I heard when I was in line,” Tessa was saying as she drove her fork through her own slice of pie. “Old Lady Witherford was a few spots ahead of me.”

Daisy sighed. The older woman had lived beside Daisy for years, and she was known as the town's gossip.

She'd lived in Willowbrook all her life, and happened to know every single family who were born and raised alongside her.

Despite her climbing in age, Old Lady Witherford never once dared to stay within the confines of her home, and was always seen out and about.

Daisy, as an aging woman herself, found comfort in seeing the old lady so much in the town, despite the fact that she didn't much like talking to her.

Gossiping, her mother used to say, brought wrinkles faster than age ever did.

"Don't you think it's weird for the town to call her that?"

"Not when she calls herself that."

"Touche," Daisy muttered. "Go on. What was she gossiping about this time?"

Tessa leaned forward eagerly. "You've seen that garish spray paint on those buildings, right?"

"The ones by Louis Street?"

Tessa nodded.

"Well, sure," Daisy replied.

"Old Lady Witherford's blaming it on the Bronkin twins."

Daisy laughed. “Neither one of them are tall enough to spray paint the sides of those buildings. Besides, I know their parents. They wouldn’t -”

“Well, she’s been telling the whole town, and they sure believe her.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised by this point. The woman’s practically the town’s local news station.”

Tessa laughed. “That isn’t even the extent of it, Daisy,” she continued. “You remember Susan Comer, don’t you?”

Daisy frowned. Susan Comer lived a few blocks away from her and had a family of six.

The kids normally rode their bikes up and down the street, and Daisy tended to keep a close eye on them when she was home.

Once, when the sun was setting, the youngest of the kids raced their bikes down the street and took a tumble in front of her driveway.

There were broken bones and a few scratches.

Daisy, for reasons she kept under lock and key, couldn’t stand the sound of crying children.

It reminded her of a time she seldom forgot, a time she strived to wipe her memory clean of whenever she had the chance. And so, Daisy shot out of her house with a bag full of tonics, remedying the wounds with a simple potion or two.

“What about Susan?” Daisy asked once she pulled herself out of her reverie.

Tessa leaned in. “Old Lady Witherford said she saw Susan sneaking the local handyman in through her backdoor.”

“Oh,” Daisy waved a hand in the air, “that’s ridiculous!”

“Why? Her husband travels, Daisy!”

She rolled her eyes. “So does yours!”

“Well, sure, but I’m not the one claiming to need my table legs fixed every other day!”

Daisy rose from her seat, unable to stop herself from laughing. “That woman’s gossip is just that: gossip. Don’t believe a word of it.”

At least, alongside Tessa, she was able to forget the mysterious potion, even though the idea of it lurked in the back of her mind. Except, when her friend left for the day, all of it would come back, and there wouldn’t be the slightest bit of a distraction in her empty home.

Breathing a sigh, Daisy began to clean up their mess, storing her slices of pie in the small refrigerator she kept in the office. The shelves were already full of fruits and vegetables she used in her tonics, but she managed to slide the box beneath a stack of cucumbers.

As they slipped back out into the main storefront, the phone began to ring.

“I can clean up the rest,” Tessa called out. “If you want to get that!”

“Thanks, Tess,” Daisy replied, taking long strides to make it behind the counter before the ringing cut off. She snatched up the phone and pressed it beneath her ear.

“Thanks for calling Fields’ Herbals , this is Daisy. How can I help you?”

Silence responded. There wasn’t even a hint of breathing.

“Hello?” Daisy asked into the speaker. “Anyone -”

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Someone walked by the front window, passing the front door before turning around again, and walking all the way back.

By the second time they passed by, hesitating at the front door, Daisy realized that it was Ethan again.

He waved a hand at the doorknob, his long brown hair looking like freshly picked chestnuts in the late morning sunlight.

Barely an hour had passed since he last came to the shop, and yet, it felt like she was suddenly seeing him for the first time.

Even at her distance, Daisy's eyes clung onto the scruff growing above his lip and around his chin, how it took on a different color than the rest of his hair. Somehow, it was reddish in the light, and she wondered if he happened to have some Irish blood within him.

Daisy could barely remember that there was a phone in her hand.

She only stared, her eyes fixated on Ethan, who paced in front of the shop.

He dug a hand through his hair, a motion that almost threatened to steal Daisy's breath right out of her chest. Ethan shook his head before snatching onto the doorknob and ripping the door open.

The bell sang through the air.

Daisy was lowering the phone before she even realized she was still holding onto it. Tessa poked her head out from the office, glanced at Ethan striding through the store and back at Daisy, and hurriedly returned to the small room, pulling the door shut.

I'll need to thank her for that later, Daisy thought to herself.

Ethan didn't look like the clumsy man he had been before. He slipped by the aisles effortlessly, his broad shoulders no longer smacking into the vials or the countless racks hanging all around him. He walked like he was on a mission, like he knew exactly what he needed.

Daisy's breath hitched in the back of her throat.

What was happening? What had changed? Maybe the tea she brewed for him was something else, not the energy inducing tonic she thought she had given him.

Suddenly, panic raced through her stomach.

If she had managed to give the man she dreamed of something horrendous, like a foot grower or mole remover, Daisy had no idea what she would do.

"Ethan," she blurted before he had the chance to speak. "Back so soon?"

He placed his hands on the counter firmly, with undeniable determination.

Daisy glanced down at his palms, at his sleeves pulled up to his elbows, at the deep maroon-colored hair along his arms. She had known him for so long, and yet, she never really took in what his arms looked like, how his hands might've felt against her own.

The blush erupted across her face before he even had the chance to speak.

“Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?”

Daisy went still, a nervous laugh blurting out of her mouth. “W-What?”

Ethan tilted his head, the corner of his lip curling into a teasing smile. “Honestly,” he said. “Have you heard that lately?”

“N-No,” Daisy stammered, her shoulders raising. “I suppose I haven’t.”

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve heard all day.”

Her eyes went wide. “E-Ethan,” she breathed. “What’s gotten into you?”

“What’re you doing on Friday?”

“Me?”

He laughed. “Yes, you! Do you have any plans?”

Daisy could only stare in disbelief for a moment. None of it could be real, could it? In the matter of an hour, Ethan managed to make his way back to the shop, to what? Ask her out? Daisy opened and closed her mouth like a fish, searching for her ability to speak.

“No, I don’t,” she replied. “Why?”

“I’d like to take you out.”

“Out?”

Ethan grinned. “On a date, Daisy.” He tilted his head again, and he looked so

handsome Daisy thought her heart was going to implode. “Can I have your number?”

“Oh,” she breathed, fumbling for some sort of paper behind the counter. “Yes, of course!” She scribbled her number carelessly on the back of a card, her handwriting looking more like chicken scratch. She passed it over the counter to him.

Ethan gingerly took the card, his fingers grazing her skin unexpectedly. “I’ll call you,” he said, his gaze holding onto her face. “Alright?”

“Y-Yes,” she whispered. “Alright.”

And before Daisy could even gather her senses, Ethan gave her a short wave and left Fields’ Herbals .

She moved like a ghost, her feet feeling as though they weren’t even touching the ground. Pushing open the office door, Daisy slipped inside, not caring about the shop as she shut it firmly behind her. Tessa stood in the center of the small room, her hands pressed together expectantly.

“Well?” she asked. “These walls are as thick as molasses, Daisy! I couldn’t hear a thing! What happened?”

Daisy raised her hands, suddenly at a loss for words. “Ethan, he,” she paused, the disbelief still clinging to her despite it all really happening, “he asked me out. He asked me out. Did I say that right? He asked -”

Tessa suddenly screeched, the sound capable of breaking glass in the tiny office.

She shot forward, her arms snapping around Daisy’s nimble frame and pulling her into a tight embrace.

Tessa was already plotting the entire evening out in Daisy's ear, mentioning what the weather forecast was and what dresses she could borrow - since Daisy couldn't possibly have a cocktail dress that was perfect for a date with Ethan.

Daisy sunk into her best friend's embrace, the reality of the moment finally sinking into her skin. And when she felt drunk on her inexplicable happiness, Daisy rested her head on Tessa's shoulder, her eyes gravitating to her desk, where a ripped piece of paper managed to catch her attention.

Now you'll get what you deserve.

Her arms tightened around Tessa, the sinking feeling returning to her stomach.

What was still yet to come for Daisy?

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Daisy

“Are you sure you don’t need any more help?”

“For the third and final time,” Susy said in her characteristically high-pitched voice from behind the counter in Fields’ Herbals, “I am okay to close by myself. I promise, Daisy.”

Daisy tapped her fingers on the counter as she glanced around the shop.

Everything looked pretty much in order. Her eyes fell on Susy once more.

The sixteen-year-old had started working at the shop last summer, when school let out, and she had wandered into the storefront.

The poor girl had a tear-stricken face, and she’d begged for some sort of a tonic that could help her parents afford the medicine they needed for her sick dog.

As an animal lover herself, Daisy decided to offer the schoolgirl a job instead, promising that a steady wage would be far better than a simple tonic.

Before she knew it, Susy’s dog was bright eyed and bushy tailed once more, and she had more than a pretty penny in her pocket.

Despite her working at the shop for over a year, it would be the first time Susy managed to close the shop herself.

Daisy didn't doubt her trust in Susy for one bit.

But she couldn't deny that strange feeling in her stomach, and the peculiar smell that still lingered behind the counter from that strange potion.

The last thing she needed was for Susy to have a similar experience.

"Alright," Daisy finally said. "But you've got all the emergency numbers, don't you?"

Susy nodded. "I've got them all twice."

"And if you need anything -"

"I will call you or Tessa," she finished.

"Straight away. Now, why don't you two get out of here?"

"Susy leaned back in her seat, shaking her head disapprovingly.

Her signature strawberry blonde pigtails shook with every move she made.

"It's like you can't remember what it's like to have a night off! "

"Well, that's just it, Susy," Daisy mused as she turned her back to the counter. "I don't think I can!"

Tessa laughed from beside the front door, one foot already holding it open. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll remember it for you. C'mon, workaholic!"

Slipping out of the store, Daisy draped her thin jacket over her arm. "Says the one

who is married to a real workaholic.”

“So I would know, wouldn’t I?”

Daisy shook her head and laughed.

The early spring afternoon was just as it always was.

The days had begun to lengthen, the sun staying high in the sky for much longer than anyone ever remembered.

Downtown Willowbrook had a more popular feel to it during those days, when handfuls of tourists passing through to reach the beach window shopped and mingled.

The heat was comfortable, then, allowing Daisy to walk down the sidewalk in a simple t-shirt and jeans.

Beside her, Tessa’s long yellow dress flowed with the gentle breeze.

Shops along downtown were riddled with customers.

Daisy felt a pit grow in her stomach the longer she looked into the windows, noticing how lines were pulled out the doors and countless products were being removed from shelves.

She couldn’t remember the last time her store was full of patrons, much less when she ran out of products to sell.

At that point, Daisy made tonics just to make them and practice her craft, not to fill her shelves.

“Good afternoon, Daisy and Tessa,” Anne said as they passed by the entrance to a squat apartment building. The older woman was sitting in her usual spot, on a bench near the entrance, watching the traffic going past.

“Good afternoon,” they both quickly replied.

Daisy smiled. Anne was one of the most wonderful people Daisy had ever met.

Not only was she heavily involved in the animal rescues in town, she worked at Daisy’s shop when needed, always looking to get out of the house and give back to the world.

She was a short elderly woman with rustic brown skin, white hair, and the kind of smile that always reached her eyes.

“Early day?” Anne asked.

“Unfortunately so,” Daisy replied, trying not to think about how little business the shop had had lately.

“Not busy?”

Daisy’s gut turned. “The shop was dead, so we let Susy close.”

Anne smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m sure things will turn around soon.” Then she glanced toward the shop. “I’ll be sure to stop by and check on her.”

“Thank you,” Daisy said, loving that she hadn’t even needed to ask.

Anne watched them as they walked by, her warm eyes holding onto them till she needed to pull her glasses out to see them.

“That just makes you feel like a bag of sour apples, doesn’t it?” Tessa suddenly muttered.

Daisy glanced sideways at her. “Like what?”

“Sour apples,” Tessa repeated.

“I don’t get it.”

Tessa sighed. “Doesn’t it make you feel bad to see Anne?”

“What on earth for? We love Anne!”

“Sure, we love Anne,” Tessa said. “But hasn’t she been waiting for a call from you? About shifts she can work at the shop?”

Oh. Daisy’s shoulders sagged, the sudden feeling of being a bag of sour apples resonating more than she thought it would.

Anne had worked at Fields’ Herbs on and off over the past few years.

She lived close to the shop and was always willing to work.

Daisy realized that, unfortunately, the only reason Anne left her house some days was to be at the shop.

But, with times being as they were, Daisy couldn’t afford multiple employees, even if she wanted them both to be there.

“Let me guess,” Tessa said in a quiet voice. “We can’t pay her, can we?”

“I would if I could, Tess.”

“Believe me, I get it.” Tessa shook her head as they rounded a corner, leaving the downtown block behind and slowly delving into a tightly knit neighborhood. “What have the finances looked like recently?”

Daisy sighed. The numbers blared in her head but she shoved them away.

The sun above in the cloudless sky was too beautiful for her to begin to taint the day with all the dreadfully negative numbers she recently saw on the store’s ledger.

“We need more customers,” was all she could say. “And we need them desperately.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Tessa said with a small smile. “Right?”

“I don’t want to worry you.”

Tessa stopped walking and grabbed onto her hand.

“Daisy,” she whispered, “not only am I your best friend, but I have worked alongside you for years. For longer than I can even remember. Share your burdens with me. Put them on my shoulders so it isn’t so heavy.

Trust me,” she paused and flashed a quick wink, “I can take it.”

Daisy’s shoulders relaxed as the words washed over her. Who needed a good luck charm or a money-inducing potion when she had Tessa, the best partner she could ever ask for? The stress pooled out of her lips instantly.

“I don’t know how much longer the shop will be able to stay in business,” Daisy whispered.

Tessa's brow shot up. "Really? It's that bad?"

"When was the last busy day you saw?" she asked with a shrug.

"I honestly can't remember." Daisy lowered her head, memories of being half the size she was now, running through the shop barefoot and bright-eyed flooding her mind.

The tears welled up before she could even think to stop them.

"Fields' Herbals have been in my family for generations.

I can't imagine Willowbrook without it, you know? "

Tessa squeezed her hands. "Daisy," she said in a warning tone, "don't you for a second start to give up hope. There isn't a reality in the entire universe where the shop doesn't exist. And in no way do I see it leaving you now, okay?"

"How can you possibly know that?"

She hesitated, her eyes flickering away for a moment before the steady confidence returned. "I just know. And sometimes, it is as simple as that."

Daisy drew in a shaky breath.

"Now," Tessa said, "Why don't we talk about something else, okay?"

"But -"

"There's no need to wallow when we haven't reached that point yet."

Daisy hesitated for a moment. Perhaps there wasn't a need to worry just then, but would she even be able to recognize the time when she was supposed to worry?

She shook her head till it felt like her bones were rattling.

Tessa was right, and she couldn't crumble before the world around her even started to grow dim.

Wrapping one arm around Tessa's, Daisy pulled them back along their stroll towards their houses. Daisy happened to live beside Old Lady Witherford, and Tessa had a gorgeous house a block or two down.

"How about you tell me what in the world I'm supposed to wear on Friday?"

Tessa gaped. "How could I have forgotten about your date!" She almost jumped in place. "Do you still have that red dress?"

"Oh," Daisy breathed, "I didn't take it to be a red dress occasion."

"If this isn't a red dress moment, when will it be?"

Daisy laughed. "Alright, it'll be a red dress kind of date," she said. "I honestly still can't believe this is where I've ended up. After all this time pining and longing and embarrassing myself, Ethan finally decided to ask me out? It feels almost..."

"Like a fairy tale!" Tessa interjected.

"I was gonna say more like an impractical joke," Daisy said with a shrug, "but that works too."

Tessa shook her head. "Don't say that! Ethan finally realizing what a catch you are is

real life, Daisy!”

“But it was so sudden,” Daisy muttered. “He came back to the shop, just to ask me out on a date? What could’ve changed in such a short period of time?”

“Everything! Who can explain how a man’s mind works?”

Daisy giggled. “Says the woman with a husband!”

“And you’ll never catch me knowing what Steve is thinking,” Tessa mused with a shake of her head. “Besides, this is different from Steve and I. Haven’t you and Ethan known each other since high school?”

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Daisy felt the blush rise to her cheeks before she even spoke. “He never paid me any mind in school,” she admitted. “Not that it mattered. I was with Gary soon enough, and I never had eyes for anyone else.”

The mention of her late husband brought a somber mood to their walk home.

Daisy was suddenly wistful with memories.

Perhaps if she closed her eyes and focused hard enough, it would be thirty years ago, and she’d be walking down the street with her arm wrapped around Gary instead of Tessa.

And, perhaps, there’d even be a roundness to her stomach, a darling creature growing deep within her womb.

Absentmindedly, Daisy reached and wrapped her arm across her stomach.

The things she never had and the things she prayed every night for hung over her head like a rain cloud.

Being a widow, she’d realized very early on, was one of the most solitary things a human could ever be.

Even then, with her close friends all around her for support, Daisy couldn’t shake the feeling that remained.

The question that she might never forget.

What would life be like if Gary had never passed?

If she'd carried her child through the entire term?

If -

Daisy shook her head. Now was certainly not the time for that.

"Do you know where Ethan is taking you yet?" Tessa asked. Even if everyone in Willowbrook teased Tessa for her cluelessness on occasion, Daisy couldn't deny her growing skill as an empath. Tessa managed to feel the shift in the atmosphere rather quickly, changing the subject as soon as she could.

Daisy shrugged. "He said he'd call when -" She paused as she realized they were coming up to Old Lady Witherford's house, right before her own. "We better nip this conversation in the bud."

Tessa raised a quizzical brow. "Why?"

"Personally," Daisy said as they drew nearer, "I'm not interested in having my love life spread across town if someone happens to be listening."

"I see," Tessa mused, the corner of her lip perking up as she peered into Old Lady Witherford's front lawn. "What do you mean you don't want a gossip hearing about your exciting first date with heartthrob silver fox, Ethan?"

Daisy tugged on Tessa's arm. "Speak a little louder, Tess, and I'll tell Old Lady Witherford about that time you went into her backyard and -"

Tessa clamped a hand over Daisy's mouth within an instant, her slender face beginning to look like a ripe strawberry. "There is a time and place for that," she said,

holding back her laughter, “and it is definitely not now!”

As they kept walking, entirely on the opposite side of the house, Daisy looked over her shoulder at the house. From the sidewalk, they could see into the Witherford household’s backyard. A grand willow tree sat in the middle. Daisy couldn’t stop herself from glowering.

“I’ll tell you,” she muttered. “The next time I see Old Lady Witherford putting her ladder up to snoop into my backyard, I’m dropping a sealed lips tonic into her tea.”

Tessa’s brow shot up. “Is she still doing that?”

“Don’t tell me you thought it was only a phase!”

“I could hardly believe it in the first place,” Tessa said. “Till I saw it myself, of course.”

Standing on the precipice of Daisy’s driveway, she shook her head and wrapped her arms over her chest as an odd chill swept by them. “I just wish she couldn’t do it anymore, you know? I can’t remember the last time I had some real privacy in my own home.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Tessa began. “You can’t always get what you -”

Boom!

Daisy flinched, her jacket falling onto the ground. “What was that?”

Before Tessa could respond, a series of screams and wails erupted from the back of Old Lady Witherford’s house. Daisy gaped and ran towards their back gate. She flipped open the latch and yanked it open, Tessa following close behind her.

The wide backyard was full of blossoming flowers and vines crawling up the side of the house. It was like a fantasy wonderland. For a moment, Daisy hesitated, believing they had to have stepped into the wrong house.

That is, until her eyes landed on Old Lady Witherford herself. The older woman was dressed in denim overalls, a flowery shirt poking out beneath it. She laid with her back against the ground, her elbows and knees smudged with dirt and soil.

Daisy ran forward. “Tessa,” she shouted, “fetch Mr. Witherford!”

As Tessa shot into the back of the house, leaving the backdoor wide open, Daisy tended to the older woman, gingerly crouching down at her side.

“Mrs. Witherford,” Daisy said in a loud voice, remembering that the woman was notoriously hard of hearing, “where are you hurt?”

“D-Did that girl leave my door open?” the lady shouted, her voice hoarse and scratchy as if she hadn’t drunk water in days. “I’ve got the air conditioner running, you know! And the bugs! Oh, the bugs! ”

Daisy bit back her laugh. “Mrs. Witherford, have you taken a fall?”

Old Lady Witherford glanced over at her as if she had just noticed her presence. “What does it look like I’ve done?” she squawked. “Had a nap with my tomatoes?”

“W-What?”

“My tomatoes!” Mrs. Witherford gestured boisterously to the vines that scaled up the fence, a few harvested tomatoes crushed beneath her back. “My state-fair-winning tomatoes!”

“Can you tell me what happened, Mrs. Witherford?”

“That silly old ladder,” Mrs. Witherford snapped as she pointed to the rusted-over ladder that was now laying in a bush of petunias. “Jumped out from right under me!”

Daisy pressed her lips together. It was exactly like she assumed. Old Lady Witherford was trying to get a look into Daisy’s yard when something happened to her ladder. Though “jumping” didn’t seem like the right word for it.

“Did you slip off one of the steps?” Daisy asked.

Mrs. Witherford thrashed about, the tomatoes splattering across her clothes. “Did I say slip?” she snapped. “I said jumped! Jumped, I said! When I say the ladder jumped, I mean the ladder -”

Before she could finish, Tessa and an older gentleman, Mr. Witherford, came rushing out the back door. He ran to his wife’s side instantly, tucking an arm beneath her and hoisting her up. Daisy rose alongside him, placing a gentle and cautious hand on the older woman’s back.

The moment she touched her, a chill rippled down Daisy’s spine. She jerked away, surprised at herself and the peculiar feeling. Tessa took her spot instead, turning to give Daisy a quizzical expression before helping the pair out to the driveway.

Daisy followed behind as if she was stuck in a trance, shutting the gate and sliding the clasp back down.

The rest happened in a blur. Mr. Witherford managed to get his wife into the car, despite her ramblings about jumping ladders and fair- winning tomatoes.

He gave Tessa and Daisy a good handshake before getting in the car himself and

speeding off to the nearest hospital.

Daisy doubted anything was really wrong with Old Lady Witherford, besides a bruised back or a sprain.

She'd be right as rain and back to gossiping before the day was over.

Standing at the foot of the driveway, Daisy watched the car till it disappeared.

"You alright?" Tessa asked.

Daisy nodded absentmindedly. "I hope she'll be okay."

"On the bright side -"

"There's a bright side?"

Tessa chuckled. "It seems you got your wish after all."

Daisy's head jerked. "W-What?"

"Something tells me that Old Lady Witherford won't be getting back on that ladder for some time now," Tessa said. "Looks like you'll get that privacy you wanted."

Even though Tessa was merely making a joke to lighten the chill in the air, Daisy turned back towards the backyard, towards the supposedly jumping ladder.

There was an odd feeling growing in the pit of her stomach, one that was quite similar to when she smelt that potion, or when she touched Old Lady Witherford on the back.

None of it made sense, and yet, they all felt suspiciously connected.

Daisy pressed her lips together, and when she spoke, the words felt oddly hollow.

“I got my wish.”

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Daisy

Daisy stretched her arms up in the air as she walked down her driveway.

Fields' Herbals normally opened an hour earlier, just like the rest of the shops in downtown Willowbrook, but on that morning, Daisy couldn't get out of bed fast enough.

Instead, she rolled over, snatched onto her phone, and gave Tessa a quick call, barely managing to force out the words: sleep in .

Now, it was time to get to work, and a cloud of tiredness still hung over Daisy's head like a low hanging fog.

"Didn't you sleep at all?" Tessa called out from the sidewalk. She dressed in an eclectic dress, a thin shawl wrapped around her boney shoulders. Clips resembling flowers pinned her short, spiky hair back and out of her face.

Daisy shrugged, still trying to zip up her jacket. "Thought I did," she murmured. "Till the alarm went off and I realized I hadn't had a chance to sleep yet."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Honestly," Daisy mused, looking in the direction of the slow-rising sun, "I'd kill for a -"

Tessa reached Daisy on the sidewalk, a steaming takeaway cup in her hand.

“Coffee?”

“Blessed be,” she whispered, almost snatching the cup out of Tessa’s hand, “You’re a lifesaver.”

Tessa shrugged. “Tell it to the local district Empath Magistrate.”

“Empath Magistrate?” Daisy repeated as they began to walk downtown. “Are you taking the exams again?”

Willowbrook stood as the hub for witches and warlocks on that side of the country.

Men and women traveled miles upon miles to reach their humble town, in order to feel the natural magic that ran through the dirt and trees.

It strung through the neighborhood and woods like a spiderweb, a boisterous power that fueled Daisy and Tessa’s strengths.

While Daisy mastered her tests with flying colors to become a certified potion brewer, Tessa still trained and studied for her final tests.

The Empath Magistrate delivered a license that allows magic users to practice their empathy spells in a business sort of way.

While Tessa could feel out emotions and thoughts wherever she pleased, she couldn’t exactly offer consultations or solutions through the shop before having a certification beneath her belt.

Unfortunately for Tessa, the Empath Magistrate’s tests had been harder than usual that year, and she had yet to pass.

“Maybe.” Tessa shrugged again, a faraway look in her eyes.

Daisy tucked her arm around Tessa’s. “Why don’t we take the day to study?”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Who says you were asking?” Daisy gave her a toothy grin. “As your boss and best friend, I am telling you to work on your studies today.”

Tessa frowned. “Well, that’s nice and all, but what if we get business today?”

Daisy fought back the urge to spitefully laugh.

The flow of patrons and orders at Fields’ Herbals quickly came to a halt over the past few weeks.

Daisy was merely messing around when she went into her office and arcane room to brew tonics and potions.

She wasn’t filling orders or delivering special ingredients to clients.

There was hardly anyone to please in the town, and Daisy didn’t expect anything out of the ordinary on the work day.

“Susy was supposed to work again today,” Daisy said. “I sent her a text saying otherwise.”

“Why?”

Daisy sighed after taking a long sip of her coffee. “Soon, I’ll be paying her hours from my pocket. We can’t afford the help if there’s nothing for her to do.”

When they were about to turn onto Main Street in downtown Willowbrook, a heavy silence spread between them.

The threat of closing the doors to Fields' Herbals loomed overhead, while everything else their lives depended on lingered in the distance.

Meanwhile, all of Willowbrook seemed to carry on as usual, with the regular early birds lingering on the streets before the rest of the town bothered to wake up.

Mourning doves flew overhead before landing on a telephone pole, just a few inches away from each other.

Daisy lifted her head, her attention caught on them.

Their song carried like the clang of an ominous bell: "coo-OO-oo, coo-OO-oo."

As she focused on their song, Tessa continued ahead onto Main Street, but Daisy lingered behind.

She finally understood why the world recognized the birds to be in mourning.

Their call was that of a quiet cry, a melancholic weep.

Daisy, despite not being plagued with sadness at all, almost drew a tear as she watched them.

Perhaps it was the natural connection every creature in Willowbrook had.

Perhaps they were a pair of sorrowful birds, and Daisy happened to tap into their pain unknowingly.

“ Daisy! ”

Hands grabbed onto her biceps moments later, yanking her forward. Daisy stumbled, her attention finally pulled out of the skies and into the world around her. Tessa loomed behind her, her long and nimble fingers still latched onto Daisy’s arms.

“Come look at this,” Tessa whispered, then dragged her forward and around the corner.

Daisy blinked. They were only a few doors down from Fields’ Herbals , but there was an extraordinary line that stretched all the way down the sidewalk.

Daisy had been too focused on the power lines and the birds to have even realized the commotion.

Girls of all ages, and a few gentlemen, jittered around excitedly, a quiet hum of their mingling filling the air.

What in the world?

“C’mon,” Daisy murmured, twisting around the line to quickly jog to the storefront.

Once they reached the front door, Daisy was shocked into stillness. The line... it was stretching out from her store! Tessa gaped beside her.

“There must be a mistake,” Daisy whispered to Tessa. “They must have the wrong store.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Tessa told her, looking as confused as Daisy felt.

Tessa stepped towards the first young girl in line. “Good morning!” Tessa said in a

friendly voice. “What’s with this line behind you? Are you all really here for Fields’ Herbals?”

The girl grinned enthusiastically. “The local news was raving about Daisy Fields’ skincare products! I thought I’d come early to get myself some before you ran out, but it seems like the entire town had the same idea.” She leaned forward eagerly. “You still have some of it, don’t you?”

This can’t be happening.

Daisy pressed a hand to her chest, feeling the excited beat beneath. “O-Of course,” she finally said. “And I can make plenty more!”

The girl clapped loudly. “I can’t wait!”

Daisy was caught in a trance, unable to move from her spot on the sidewalk.

Her eyes trailed down to see the line still growing, more and more people hurriedly taking their place as they eagerly stepped forward to get into the storefront.

Daisy felt a tremble rush through her. When was the last time Fields’ Herbals had that many people inside?

When was so busy she had a line of sweat along her brow?

Her memory came up blank. How was it that a simple story that aired on the nightly news would set the gears in motion for a drastic change in the business?

“Daisy!” Tessa said from the door.

Running forward, Daisy pulled out her shop keys and unlocked the doors, trying her

best to hold the shakes within her.

Before they slipped inside, Tessa snatched onto her hand and gave her a tight squeeze followed by two more.

The motion was simple and mundane, though it brought a wave of calming energy over Daisy's frantic mind.

Suddenly, it was all doable and standard, as if she handled that sort of busy each and every day.

Daisy mouthed the words thank you to Tessa.

Her friend shrugged, though a pinkish and pleased hue took to her cheeks.

The next few hours went by in a frantic blur.

The moment they flipped the sign to 'open', patrons from all over town filtered in and out of the storefront.

Some went straight to the counter for personalized skincare products while others took the time to mosey around, glancing over the aisles and picking up a few tonics here and there.

Before they even reached halfway through the day, Daisy left the counter for Tessa to man and took to her arcane room, working double time to replace all the low products in the store.

As she worked, Daisy's mind raced a million miles a minute.

"I should've called Susy," Daisy whispered to herself at some point during the day,

though she didn't have a second to spare to retrieve her phone.

By the time the sun began to set, the shop grew as quiet as Daisy was used to.

She stood behind the counter as an amber glow took over the storefront, not a soul in sight.

Groups of people still lingered in downtown Willowbrook, window shopping and deciding where they should eat dinner.

Daisy glanced through the front to see a few patrons with familiar brown bags in their hands, the classic Fields' Herbals logo printed in the middle.

Daisy couldn't stop the tired smile from pulling at her lip.

Tessa curved around one of the aisles as she swept. "Boy, am I beat," she said. "I can't remember the last time I really needed to clean around here."

"Tell me about it," Daisy said as she popped open the cash register.

Pulling the bills out, Daisy retrieved her calculator as she began counting through their sales.

She reached triple digits sooner than expected, and once she hit four digits, Daisy began to feel short of breath.

There was enough money in there to fix the divot in the floor, and then some.

Daisy could order more supplies and ingredients without tainting their final profit.

Somehow, the margin of their sales was more overwhelming than not making a single

dime.

“T-This is unbelievable,” Daisy murmured.

Tessa poked her head up. “What is it?”

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“Everything we managed to make today,” she said, her eyes unable to pull away from the surplus of cash in her hands. “Can you imagine if it stays this way? We’d be better than surviving, Tessa. We’d be successful .”

Tessa approached the counter cautiously, resting her broom against the wall. “You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you?”

“Not about this, Tess.”

She peered over the cash register, her eyes widening. “This means we can pay for Susy and Anne, Daisy.”

“Now, I wouldn’t get my hopes up that far,” Daisy said, lowering the cash back into the register. “But, for now, we don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Then why don’t you seem more excited?”

“I’m...” Daisy’s words trailed off. “I don’t even know what to think.”

Tessa slipped around the counter, snatching onto Daisy’s hands and yanking her away from the money.

“This was all we needed, Daisy,” she said, unable to hide the excited smile that pulled across her face.

“Just one day to prove our worth, and the entire town will be flocking here soon enough. Breathe. Be excited. Be proud . This, after all, is all because of you.”

Finally, after the day was over, Daisy felt the joy sink into her skin.

She grinned, all the possibilities of what to do with their profits soaring through her mind.

Everything she thought she wouldn't be able to do from a lack of business seeped out of her.

All of their hard work was beginning to pay off, and Daisy felt drunk with the ease it gave her.

Before Daisy could begin to jump and laugh and cry with happiness, the bell rang through the shop another time.

Tessa groaned. "Honestly," she muttered, "if we're so rich, can't we just close early?"

"Don't go saying we're rich, now," Daisy teased, giving Tessa a gentle push from behind the counter. "You'll jinx us before we ever really get going."

Turning towards the storefront, Daisy stepped onto the tips of her toes to get a good look at who was slowly making their way towards the counter.

Tessa's eyes narrowed. "Isn't that -"

"Alan Harris," Daisy finished, her eyes widening in surprise.

Once her high school boyfriend, Alan was now a man that Daisy preferred to avoid.

Most of the townspeople called him a heartthrob or a stunning bachelor, but Daisy couldn't see it.

Perhaps it was because he called her boring when they were together in grade school, which led to her first heartbreak.

But Daisy's taste happened to be narrowed down towards disheveled lawyers with grey streaked hair.

Her mind lingered on Ethan for a moment before her attention turned back to Alan, who had finally made his way to the counter.

Alan dressed like he normally would - a button down flannel with a pair of rustic denim jeans.

But the one peculiar thing that pulled Daisy's stare up to the top of his head was the wide brimmed hat he wore.

The main attraction most people found about Alan was his luscious hair, even when they were teens.

Alan spent more time grooming his hair with ludacris products than caring about anything more important.

Even then, when Daisy happened to pass him by in the street, she could tell that, without a doubt, Alan was still incredibly vain about his dirty blonde locks.

Daisy sighed. When her mind happened to touch on him, she wondered how amusing it would've been to see Alan lose all his hair. Perhaps it was only her jilted heart talking, but something told her that the childish wish would've shown more of his true character than anyone else ever realized.

"Busy day?" he finally asked.

Daisy raised a brow. “The busiest in a while. Did you -?”

“I need your help, Daisy.”

Immediately she noticed how Tessa hung around the counter, her interest obviously piqued. Daisy glanced over Alan’s frame, curious as to what it was that ailed him when everything seemed as right as rain. If only he wasn’t wearing that strange hat.

“I know I haven’t been the nicest,” he continued, not bothering to wait for her to respond. “Or the most caring. B-But you know how kids are, right?” Alan forced out an awkward laugh, though no one else joined in. He gulped.

“Alan,” Daisy said. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, you see, it’s...well, it’s...” Alan fidgeted with his hands, messing with the few bottom buttons of his flannel. “Honestly, it’s pretty embarrassing.”

Daisy leaned against the counter. “This is a shop that heals any sort of problem, Alan. I’ve heard stranger things than you could probably imagine.”

He glanced in Tessa’s direction before returning to Daisy. “Well, I...” Finally, Alan released a sigh, his shoulders sagging in a defeated way. “I suppose it’ll make more sense just to show you.”

Alan reached for his hat and yanked it off.

“Holy -” Tessa began before clamping a hand over her mouth.

The long locks Alan had cherished for as long as Daisy could remember were no longer there.

His hairline seeped back into his scalp, a very telling sign of early balding.

Patches were missing hair while some other spots still had the wavy curls.

A wide bald spot started at the top of his head and was slowly working its way out, till eventually, there wouldn't be a single strand left.

Daisy crept around the counter, her eyes focused on his head. Even without touching him, she could feel the magical energy wafting off his skin. She could only imagine how deep the spell must travel beneath him to have such a detrimental effect on his hair.

"It just started yesterday," Alan explained in a small voice.

"At first it was just chunks in the shower, but by the time I got to work -" he paused to point to the growing bald spot in the center, "- this had grown larger than a baseball. Now I've got handfuls of hair falling out.

Please, Daisy, tell me you can help me."

She hesitated before she reached, her hand just barely hovering over his scalp.

The tension radiating off of him was enough for her to realize that there wasn't anything in the shop strong enough to eradicate whatever it was that had been placed on him.

Perhaps it was a jilted lover or vexed coworker.

Maybe they managed to buy a black market potion that worked overtime to rid Alan of his hair.

Either way was possible, but unfortunately untouchable by Daisy.

She'd need days of research before ever knowing how to truly heal it.

Daisy lowered her hand. "I'll get you some cream to slow it down, Alan," she explained. "But you'll need to give me time to find a solution."

"That bad, huh?"

She frowned. "Why don't you come back in a few days, and I'll have something better prepared."

Alan lowered his head solemnly, but didn't argue. Maybe the hair loss stung deep within him, deep enough to give him a few strands of humility to hold onto.

Daisy crossed the room to grab onto a squat bottle of some hair growth cream.

She couldn't even give a confident answer as to whether or not it would work.

Something told her that whatever ailed Alan was far too strong for a simple over-the-counter cream, but it would have to be his best friend for the time being.

Daisy passed the bottle over to him and Alan exchanged a few bills.

"This is far too much, Alan," Daisy said after counting the money.

He shrugged, a far off look on his long face. "Keep it." He continued on towards the door, his head hanging low, as he replaced the hat on the top of his head.

Tessa crept around the counter, her eyes clinging to his receding figure. "That couldn't have really been Alan Harris, right?"

“Who else would it have been then?”

“His good twin,” Tessa teased with a loud laugh.

“Don’t be cruel.”

Tessa raised a brow. “Was it not you who wished for him to lose all his hair when we were girls?”

“Hey,” Daisy argued, “you were wishing for it all the same.”

“My point exactly!” Tessa laughed again as she leaned against the counter. “Serves him right.”

Daisy pressed her lips together. That gnawing feeling returned to her stomach.

Despite it hanging around her for a few days now, Daisy could not pinpoint it.

Her gaze drifted towards the slip of paper poking out of the register, where she decided to hide the ominous note.

Despite only sticking out halfway, Daisy remembered the words on it as if she’d spoken them herself.

Without facing Tessa, she mouthed the words to herself.

Now you’ll get what you deserve.

Just then, as dusk took over Willowbrook, Daisy heard the distant melancholic call of the mourning doves. “Coo-OO-oo, coo-OO-oo.”

Daisy

The business at Fields' Herbals never once let up.

The following morning, Daisy and Tessa arrived to find a line already growing outside the door.

Returning customers along with the unfamiliar faces of tourists excitedly awaited the 'open' sign, whispering and wondering about what tonics they'll order next.

Daisy kept to the arcane room for most of the morning, pushing herself to the very limits to make all the orders they were receiving.

Only an hour into the workday, with an already full storefront, Daisy hurriedly called Anne.

Anne arrived within minutes of being called.

Luckily for them, she lived a few doors down, in an apartment building above a delectable cheese shop.

She swept through the storefront like an owner herself, regaining control over the crowd and seamlessly handling the growing line.

Daisy heard Anne's deep voice from within the arcane room, immediately putting her stress at ease with the extra help.

“Morning, Daisy!” Anne greeted as she came into the backroom and set down her shawl and frayed old purse. Her rustically brown skin was glowing in the dim light, those wide chestnut-colored eyes warming up the room immediately. “Quite the crowd you’ve got out there.”

Daisy peeled herself away from her worktable. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Anne. The day’s just started and I’m behind already.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Well, it’s more than good, I suppose,” Daisy mused.

Anne raised a thick brow. “And?”

“And what?”

“Now, now, dear,” Anne cooed, “I’ve had five children myself, and they’ve gone on to give me over ten grandchildren.

I think I know a cloudy mind when I see one.

” Anne drew nearer, placing a wrinkled hand over Daisy’s.

“The worst thing you can do is trap it inside. We are humans, after all. God never intended to have us holding so much within. That’s why we’ve got each other. ”

Daisy let a smile cross her face. She’d never considered herself to be religious as an adult, though she attended church every Sunday alongside her family.

Hearing the words come from Anne made her feel small again, like she would head home soon to her parents cooking a roast in the oven and asking about her day.

It was one of the reasons why she greedily loved having Anne around.

Sometimes, feeling like a child again was enough to brighten Daisy's troubled mind.

Daisy squeezed her hand. "Get us through this rush, and I'll talk to you till your ears fall off."

Anne gave her a quick wink before scurrying back out into the storefront.

The older woman's voice carried through the room as she greeted the guests, knowing most of the Willowbrook residents by name.

Her addition to the business gave Daisy enough comfort to leave the counter in her hands.

Not only was Tessa a brilliant conversationalist - much due to her ongoing empath studies - but the involvement of Anne turned them into an unstoppable pairing.

There wouldn't be a frowning patron in all of Willowbrook.

Daisy continued her work for a few more hours, till it was late morning and her stomach grumbled.

She'd just finished brewing a series of insomnia elixirs, which happened to be the second most popular after her skincare kits.

People of all ages came for a reprieve from their restlessness and returned with empty bottles, praising Daisy for how well and quickly the elixirs worked.

Doctors familiar with her practices quickly began referring their patients to her as well.

Tessa slipped into the arcane room just as Daisy finished pouring the elixir through a funnel, and into a series of short vials. Tessa swiped a rag across her forehead before laying it across the back of her neck.

“I gotta tell you,” Tessa breathed, “this crazy business has me beat before the clock even strikes noon.”

Daisy chuckled, though she felt the exhaustion all the same. “They say that comes with old age, Tess.”

She gaped. “Don’t offend me, now! Or you’ll have to make me a private batch of that deaging cream.

” Tessa chuckled to herself as she crossed the room, looking over the ledger of all the tonics and brews Daisy had marked off her list. She let out a low, impressed whistle.

“How do you feel after all that potion making?”

Daisy shrugged. “You know.” She chugged down the rest of her water, the depletion of her energy holding onto her more than it usually did. “It is what it normally is.”

“You should eat something.”

“Don’t you think it’s too busy?”

Tessa nodded towards the storefront. “Take a look at it yourself.”

With a heavy sigh, Daisy pushed herself up, ignoring the cracks and aches that began in her knees. Her long cardigan reached down to her ankles as she stood, the warm fabric clinging onto her in the already stuffy building.

The storefront was surprisingly quiet. Anne swept within the aisles, whistling a cheery tune as she worked.

A faint smile remained on her lips. Passersby lingered outside the front door, glancing through the windows before deciding if they wanted to come in or not.

Despite already having a large amount of sales, the extra tonics Daisy worked on kept the shelves full and ready for more purchases.

Daisy breathed a sigh of relief. They could handle the busy shift after all.

Anne came back around the counter. “Why don’t you two get some lunch?”

“What about you?” Daisy asked. “You’ve already done so much.”

The older woman waved a dismissive hand in the air. “There’s a cluttered shelf calling my name. Take a break to enjoy this fine day, won’t you?”

Daisy breathed in deeply. Even from within the shop, she could tell that the sky was a cloudless blue.

The sun rose steadily over the trees, bringing a steady heat throughout the town.

A gentle breeze coaxed the trees into a delicate sway.

Daisy felt her shoulders sag. Perhaps she was craving a moment or two out in the fresh air.

“As long as you’re comfortable with it, Anne,” she said.

Anne was already making her way to the crowded shelves positioned at the wall,

where a few vials and squat containers were tumbling into each other.

With Tessa following close behind, Daisy made her way out of Fields' Herbals .

The weekday was surprisingly busy in downtown Willowbrook.

Tourists were more common at that time of year, when the trees had a magnificent color and the flowers bloomed all along the streets.

The pair began to make their way in the opposite direction, where a small diner a few doors down from the shop sat.

“How does The Wilted Garden sound for lunch?” Tessa asked.

Daisy nodded. “We’ll probably run into every person we know in town, but -”

“I think you can say that for everywhere in Willowbrook.”

Daisy blurted out a laugh. “Touche.”

The Wilted Garden sat at the very end of the block and was built in the traditional style of a diner.

The floors were a square black-and-white pattern, with red barstools and booths with squeaky leather seats.

Behind the bar counter, the entire kitchen was on display, the tall cooks flipping pancakes and building sandwiches.

Most townspeople found themselves in the mock diner regularly, using it as their time for mingling and gossiping.

While Old Lady Witherford often sat at the counter directly beside the cash register, Daisy didn't expect to see her there today.

When they entered, The Wilted Garden was already bustling with lively energy. Daisy led the way to her favorite booth, one that was directly in the middle of the row with a delightful view of the storefront down the way.

"Can't keep your mind away for even one second, can you?" Tessa teased as they slid into the booth.

Daisy shrugged. "Can you blame me?"

"Sure," Tessa said, "but I won't today."

They laughed together as the waitress came up to the table.

"Good morning, Lucy," Daisy greeted. "How's the tonic doing for you?"

The waitress, Lucy, attended the local community college on the outskirts of Willowbrook.

She was an attentive student, one who'd left high school in the south with more accolades than Daisy could count.

Lucy, however, struggled to merge into college life after the ease of high school, and had trouble concentrating when it came time to get her work done.

She came to Fields' Herbals the previous week and ordered a custom-made tonic, fit around her needs specifically.

"Holy Lord, Daisy," Lucy drawled, her heavy southern accent quickly filling the

already noisy restaurant, “You damn near saved my entire semester.”

“I guess that means it’s working for you?”

“It’s more than working,” Lucy said. “I feel like myself again. How about some of Jesse’s famous chicken salad sandwiches for you both, on the house? Extra sweet potato fries on the side?”

Before Daisy could speak, Tessa piped up.

“How kind of you, Lucy!” Tessa exclaimed with a wide smile. “I think some sweet teas might sweeten the deal.”

Lucy finger gunned her before twisting around and disappearing behind the counter.

“You’re something else, Tess,” Daisy teased.

Tessa shrugged sheepishly. “If business skyrocketing means free lunch, I’ll take it faster than you can say ‘witch’!”

After the teas were delivered, Daisy sipped leisurely, her gaze focused out the window.

From where they sat, she watched a handful of young people trickle into Fields’ Herbals .

For a moment, her immediate instinct was to rush out of there and assist Anne, but she settled herself just as fast. Anne wouldn’t have told them to leave if she couldn’t handle it herself, and with how everything had been going the past few days, she needed a moment or two to sit in a cozy diner.

“Look at what the cat dragged in,” Tessa quietly mused, her eyes following someone behind them.

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Daisy glanced over her shoulder. “Blessed be,” she grumbled. “Rebecca Mitchel.”

“Good gracious,” Tessa said. “Who dresses up like that for a place like The Wilted Garden?”

“Don’t be so surprised,” Daisy muttered as she turned back around. “She was just the same in grade school.”

Rebecca’s silver hair was pulled into a bun at the top of her head, a few particular strands pulled to frame her angular face.

There wasn’t a wrinkle across her deeply olive skin.

The white dress suit she wore showed off her collarbones in a deep ‘V’ cut.

If the woman was as beautiful within as she was on the outside, Daisy wouldn’t have had a single problem with her. She might’ve even been jealous.

“I heard she doesn’t go to Ronald’s anymore after one of the servers got her order wrong,” Daisy whispered, running her hands over the condensation on her cup. “Apparently, Rebecca thought blowing up on the server was the way to handle the situation.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Tessa rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me she’s about to cause a scene here, too.”

Daisy shrugged. “The sooner she leaves, the better I’ll feel. The last thing I need

today is to be politely insulted by an old classmate.”

“Do you think she remembers?”

“Remembers what?”

Tessa leaned forward. “How she poured the punch all over your prom dress?”

“Well, I’ll be,” Daisy said. “I happened to forget that myself.”

“What was the point behind it, anyways?”

Daisy shook her head, the memory coming back to her like a childish nightmare. “Alan asked me to the prom,” she explained. “And she was jealous. If I could turn back time, I’d tell my seventeen-year-old self to just hand the boy over. Simple as that.”

Tessa straightened her back against the seat, eyeing someone over Daisy’s shoulder.

“Good morning, ladies,” Rebecca greeted once she reached their table.

She poised herself in front of them, one hand resting against her hip while the other gripped onto a shimmering handbag.

“A fine day outside, isn’t it?” She threw a look over her shoulder at the diner counter.

“Thought I’d start my day with a cup of coffee but,” when she turned back to them, there was a sneer pulling at her inked lips, “it seems simplicity is lost on Willowbrook these days.”

Daisy pressed her lips together as she tried to force a smile. “The sweet tea is perfect

here. Maybe you can -”

“Always the same little girl from school,” Rebecca interjected. Though there was a smile on her face and a musical laugh filling the air, there wasn’t a hint of niceness in what she really said. She placed a delicate hand over her chest. “You have a way of making me laugh, Daisy!”

Daisy glanced at Tessa, who was holding a hand over her mouth to hide her laughter.

“Anyways,” Rebecca drawled, “I can’t bring a cup of sweet tea to my big interview. Can you imagine such a thing?”

Daisy knew that she was goading her to ask about the interview, and she hardly had any interest in hearing about it, though she wondered if it would make Rebecca leave them faster. She opened her mouth and Tessa delivered a swift kick beneath the table, her head slightly shaking.

“What interview?” Daisy asked, ignoring Tessa’s quick eye roll.

Rebecca grinned. “Well, if you must know,” she said. “I’m not supposed to mention it too much, but Willowbrook’s charity board invited me to interview with them. Isn’t that exciting?”

Daisy opened her mouth again, but was quickly silenced - except it wasn’t from Tessa that time.

“Who am I kidding?” Rebecca continued with another sharp laugh.

“Of course you think it’s exciting! Out of all the candidates in town, they sought me out.

And how can they not choose me when I arrive in this delectable Chanel suit?

” Rebecca stretched her arms out, not caring for the busy restaurant all around her, to show off her outfit.

“You wouldn’t believe the searching I had to do to get my hands on a limited-edition suit like this one. I mean it’s just -”

Her voice continued on and Daisy quickly tuned her out.

The suit was gorgeous, of course, which annoyed her more.

Neither one of them even mentioned it, and all Rebecca could do was brag and brag and brag.

Daisy rested her chin on her palm, her other hand spinning her cup absentmindedly.

If only Rebecca could ruin her white suit before the interview, she might get a good taste of the reality around her.

Daisy smirked to herself. She wished Rebecca had the chance to feel how Daisy did on her prom day, when a bright red punch soaked her entire dress.

“Well, ladies,” Rebecca said, “I believe I’ve lingered long enough. Wish me luck, won’t you? Though you and I both know it won’t be necessary!”

Rebecca spun around before either one of them could say another word.

She took a single step, glancing over her shoulder to give them an exaggerated wave, when a waiter slipped out from behind the counter in a hurry, a large tray of food in his hands.

Rebecca kept walking forward, not looking where she was going.

Crash!

The tray flipped forward, the food splattering across Rebecca's white suit. Cherry red tomato sauce splashed across her entire torso, slowly dripping down to her matching dress pants. The waiter winced, trying and failing to stop the food from clinging to her skin.

"Why you little—!" she screamed.

Then Rebecca screeched, the sound so sharp Daisy thought it would cause the glass windows to shatter.

Before the waiter could even try to beg for forgiveness, Rebecca was already storming out of The Wilted Garden, her feet stomping noisily against the tile.

She slipped once at the front doors before shoving them open and disappearing around the corner.

Daisy turned back to Tessa, and they barely lasted a second before bursting out in hysterical laughter. They were so buried in their amusement that they didn't notice Lucy stop by to deliver their sandwiches and refill their glasses.

As Tessa began to eat, teasing and mocking Rebecca's freak accident, Daisy's mind wandered elsewhere.

What had she thought before the crash took place?

Didn't she want Rebecca to feel the same as Daisy did, when her prom dress had been ruined?

The two things didn't have to be connected, but it was hard to ignore the possibility, or how close they were in timing.

Daisy pushed around her food before sliding the plate away and asking for a box from a passing waiter.

"You hardly ate," Tessa noted. "What's bothering you?"

Daisy pressed her lips together. Keeping something like that away from an empath like Tessa was slowly growing to be impossible. She could sense the shift in the mood, practically see the storm cloud hanging over her head. Daisy sighed.

"Yesterday," Daisy explained, "I received a potion in the mail. It spilled and broke all over me before I had the chance to see what it was. I think...I think it did something to me."

Tessa's eyes narrowed. "Did what?"

"Well, it had a note attached to it. 'Now you'll get what you deserve.'"

"Cryptic."

Daisy nodded. "And the next thing I know, things that I wish are coming true. First there was Old Lady Witherford -"

Tessa shrugged. "An accident that was bound to happen."

"We talked about the business being slow, and the next thing I know, we're crowded."

"There was a news story."

Daisy pressed her lips together. "I know for a fact I wished for Rebecca's clothes to be ruined in the same way my prom dress was."

"Karma was coming for her long before she came to our table," Tessa said.

"How about Ethan, then?"

Tessa raised a brow. "What about him?"

"What can explain his sudden change of heart in one day? Asking me out suddenly?"

"I think you hold yourself to a low standard, Daisy," Tessa said in a serious voice. "Why's this bothering you so much? Is it so unbelievable that good things would happen for you?"

The words sunk into Daisy more than she thought they would.

Perhaps there was a part of her that just didn't want to settle with the fact that good things were coming to her.

So much heartache and troubling times surrounded her twenties and early thirties.

Now that she was older and wiser, the reality of the world settled in around her, and Daisy didn't expect good tidings to be granted so easily.

It didn't make sense, and she wasn't one who trusted it so easily.

Daisy leaned against her hand again, unable to avoid the unsettling feeling in the back of her mind.

Tessa reached to hold onto her hand. "Why don't we test it?"

“How?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have the faintest idea. But we’ll do it together, right?” A smile filled her face. “We’ll figure it out.”

Daisy watched her best friend and allowed the relief to seep into her. Even if it was all in her head, at least she had someone like Tessa around to keep her anchored through it all. She gave her a smile.

“We’ll figure it out.”

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Daisy

Daisy and Tessa took a seat alongside the main road that led out of downtown Willowbrook and funneled into the plethora of neighborhoods.

A few more shops were on the other side of the road, one being a bustling grocery corner store.

They both had a sweet tea in a takeaway cup, and a bag with Daisy's leftovers sat on her right.

A few pigeons fluttered around at their feet, expecting food but coming up empty-handed.

"How about the spell book in the attic?" Tessa asked.

Daisy shook her head. "I don't think there are any wishing spells in it."

They had been going back and forth about ways to test the possibility of Daisy having a spell attached to her, but weren't entirely sure which way to go forward.

Daisy was a brewing specialist with an affinity for tonics and elixirs.

They were meant to help people, cure small ailments, or align with miniscule needs.

Things like that, curses or hexes, were entirely out of her basic knowledge.

Tessa wasn't much better, as she had been focusing primarily on strengthening her empathy detection before anything else.

Daisy's gaze was stuck on the grocery across the street. A familiar face slipped outside the sliding doors, hurrying to gather metal carts that had been left outside.

"Isn't that Maria Blakely?" Daisy asked.

Tessa followed her stare. "Oh, yeah," she mused. "Blessed be. Look at that poor girl."

"I didn't realize she worked at the grocery store," Daisy said. "Wasn't she just at Ronald's?"

"She's working them both, I believe."

Daisy's eyebrows shot up. "Not at the same time, right?"

"I don't think they're her only two jobs, Daisy," Tessa replied with a somber look. "Last I heard, Maria worked at Ronald's weekends, the grocery weekday mornings, and then at The Wilted Garden till the kids got out of school."

Even from their distance, Daisy could easily see the exhaustion in Maria's face.

For as long as she'd known her, Daisy had admired the woman's inexplicable beauty.

She had simple hazel hair that stretched down to her stomach, and she usually wore it in a complex braid down her back.

It was messy and uncoordinated, but natural, and Daisy couldn't help but fawn over her.

Most of the town did, especially after the dreadful accident that took her husband away from her.

“How many kids does she have?” Daisy asked.

Tessa sighed. “Three.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“They’re bright kids,” Tessa said. “I was in the library last weekend and they were using the computer lab for their schoolwork.” She shook her head, her eyes holding onto Maria scrambling around. “All three of them made the Honor Roll, from what I could see. I know Maria is proud.”

“But can you see yourself raising three kids, working three jobs, all on your own?” Daisy asked, though she wasn’t really asking anyone in particular. The question hung in her own mind as she grew wistful for a time long gone.

Tessa scooted closer to her. “Are you thinking about Gary?”

“Do you even have to ask?” Daisy laughed lightly, though there wasn’t any humor in it.

“It’s okay to still feel that pain. Especially when there’s someone going through it in their own way.”

Daisy shook her head. “It feels like an insult to Maria.”

“Whatever for?” Tessa faced her. “Do not compare your pain, Daisy. You both feel it all the same, and that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

No matter what emotion began to wash over Daisy, she couldn't take her eyes off of Maria.

The woman was barely over forty, looked like she was still thirty, and had experienced a tragedy most would never have to know.

Her late husband had perished in a horrid accident, one that was even out of the state.

How could a mother of three survive when she didn't even realize her husband wouldn't be coming home one night?

Daisy felt choked up with memories, the image of Gary hovering in the back of her mind.

If she closed her eyes, even for a second, he would appear there, as if he had never left in the first place.

And if she concentrated, Daisy could imagine him growing grey, the age she never got to see him reach gently showing across his skin.

"Daisy," Tessa suddenly said. "Talk to me."

"Losing Gary in my twenties was a pain I never thought would be possible," Daisy whispered.

"We were practically newlyweds still. He hadn't a grey hair on his entire head.

Though he might've been quick to disagree.

"Daisy smiled wistfully. "But Maria...she had her husband beside her for years. She saw him change, saw him age, saw him grow and fall. To suddenly have that ripped

from your hands is unimaginable.”

Tessa watched her closely.

“And three kids?” Daisy shook her head with a scoff.

“Maybe if mine -” She stopped herself short, wrapping a protective arm over her stomach, like she always did when she imagined her child, the soul she was unable to keep safe.

“Maybe if life played out differently, I could understand her pain better. I could support her more.”

“Daisy,” Tessa cooed, “your pain is as powerful as hers. A simple smile is more than enough.”

“But if that was the most painful thing for me, can you even begin to imagine the life Maria will be forced to live?”

Tessa sighed. “No,” she whispered. “I don’t think I can.”

Keeping her gaze focused on Maria, Daisy swallowed the tears that threatened to fall.

The last thing she needed was to be burdened by her own heartache once more.

Though she knew that it always clung to her, never once leaving, Daisy couldn’t allow it to run her when there was someone like Maria lingering nearby.

If Daisy was in her shoes, she would’ve wanted a smiling face to greet her, a helping hand to keep her moving forward. Not more unwarranted sadness.

Tessa reached, gently taking Daisy's hand into her own and squeezing.

Without saying a word, Tessa began to rub her thumb along Daisy's palm in rhythmic movements.

Only a second or two passed, and Daisy felt the magic begin to seep into her skin, in the same way that sunscreen settled against the skin.

Tessa traced symbols and words against her hand, her lips moving so slightly she could barely catch it.

Daisy pressed her lips together. The ease was beginning to travel into her, but she wasn't sure how much she wanted it, when someone like Maria didn't have a thing to lift the sorrow off her shoulders.

"I only wish," Daisy paused, the words hanging in the air, "I wish Maria's life could be easier. For her and her children."

Tessa sighed. "Me too."

From across the street, Maria looked both ways before jogging across the street. As she came up to them, they got a better look at her. Deep bags rested below Maria's eyes, the exhaustion obvious in the way her shoulders sagged, how her hair looked like it had been unwashed.

"Enjoying the sun, ladies?" Maria asked, her voice hollow and coarse.

Daisy gave her the best smile she could muster. "We are," she said. "You look to be working hard, Maria."

"Well," she paused before shrugging, "you know how it is."

Tessa leaned forward. “How are the kids?”

“Better,” Maria replied with a firm nod. “They have a nice therapist at school and spend most of their time at the public library before heading home. It’s better not to be there so much, you know?”

Daisy felt a pit grow in her stomach. “And what about you, Maria?”

“Me?”

“How are you?”

Maria frowned, and she suddenly looked ten times older than she really was. Wrinkles appeared around her lips, crinkling around her almond shaped eyes, rippling across her forehead. And, on the top of her head, Daisy spotted a few sleek streaks of grey.

“You know,” she said again, though it wasn’t much of an answer. “I’m well.” Maria shrugged before glancing over her shoulder at the grocery. “You know.”

Daisy tried to smile but could hardly feel it on her own face.

“Did you guys go to The Wilted Garden?” Maria asked, pointing towards their cups. “How busy did it look?”

Tessa shrugged. “As it normally is, I suppose. Are you heading there soon?”

“In the next five minutes, probably.”

“Busy day,” Daisy said.

Maria smiled. “Sometimes, it’s easier to be busy than anything else.”

“Sounds tiring.”

“More than you know,” Maria blurted. It was the first real thing she’d said, and the smile that took over her face afterwards seemed to say that she wasn’t planning on being honest about her feelings anytime soon. “Well, I should -”

Woosh!

A gust of wind carried itself through downtown before surging around them at the bench. The surrounding trees and bushes ruffled and creaked, stray leaves flying through the air in a whirlwind. Maria raised her hand to her face as her braid got whipped back and forth.

“Blessed be!” Tessa exclaimed as she held onto her cup with all her might. “What a breeze! If I was any smaller, it would’ve carried me away.”

Daisy lightly laughed. “You’ve got a leaf in your hair,” she muttered, reaching over to yank it out from within her short and spiky hair.

Maria was about to start walking away when she stepped, and something crinkled beneath her shoe. She lifted her leg, placing her heel against the bench beside Daisy. Reaching forward, Maria plucked a square card from her shoe, her brow furrowed as she flipped it over curiously.

“How funny,” Maria said, though there wasn’t a smile on her face. “It’s a scratch off ticket.”

“Like for the lottery?” Tessa asked.

Maria nodded. "Would you like it? I don't normally play."

"It's yours," Daisy suddenly blurted. "Fair and square." Reaching into her pocket, Daisy pulled out a shiny quarter. "Why don't you scratch it?"

"That seems a bit ridiculous, don't you think?"

Daisy shrugged. "What's the harm in trying?"

"Go on, Maria," Tessa encouraged. "You never know!"

Maria glanced between them before the corner of her lip perked up.

Daisy watched as she eagerly scratched off the numbers, glancing at the key at the very top to understand what it all meant.

A warmth flooded through Daisy's chest, the deep untouched sadness she felt before slowly creeping out of her.

Tessa was right before she ever realized it.

Finding the smallest bit of joy or happiness in the world was, perhaps, the best thing for Maria at that moment.

The pain would always be there, a fact that Daisy was very aware of.

But, fortunately for the both of them, that didn't mean it always needed to be there.

It was as easy as scratching off a lottery ticket.

"Well, that can't be right," Maria suddenly said as she held the card up. She lowered

it again, her finger following the numbers and her lips moving as she read it over. “T-That’s just silly.”

“What is?” Daisy asked. “Did you win something?”

Maria shrugged. “This seems to say I won a hundred thousand dollars. But,” she paused, her eyes wide and cheeks quickly growing flushed, “that can’t be right. Right?”

Tessa’s jaw went slack. “Did you just win a hundred thousand dollars?”

“No,” Maria blurted. “No, I couldn’t have.”

Daisy reached, grabbing a hold of her wrist and pulling to take a look at the ticket herself.

All of it was self-explanatory, with the numbers matching on the top and the bottom.

As far as the fine print went, it looked more than likely that Maria had, in fact, won a very large lottery.

Daisy felt her chest inflate with excitement.

“Maria,” she exclaimed. “You won the lottery!”

“N-No, I -”

Daisy stood, wrapping her arms around her in a tight embrace instantly. Her hand grasped onto the back of her head. “Dear Maria,” she said in her ear, feeling the woman’s heartbeat grow exponentially against her chest, “you won . Believe it.”

For a moment, Maria wobbled in her arms, her knees growing weak and stumbling as Daisy handed the ticket back to her. Tessa stood next, reaching forward to grasp onto her. The girl stabilized within a second, pulling out of the embrace with eyes as wide as the sun.

“D-Do you know what this means?” Maria breathed as tears began to well up in her eyes. “I’m still paying off my husband’s funeral expenses. His coffin. The tombstone at the cemetery. M-My kids -” She raised a trembling hand to her lips. “This is going to change our lives. All of our lives!”

Daisy cupped her face, the smile not at all fake or forced on her lips. “You deserve every cent, Maria,” she said. “Go. You should get your kids.”

Maria stepped away, clutching onto the lottery ticket as if her entire life depended on it. And, in a way, it certainly did. She ran off towards the neighborhood, her old sneakers kicking dust and dirt in the air.

“How spectacular,” Tessa mused as they watched her go. “What’re the odds?”

And then it hit Daisy. What were the odds?

“You heard what I said before, didn’t you?”

Tessa raised a brow. “What?”

“Before Maria came over,” Daisy whispered, the sinking feeling returning to her stomach. “I had said: I wish Maria’s life could be easier. For her and her children.” She glanced over at Tessa. “Tell me you don’t believe that it is magic.”

Her eyes widened. “Well, I -”

“Tessa.” Daisy watched her sternly. “Honestly.”

“Alright,” Tessa said, a frown growing across her face. “Alright. Maybe it is magic. But...”

“What else could there be?”

Tessa grabbed onto her hand. “We need one more test.”

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me.”

Daisy followed close behind her friend, more than willing to trust her, but dreading the results she already knew to be true.

Daisy

“What more tests could be done?”

Tessa clung onto Daisy’s hand tightly. “More than you can imagine,” she replied. “But I think we should get home before anything.”

Daisy’s brow furrowed. “Why do you seem afraid?”

A laugh blurted out from Tessa’s lips. “Who said anything about being afraid?”

“Tessa.”

She chewed on the inside of her mouth before letting out a sigh.

They were almost home, and the neighborhood was quiet all around them.

“Without knowing what the potion entails,” Tessa began, referring to the original potion that had fallen all over Daisy’s shoes, “We can’t be sure how it affects others.

I mean, don’t get me wrong, what just happened for Maria is outstanding. ”

“But?”

Tessa hesitated. “How can we explain Alan’s hair? Or Rebecca’s clothes? Or Old Lady Weatherford falling?” She shook her head, a faraway look falling over her. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Pressing her lips together, Daisy remained silent as they continued their regular path towards their homes.

For a moment, she imagined what would happen if the potion turned out to have been a hex, or much worse, a curse.

The future of Fields' Herbals and her residency within Willowbrook could be at stake without knowing what was causing her wishes to come true.

The moment she said the wrong thing, someone's life could be at stake.

Daisy shook her head. There was no way it could get that far. Though the uncertainty surrounding it was incredibly hard to ignore.

"Steve's home," Tessa suddenly said.

Following her gaze, Daisy's eyes landed on Tessa's husband, Steve Hala.

He was a rather ordinary man, not a warlock or practitioner of any form of magic.

He merely loved his wife and his job all the same.

His wardrobe was always full of luau button downs and brightly colored shorts, his eccentric clothes matching his wife's bubbling personality.

They were quite the pair and melded with each other easily.

Steve was standing across the street from his house, looking up at another man.

They were in the middle of a conversation, and it was easy to assume that it wasn't exactly a friendly one.

As they drew nearer, Daisy narrowed her eyes on the other man, the realization hitting her almost at the same time as it reached Tessa.

“Isn’t that Richard Martin?” Daisy asked.

Tessa groaned. “That grumpy man can’t seem to keep his anger on his own property.”

“Last weekend he was yelling at the kids down the block from us,” Daisy said with a shake of her head. “All because they were riding their bikes a little too close to his mailbox. Isn’t that ridiculous?”

Tessa sighed. “I wonder how much anger a person has to have if they feel the need to hate on everyone else’s business.”

Daisy normally preferred to keep her mouth shut when it came to gossiping about her neighbors, but there was something about Richard that made the entire town turn against him.

First he was spending his free time throwing old cans and boxes at the stray cats living in the neighborhood.

That act alone turned most of Willowbrook against him.

Daisy herself fed most of the cats living in the woods around their houses, leaving out bowls of food and water for them to eat as they pleased.

One day, Richard made his way to her front door, banging his fist on the wood till she opened up to him.

He went on and on about the chores cats brought, how they liked to have their kittens in his garage during the wintertime.

Daisy was nice enough to give him the time of day, but never did she even consider halting in feeding the cats.

“The last time I spoke to him,” Tessa was saying, “I needed to bring a calming tonic to the house.”

“Whatever for?”

Tessa leaned over to lower her voice as they walked.

“His wife, the poor woman, was screaming her head off,” she explained.

“Apparently he had come home from work in a rage, and was even more upset when he arrived to his wife deep cleaning their fine china. Plates here, bowls there, expensive silverware everywhere.”

Daisy raised a brow. “Sounds harmless to me.”

“You’d think,” Tessa said. “But Richard, the loving man he is, decided to throw a temper tantrum and began throwing the china everywhere. It made a big mess, I’ll tell you that.

” She sighed and shook her head. “Richard and I went over when the kids found their way into our backyard. They refused to go back for hours, but it was settled in the end.”

“And she stayed with him?”

“Where else could she go?” Tessa asked. “Richard might be the biggest jerk with an ivory spoon up his you know what, but look at their house! The man is worth more money than that woman will ever get her hands on. I hate to say it, but you know it as

much as I do.”

Daisy looked over their three story house and let out a low whistle. She couldn’t deny it.

As they drew nearer, the conversation between Steve and Richard grew clear.

Richard was at the top of his ladder, a thick paintbrush in hand.

Half the side of the house was already done in a nice color, the rest remaining what it normally was.

A paint bucket sat on the edge of the roof, directly beside where he worked.

“Now,” Richard was in the middle of shouting, “don’t you hear that, Steve?”

Steve stood at the foot of the ladder, turning to glance over his shoulder at the front of his own house.

A series of windchimes hung from their roof, directly above their covered porch.

The windchimes were mainly handmade by Tessa herself, from shards of glass or pieces of drywood.

As the wind rushed by the chimes made a pleasant symphony of sound, each one of them producing something different but somehow blending effortlessly together.

Steve turned back towards Richard with his hands on his hips.

“Sure,” Steve called out to him. “ I hear music. What do you hear?”

“Noise! Annoying, unneeded, uncoordinated noise! That,” Richard paused to shove an accusatory finger in the direction of their house, “is nowhere near music, Steve!”

Daisy glanced over at Tessa. She had a sour look on her face, her small hands clenching into tight fists. “Are you alright?”

Tessa pressed her lips together as they got closer. “What’s wrong with my windchimes?”

“Not a thing,” Daisy replied. “You know that. It’s just Richard. He can’t enjoy anything nice, it seems.”

As they drew near to the bickering pair, Steve glanced in their direction.

His face lit up the moment he saw Tessa, whatever bother Richard had been giving him going in one ear and out the other.

Tessa, on the other hand, was a bundle of rage, and was more than ready to defend her windchimes the moment she got close enough.

Daisy shook her head as she watched Richard, who was beginning to climb down his tall ladder. He was still calling things out to Steve, though the words were caught on the air and carried elsewhere.

“I wish someone could humble that man,” Daisy mused.

Richard turned while still holding onto the ladder, ready to unleash another slew of complaints now that he noticed Tessa had arrived.

He pointed towards them when the wind brushed by, and the paint bucket resting on the roof’s edge wobbled.

Before Daisy could say a word, the bucket moved a little too close to the gutter and fell on its side.

A flood of pastel blue paint washed down in Richard's direction like a waterfall, the sound of it splattering on his head so loud Daisy swore it would bring out the entire neighborhood.

As the paint settled against the neatly trimmed grass, staining the driveway and the path leading to their front door, Richard climbed the rest of the way down the ladder.

He was entirely soaked with paint. It covered his expensive clothes, drenched his pointed shoes.

His normally suave hair was flattened against his face and dripping with paint.

He landed on the ground with a thud, the mess causing him to slip and slide if he wasn't careful.

The trio standing at the side of Richard's house were entirely gobsmacked.

They all had slack jaws and wide eyes, staring at the mess without uttering a single word.

Richard pressed his lips together, probably to stop the paint from going in his mouth, before storming off towards his front door.

Though Daisy had no doubt he was mumbling all the way there, he ripped his door open and slammed it behind him.

Tessa burst into laughter. Steve quickly followed, removing his square glasses to swipe at a stray tear.

Daisy allowed herself to laugh, though it wasn't as boisterous as the rest of them.

She had said it again, hadn't she? She replayed the moments leading up to it in her mind.

They'd talked about Richard and his angry tendencies, his unfortunate circumstances with his wife and cats. But she did say it.

I wish someone could humble that man.

The trio began to walk back across the street towards the Hala household. Daisy's house was a few doors down, but it wasn't much of a walk at all. She remained beside them as they arrived at the front porch.

"I don't entirely want to ask this," Steve suddenly said.

Tessa's brow rose. "Ask what?"

"Did either one of you have anything to do with that?" He pointed over his shoulder to the mess on Richard's front lawn. "Because if you did -"

Daisy glanced over at Tessa before he could respond.

The look on the empath's face told her everything she needed to know.

Whatever happened wasn't a freak accident, even if it was the easiest option to believe.

If they looked hard enough, Daisy's magical fingerprint would've been written all over it.

At least Richard and the rest of his family weren't involved in magic. That would've been harder to explain.

Steve crossed his arms disapprovingly. "Tessa," he said in a stern voice. "How could you allow such a thing?"

"I -"

Daisy stepped forward. "Don't be rash, Steve. Not before you know the story."

He raised his hands and took a step back. "I don't want to hear it," he blurted. "Now, now, Tessie, don't look at me like that. I may not be a warlock, but I know just as well as the both of you that harming another without cause is against the witch's code."

Daisy felt her stomach drop. After all this time, she'd never once stopped to consider the ramifications of the witch's code.

It was the law that bound magic users together, that held them to a higher standard.

Weaving away from the code meant leaving the morally right side of things, disrupting the very flow of nature.

If it came down to it and Daisy was accused of breaking the code, she didn't have much going for her case.

But it wasn't her future that worried her. Daisy glanced in Tessa's direction. Tessa was in the process of gaining her empath certification. Anything Daisy did could stand in the way of her success.

"Look," Steve said, "I'm not going to involve myself in things I can't understand. But

this?" He shook his head. "That's something I never expected out of the two of you. Just," he paused before letting out a tired sigh, "be careful."

Without another word, Steve began to cross the front lawn back towards their house. The door shut firmly behind him.

"Tessa," Daisy said. "I-I never meant to cause -"

Bumping her shoulder into Daisy, Tessa let a smile cross her face. "Don't you dare say what I think you're gonna say," she interjected. "You and I are like two peas in a pod. What happens to one, happens to the other. Okay?"

"But -"

"If you think I'm going to let you solve this without me, you don't know me at all."

Daisy watched her closest friend with a heavy heart.

"In the meantime," Tessa continued, grabbing a hold of Daisy's hand, "that spell, without a doubt, did something to Richard. Till we know exactly what to do, be careful what you wish for."

She took a shuddering step backwards. Barely a second passed and Daisy grew flushed with panic.

Tessa lurched forward, her hands gripping onto Daisy's thin arms. "Relax, flower," Tessa cooed, the old nickname from their grade school years sending a rush of ease through Daisy's body.

"We take this one step at a time. Tomorrow, after a good night's rest, we'll tend to it as we should."

For now,” she paused, making a breathing motion, “we only inhale and exhale.”

Daisy’s trembles came to a stop. “I do not want to put you at stake.”

“Don’t worry about me for a second,” Tessa whispered. “Unfortunately for you, I’m not the one who’s gotten myself into a barrel full of issues.”

She laughed shakily. “Be realistic with me. What do you think this is?”

“Honestly,” Tessa said, giving her arms a reassuring squeeze, “I think someone might be trying to set you up.”

Daisy gulped.

“Imagine what would happen if you wished harm on the wrong person,” Tessa continued, her voice radiating comfort despite the words she used. “You’d suddenly have the Elders of the Witch Council knocking at your door. And you know that all they come around for is for instances of -”

“Dark magic,” Daisy finished.

Tessa had a grim look on her face. “Something like that could do something worse than destroy your life.”

“What’s worse than that?”

“Getting your magic taken away.”

Daisy paled. Dizziness swayed her for a moment, but she grounded herself.

The panic and worry was hard to ignore, but the constant presence of Tessa’s calming

powers brought an undeniable ease.

She could make it home. And once she was there, all alone for the evening, she'd let the panic and worry take over her then.

Daisy pulled herself out of Tessa's tight grasp. "Go on home, Tess."

"Are you alright?"

She gave her a thin smile. "You're such an empath."

Tessa laughed.

Turning on her heel, Daisy began to make her way up the sidewalk towards her house. The evening came upon steadily, nighttime falling across Willowbrook. A haunting future presented itself to Daisy, and she walked straight towards it.

Her whisper came out as gentle as the air.

"Blessed be."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

Daisy

“I call upon thee, Earth and thine Shadow, Holy Mother of all things: Hecate !”

Maroon candles positioned around a neatly drawn pentagram suddenly held plumes of fire in their wicks.

The dark arcane room glowed an ominous burnt orange as the flames danced and swayed to the constant beating of bare feet against the old wood floor.

The pentagram held a candle at each of its points, while a bowl of objects sat in the very center.

A few strands from Daisy’s long, brown hair mixed around with sprigs of freshly picked lavender and rosemary.

A rat’s tail, dried up and almost leathered, sat on top of it all.

Daisy began to march around the pentagram, keeping her step in place with the beat. The floor of the arcane shop creaked and moaned but she shoved the thought away. To stray from the spell, as powerful as it was, could ruin the overall effect. She could ruin it before the magic even began.

The energy in the small room shifted the moment they set up for their spell.

Daisy dragged the white paint along the floor.

Tessa preferred to draw the pentagram and runes, but couldn't deny Daisy's needle straight hand.

Now, when she managed to catch a glimpse of herself, Daisy trembled and shook from the excitement alone.

No matter how long she practiced witchcraft, felt the very essence of the earth running through her veins, Daisy felt it all as though it was the first time.

The dirt deep below her feet hummed with anticipation, the early morning sun pressed in from the outside, delivering a stunning heat.

Every piece of the world reached into the arcane room to touch Daisy, and the spell reminded her of why she ran Fields' Herbals in the first place.

Across the way, Tessa swirled, her steps syncing to the music effortlessly. "Come, Hecate," she called, following the lines of the spell. "Come forth, Hecate!"

"Grant me the will, Hecate," Daisy rang out next, "to reveal the spell set upon me!"

The thumping continued as the flames began to join in, the reddish yellow hue bouncing rhythmically in the darkness.

Daisy's eyes grew wide with anticipation.

The spell pressed further on, the power growing stronger and stronger.

Unlike other spoken spells, the ceremonial kind drew in the power from Hecate, the figure that acts as the Mother of all things Witchcraft.

Hecate was the very world itself, from deep within the soil to the stars beyond the

sky.

For Daisy to see the spell that was latched onto her soul, she might be able to see who cast it, and how it may be removed.

But now, all she needed was the ability to see it done.

Smoke from the candles curled in the air.

Jewels and crystals that once lined the floor began to stand on their edges before rising above the floor.

Daisy could hardly believe it, but barely paid them any mind.

The longer she stared, the quicker the magic would scare away, and she would be left with nothing but more questions.

Daisy twirled and danced around the floating crystals.

Her eyes landed on a floating Carnelian.

It resembled the flames themselves, if only they were deeply dark with age.

The stone was curved and smooth, rising higher and higher.

Jagged stumps of Quartz rose along Tessa's path, some larger than the others.

Black Tourmaline almost blended into the shadows but were incredibly surplus in number, due to their natural ability for added protection.

Purple Amethyst and Hematite came next, their spiritually protective properties

keeping both Daisy and Tessa safe from any dark forces lingering nearby.

Daisy bent low, snatching up a twined bunch of dried sage before plunging one end into a flame.

The smudging stick grew smoky instantly, a sweet and earthy smell filling the room.

She swiped the smudge in different directions, watching where the smoke trail went and the symbols it left at the same time.

“Oh, Hecate!” Daisy shouted, her voice stronger and firmer than she thought it to be. “Show me the one who burdens your faithful servant!”

Tessa chanted: “From witches night and witches day, reveal the burden upon me!”

Daisy caught the chant herself, letting the words fill the air as the flames grew tall and strong. Their voices carried together like a symphony, growing louder and louder. And, as the candles shuddered from the heat they radiated, they shouted the incantation once more.

“From witches night and witches day, reveal the burden upon me!”

Outside, on the clear spring day, thunder crashed in the distance.

A burst of wind shot through the arcane room, blowing out the candles in an instant.

The lights flickered on, sputtering for a moment, before returning to its naturally dim glow.

Daisy blinked in the gentle light, the sage no longer burning.

Across from her, Tessa was locked in place as the crystals clattered from their spots in the air and onto the floor.

At the center of the pentagram, where the wooden bowl was, a thin trail of deeply black smoke curled up around them. There was a very particular smell wafting off it, something like burnt rubber or plastic.

Tessa stepped forward and shook her head. “Don’t like the look of that.”

“Me neither,” Daisy mumbled, already disheartened.

Smoke was to be expected, but black like squid ink was something else.

Daisy pressed forward and knelt within the pentagram.

The dress she wore fluttered out around her.

Undeniable energy hummed around her as the spell faded, the answer they had been searching for apparent in the wooden bowl.

All that remained from the offerings presented was a smoldering piece of papyrus, the sprigs of rosemary and lavender, along with Daisy’s hair, were all gone.

Daisy reached into the bowl with a trembling hand.

The paper, despite smoldering, was cool to the touch.

She flipped it over to reveal a symbol, one that looked to have been branded onto the thick material.

Running her fingers over it, Daisy jerked backwards, the heat burrowing itself deep

within the rune.

“Look this one up,” Daisy said, holding the paper above her head.

Tessa snatched up a dusty book with frayed pages. She flipped through it for a minute before stopping halfway through, her index finger tracing the same symbol on the page.

“Well?” Daisy asked, eager to know. “What does it say?”

Tessa pressed her lips together. “It’s a scalding rune, Daisy.” She raised her eyes, the disappointment so strong it was almost palpable. “Whoever sent you that potion managed to cover their tracks incredibly well.”

Daisy pushed herself off the floor to peer at the pages in the book.

Scalding runes are leftover when a successful spell is being forced open by other magic users.

While the original spellcaster did their due diligence to protect their identity, what a prying eye might be left with is a scalding rune, telling the peeker that - no matter how strong their efforts are - the truth is hidden from them.

“Great,” Daisy mumbled before falling into a plush chair in the arcane room. The unlit candles clattered over noisily. “Just when I thought we could’ve had this figured out before my date with Ethan tonight.”

“If you thought I’m going to let this get in the way of your big date,” Tessa snapped, pointing an accusatory finger at her, “you’re very wrong, flower!”

Daisy sighed. “You felt how much energy that used, didn’t you? I can hardly stand.”

“We’ll drink some orange juice,” Tessa replied with a shrug, though she wobbled slightly when she walked. “For now, we still have work to do.”

Daisy watched as Tessa stumbled around the room, careful not to step on any of the sharp crystals.

She returned with a piece of paper before taking a seat on the floor beside Daisy.

The color from Tessa’s face was drained, leaving a slightly red tint at the center of her cheeks. Their exhaustion was more than obvious.

“So,” Tessa began, using the rune book to rest her paper on, “the next best thing is to figure out who would want to curse you.”

“That’s too simple.” Daisy leaned forward. “To produce a scalding rune like that requires a skilled caster. Not just any witch or warlock capable of minor tricks. An old and strong power.”

Tessa’s brow furrowed. “Doesn’t sound like Willowbrook spellcasters at all.”

“They’re out there,” Daisy murmured. “Somewhere.”

Silence settled around them as they thought over the witches and warlocks in Willowbrook.

Daisy was lost in a trance as she stared into the pentagram, as if the properties still hummed with a powerful magic.

She thought back to the last meeting she attended of the Witch Council, where the Elders overlooked the town and the magic users within.

Only the strongest spellcasters attended through invitation.

The last time she went, though, Daisy remembered the sharpest of stares holding onto her, someone from her past. Someone like -

“That’s it!” Daisy snapped her fingers. “Marigold Shadowbrook!”

Tessa winced. “I hope for our sake it isn’t her,” she grumbled.

“Why?”

“Everytime I go into Ronald’s,” Tessa explained, “Marigold is in there just raving about you and Gary. It boils my blood everytime.”

Daisy sighed. “They were together long before Gary and I.”

“Doesn’t make it normal for her to try and crash your wedding!”

“Listen, empath-in-training,” Daisy teased, “Marigold had her heart broken more times than most people. Sure, she showed up at the wedding, but Gary turned her down and the entire town saw! Last I heard, her recent engagement went down the tube after she kept bringing up Gary.”

Tessa shrugged. “More reasons why I don’t like her.”

“Just write her name down,” Daisy said with a laugh. “Suspect number one.”

“You know,” Tessa mused while scribbling down the name, “I went into Drusilla Ashford’s store a few weeks ago.”

Daisy glowered. “I haven’t been to Ashford Grocery in months. Not since her

daughter got that full-ride scholarship out of state.”

“Good,” Tessa blurted. “You don’t want to go.”

“Why?”

Tessa sighed. “You know Drusilla. If anyone can hold a grudge, it’s that woman.”

Leaning back in her seat, Daisy ruminated over Drusilla Ashford’s predicament.

In the latter years of high school, Drusilla surprised the entire town by getting accepted into a prestigious school across the country.

While expensive, the school provided a scholarship that would’ve pushed Drusilla through her entire academic career.

That is, until Daisy realized that Drusilla stole her entrance essay.

Daisy, perhaps, wouldn’t have bothered telling the truth about the stolen work if its subject wasn’t such a personal topic.

Daisy wrote the paper about her struggle growing up without a father, her upbringing done solely by her mother and grandmother.

The essay glorified the women in her life while imagining what it would’ve been like to have had her father there all along.

Daisy couldn’t let Drusilla take that away from her and use it for ill tidings.

“Needless to say,” Daisy mused, “I think we should write her name down next.”

“Really?”

Daisy pressed her lips together. “She is a woman scorned. You said it yourself - she can hold a grudge.”

Tessa sighed before adding the name onto the short list. “Anyone else?”

“There is one,” Daisy mumbled. “But I don’t want to think about him for one minute.”

“Who?”

Daisy leaned against her hand. The words came out muffled, barely heard in the already cramped room. “Sebastian Crowe.”

“Don’t tell me he’s been bothering you again.”

“Not any more than before,” Daisy replied. A chill crept down her spine as she thought about him. “I-I don’t even want to get into it.”

“That’s okay,” Tessa reassured her, already writing his name now. “We know the guy is a creep and a jerk who can’t understand boundaries. For now,” she paused, reaching up to grab a hold of Daisy’s hand and give it a tight squeeze, “that is more than enough.”

Daisy’s eyes scanned over the three names written on the sheet of paper.

Everything happening to her over the past few days was because of one of them, and there were, perhaps, more ill tidings to come.

So far, nothing drastically dangerous had happened, but there was no telling what

would happen tomorrow or the day after that.

Now that her date with Ethan was steadily approaching that evening, the last thing Daisy wanted was to realize that his interest in her was from the potion, or worse.

She shook her head. It was still morning, and there was plenty of time to worry before the date.

“This is good,” Tessa suddenly said.

“What is?”

Tessa waved the paper in between them. “We have suspects to question! Isn’t that better than just guessing?”

” Rising to her feet, she reached onto Daisy and yanked her off the chair next.

“Now that we have some names, we’ll question them till we figure out where that potion came from.

But the real question is this: do you want to be the good cop or the bad cop? ”

Daisy burst out in laughter.

“I’m being totally serious, Daisy!”

Wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes, Daisy sighed. “You’d make a pretty good bad cop, don’t you think?”

“But I’m an empath!”

“Exactly,” Daisy replied with a shrug. “You know what makes them tick!”

They laughed together for a moment, the musical sound filling the stuffy arcane room. Daisy allowed herself to revel in the joy, to pay attention to the laughter rather than focus on the unknown. Despite that, a hidden truth lied in the distance, and Daisy grew more and more eager to figure it out.

Soon, she thought. Very soon.

Daisy

Tessa rubbed her stomach as they made their way up to Marigold Shadowbrook's front door.

For the fourth time since leaving Fields' Herbals, Tessa complained about how hungry she was.

Even from beside her, Daisy could hear the grumbles and mumbles of her stomach, calling out for some food.

Daisy raised her watch. It was close to lunch time, and nearing ever so slightly closer to her evening date with Ethan.

But, as Tessa told her beforehand, there were important things needing to be done.

Daisy stopped a few feet away from the front porch. Lights were on through the windows, Marigold's car parked in the driveway. She was obviously home, and that realization frightened Daisy more than she wanted it to.

Tessa paused at the few steps that led onto the porch. "Are you coming?"

"M-Maybe we should get some lunch first," Daisy blurted. "That spell drained us."

"We need to get you ready for your date after lunch."

Daisy hesitated, fidgeting between her feet. "Tess, I've heard some things about

Marigold. Like that she's gone, well..." She paused, raising a finger to her head.

"Crazy?"

"Well, that's such a blunt way to put it."

Tessa laughed. "But that's what you meant, right?"

Daisy pressed her lips together, embarrassed by her own feelings.

Leaving the porch steps, Tessa came in front of her and snatched onto her hands. "You aren't alone, Daisy," she reassured, the natural energy of her growing empath abilities seeping into her skin. "And let's be honest about something. You can't be liked by everyone."

"I know that," Daisy mumbled.

"Then stick to it. Marigold made her own decisions that led to her life being this way," she continued. "Don't let someone else's life choices bog down your own, alright? Now," Tessa squeezed her hands, "the sooner we get this done, the quicker I can get some food in my belly."

Daisy lightly laughed, though her voice trembled and quivered still.

With their hands intertwined, the pair walked the rest of the way to the door.

Daisy rapped her knuckles against the wood.

The sound of scurrying and fumbling could be heard from the opposite side.

Footsteps clashed against the floor as someone unsteadily approached the front door.

Daisy squeezed Tessa's hand, bracing herself for the uncomfortable conversation that was bound to follow.

The door was ripped open.

“ You! ”

Marigold Shadowbrook had always been stunning to look at.

She wore her black, pin-straight hair down her back simply, sometimes a bandana or headband pushing it out of her face.

Her skin was sun-kissed, only tanned and amber in a way.

There wasn't a blemish in sight, despite being the same age as Daisy, who wore her wrinkles fashionably and confidently.

Marigold stood a head taller than Daisy, almost the same height as Tessa.

But these were all things Daisy could recite from memory. What they saw when the door opened was far from what they were actually expecting.

Marigold was dressed in a wide wedding dress.

The lower half was made out of pluming skirts, the white fabric stretched out so far that it poked outside the front door.

Marigold's feet were hidden by the dress, though they could hear the sound of her sharp heels clicking against the tiled floor.

Around her bosom, the wedding dress was tight and form fitting.

The veil was thrown around haphazardly behind her head.

Streaks of makeup stained her cheeks and chin.

Dried tears along with fresh ones fell down her face like a waterfall.

And, the most surprising feature out of it all, was the amber-filled liquor bottle in her right hand. The liquid sloshed with every move she made, already half empty. It was obviously whiskey, a realization Daisy made from the scent alone.

“A-After all this time,” Marigold slurred, her almond shaped eyes narrowing as she focused on Daisy. “The husband s-stealer shows up at m-my door!”

“Marigold,” Daisy said, keeping her voice as even as possible. “Can we -”

She stepped forward, looming over Daisy. “H-How does it feel,” Marigold paused, taking in an exaggerated deep breath, “to be the villain in someone’s story?”

Daisy blinked.

“P-Picture perfect,” Marigold continued, the bottle high above her head, “Daffodil, not actually liked b-by all of Swallowbrook!”

Tessa pressed her hand over her mouth, stifling the laughter that so badly wanted to be released. She glanced in Daisy’s direction, her brows trembling.

Daisy shook her head, her own laughter daring to be released. She watched Marigold instead, trying her best to keep the hesitant smile on her mouth. “How does some water sound, Marigold? You seem a little parched.”

“Bah!” Marigold spat, raising the bottle to her lips to take another long swig.

The amber liquid dribbled down her chin and onto her once-beautiful dress.

Twisting around, Marigold stumbled back into her house, almost tripping over the threshold but quickly regaining her balance.

She mumbled as she walked, but didn't shut the door behind her.

Daisy glanced at Tessa.

Tessa shrugged and nodded her chin towards the door.

With a deep sigh, Daisy slipped inside, following close behind Marigold. Despite how drunk she was, Marigold didn't slip or fall. She made her way into a large living room, pacing around the coffee table without daring to let go of her bottle.

"Marigold," Daisy called out to her. "We wanted to talk to you about -"

"First," she blurted, waving a hand towards them, "y-you take Bary -" Marigold froze and waved a hand across her face.

"Gary from me! A-And then, you take Barrett. H-Heartbroken and lonely Daffodil," she slurred her words so much they could hardly understand, "s-stealing husbands and engagements to make herself feel better!"

Daisy pressed her lips together. It didn't feel right to interject or stop her from going too far in this state.

Marigold could barely even get her name right.

What was the harm in letting her rant about the things she, obviously, wished to say?

Even though she was entirely wrong. Even though the truth was that Marigold had wanted Gary, and Gary had never wanted Marigold.

Gary had always been completely in love with Daisy, which was a hard pill for Marigold to swallow.

The woman had been so unhinged that she'd shown up on Daisy's wedding day to try to get Gary to run off with her...

and had gone even crazier when he hadn't given her the time of day.

As for Barrett... Daisy had no idea what was going on there. Except that rumor had it that he'd left Marigold on their wedding day, after she'd continued to talk about Gary. Her obsession still was not gone, even after all these years.

Daisy stepped towards the couch and took a seat. Perhaps she was the villain in another's story, even if it wasn't well-deserved. Daisy couldn't help but feel bad either way. She sighed, looking up at the drunken woman as she continued her rants.

"I'm guessing you're the good cop?" Tessa whispered as she sat beside her.

Daisy shook her head. "Neither right now," she replied. "Don't you feel bad?"

Tessa scoffed. "As bad as I can for the woman who crashed your wedding."

Unbothered by their whispering, Marigold continued her rants. "W-What is it about me that took them both away?"

"Marigold," Daisy cooed, eyeing the bottle in her hands, "fate works out in many different ways. It doesn't mean you did anything inherently wrong."

“Don’t lie,” Marigold snapped. “I begged and begged for Gary. What difference did it make?” She thrust the bottle towards Daisy, a few drops splashing onto the pristine floor beneath their feet.

“N-Now the whole town calls me c-crazy. Crazy Mary,” she muttered.

“Crazy Marigold. Lovesick Marigold. Deranged Marigold. Humiliating Marigold.” Ignoring the width of her skirts, Marigold collapsed into one of the loveseats, the bottle hanging loosely from her grasp.

“If Gary rejected you,” Tessa suddenly said, her voice seeping with ease, “why do you say it’s Daisy’s fault?”

Marigold was silent for a moment before lurching out of the chair, pacing around the living room once more. “What i-infects a man’s mind more than a w-woman’s voice?”

“Gary had his own mind,” Tessa called out. “I know that for sure. He wouldn’t let me watch what I wanted on his big screen television. Does that make it Daisy’s fault?”

Marigold continued to stumble around, her brow furrowed so tight together, wrinkles began to crease over her forehead. She muttered something too quiet for them to hear, her anger and stress almost palpable.

Approaching the mantelpiece, Marigold snatched up a framed photograph.

“My Barrett,” she whispered, the tears beginning to swell once more.

Spinning around, Marigold shoved the photograph in Daisy’s face.

“D-Did you even think of me when you took him away? When you t-told him to

leave me at the altar?” She gulped down more of the whiskey.

“D-Did you enjoy your revenge, Daffodil?”

It was hard to take Marigold seriously when she continuously failed to get Daisy’s name right.

Daisy sighed, eyeing the picture before glancing back up at the drunk woman.

She had heard through the grapevine that Marigold was getting married again, but never actually met the man herself.

From what she heard, Barrett came from a neighboring town.

Daisy couldn’t imagine the discomfort he must’ve felt if Marigold continuously mentioned Gary and how he was taken from her.

How could they have been wed if Marigold still clung to the past?

Tessa, at the same time, seemed to have similar thoughts. “Look,” she snapped, standing up from the couch, “if there’s anyone here who enjoys revenge, it’s you, Marigold.”

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The drunk woman swayed, her head shaking as she raised the bottle once more.

“What proof do you have of Daisy’s involvement in your ruined engagement?”

Marigold waved the bottle in the air between them. “He left me!”

“And she had nothing to do with it! Whose fault is it for talking about Gary nonstop to someone who expects to have a future with you?”

“Hers!”

Tessa shoved an accusatory finger towards her. “Yours, Marigold!”

Marigold sputtered before flailing into the loveseat once more, the bottle falling out of her grasp and clattering against the floor.

Some of the remaining liquor spilt, but it was the very least of their problems. Marigold stared up at the ceiling, the tears streaming down her temples, her attention no longer holding onto them.

If they wanted to get an answer from her, they were steadily running out of time.

Daisy glanced in Tessa’s direction.

“You can say whatever you want,” Tessa said in a quiet voice. “But at the end of the day, Daisy didn’t do those things to you. You did.”

Marigold covered her face with her gloved hands.

“And you know as much as we do that putting a spell on Daisy for revenge is wrong ,” Tessa continued. “Don’t you realize what that could do to you? If the Witch Council managed to find out? You’d -”

Marigold’s head rolled forward, her brow knitted together quizzically. “What spell?”

“The potion you sent to Fields’ Herbals,” Tessa explained. “It was cursed with something. You hid yourself well, Marigold, but we aren’t stupid. Reverse what you’ve done.”

Daisy watched Marigold’s face contort into undeniable confusion. She glanced between the pair of them, blinking as if she had been caught in a daze.

“I-I didn’t do that,” Marigold mumbled. “You think after everything I’ve already lost I’d risk my magic?”

Daisy’s brow shot up. It was the first near lucid thing Marigold had said since they arrived.

Daisy wasn’t an empath like Tessa was, but something about it told her that Marigold wasn’t the one they were looking for.

It seemed as though she was merely a heartbroken woman, left alone in a great big house that was still full of the memories she would never be able to relive.

Standing from the couch, Daisy passed by the coffee table to stand in front of Marigold. The woman flinched away from her and crossed her arms.

“Marigold,” Daisy said in a gentle voice, “let me perform a Truth-Binding Spell to -”

She jerked backwards, managing to slip out of the chair despite being drunk and weighed down by hefty skirts. “Y-You think I’m stupid?” she drawled, the words more slurred than they were before. Marigold moved as if she was stuck in slow motion. “I-I didn’t curse you!”

Daisy sighed. “Then there’s nothing to hide!”

Marigold watched her closely for a minute, her arms stretched out defensively in front of her.

The longer she stared, the more her shoulders relaxed and her limbs lowered.

Eventually, Marigold looked too tired to stand upright, and she waddled back to the chair, falling back against the crunching cushions with a frown on her face.

Daisy reached out and laid her palm over the top of Marigold’s head. The veil was scratchy and uncomfortable beneath her skin. Pressing her thumb into the square center of her forehead, Daisy closed her eyes, the incantation coming to her instantly.

“Blessed be the soul’s truth,” she said. “Show me the path to within!”

Energy stretched between the two of them. A blur of color appeared within Daisy’s mind, diving deep into the secrets Marigold held within. But, unfortunately for Daisy, there was hardly anything on Marigold’s mind that wasn’t dreadfully sad.

Her days were spent how they had found her: wallowing in the life she missed out on and blaming it on the only person she could. Marigold had never brewed a curse-inducing potion and never mailed anything to Fields’ Herbals.

Daisy pulled her hand away, the connection falling between the two of them. Marigold looked up at her with wide, brown eyes, the tears glossy as they welled up.

“Well?” Tessa asked.

Daisy turned to face her. “She was telling the truth. Marigold didn’t send the potion.”

Tessa’s shoulders fell. “Blessed be, I’m relieved.” She glanced behind Daisy. “Honestly, Marigold, you need some help.”

Daisy’s brow shot up. “Be respectful!”

Tessa grumbled under her breath and rubbed her stomach. “I’m starving , Daisy. Let’s go!”

Shaking her head, Daisy motioned towards the front door.

Tessa was already halfway there. Daisy found herself hesitating for a moment, but didn’t dare to turn back.

There was only the image of Marigold crashing her wedding in the back of her mind.

The unfortunate reality she saw in Marigold’s mind was the consequence of her actions.

“Wait!”

Daisy froze. When she turned around, Marigold was standing, the drunken haze slowly dissipating from her eyes. The tears fell silently and effortlessly.

“I understand,” she whispered, the words barely carrying between them.

“I...I wanted a life that was not mine. I thought Gary was meant for me, only me, but I was selfish. I was selfish and yet,” Marigold paused, taking a few small steps closer

to Daisy, “you were with him in his last days, and you never once complained. You were so strong in the face of everything going wrong, and I was so stupidly selfish. Wanting to trade places. Wanting to steal what you had, blaming you for everything I threw away.”

Marigold’s shoulders shuddered as she bent forward and desperately clutched at her chest. “Gary was more than loved in his lifetime,” she said through her tears. “And I need to carry on. I need to move on.”

Daisy’s heart softened. She stepped forward and rubbed her hand over Marigold’s back as she cried. Her shoulders trembled and shuddered with each breath she took, but Daisy never once moved, never once ceased in giving her as much comfort as she could muster.

“To live is a blessing,” Daisy whispered, the words her therapist once spoke drifting back to her. “And you cannot waste it. Not when there’s so much life to live. Alright?”

Marigold straightened herself, managing to pull a half smile across her lips. “Alright.”

With the case on Marigold Shadowbrook closed, Daisy and Tessa made their way out of her house, shutting the doors behind them.

They marched silently across the untrimmed lawn to Tessa’s car and slid within the hot compartment, listening to the hum of the air conditioner as they waited for it to turn on.

“Well,” Tessa finally said, “we can mark her off the list.”

Daisy nodded slowly.

Suddenly with a crazed speed, Tessa turned the ignition, and the car hummed alive. Tessa whipped out from in front of Marigold's house, testing the speed limit as she raced through the quiet afternoon neighborhood.

“What's the rush?” Daisy squeaked.

Tessa grinned. “It's time for lunch .”

And they curved out of the neighborhood, rushing towards downtown Willowbrook.

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Daisy

The fourth Madonna song clicked on the radio and Daisy tapped her foot against the floor.

The bedroom had a delicate glow about it with the setting sun on one side and the amber lights Daisy bought a few years ago on the other.

The warmth was meant to calm her down, but her mind was racing a million miles a minute.

The music, some of her favorite songs, played on repeat to set the fun mood.

Across from her, dancing in front of the walk-in closet, Tessa yanked out another dress.

This time it was long, reaching to the ankles, and had sequined beads speckled across the torso and lower skirts.

Tessa held it in front of her with a suggestive brow, the corner of her lip curling up in a grin.

“How about this one?” she asked. “I think it says ‘I’m a classy girl, but with a youthful, fun side.’ Right?”

Daisy eyed the dress. Butterflies swirled in her stomach.

She pressed her hand over her bellybutton, desperate to soothe the lunch they'd gotten from The Wilted Garden hours ago.

Nerves began plaguing her the moment lunch was finished.

Working at Fields' Herbals while it was raging busy couldn't even stop the fretting in her mind.

In fact, she managed to catch a glimpse of Ethan across the street when she was sweeping.

He hadn't seen her, but Daisy couldn't take her eyes away till he disappeared around the corner.

Her heart stammered and the butterflies fluttered through her as if she was a bright-eyed school girl.

Daisy shook her head. "Not that one."

"Okay," Tessa drawled, her eyes narrowing on her.

"Perhaps you're feeling more like a top and bottom situation?"

"She dived deeper into the closet before pulling out a skirt and ruffled blouse.

The skirt was dark and sleek, slightly flowing at the edges but tighter near the waist. The blouse had unfortunate ruffles across the breast, an old-fashioned trend she wished to forget.

"Now, this ," Tessa continued as she held the outfit up, "is a more mature look, I know, but men these days appreciate a mature woman. How about it?"

Daisy frowned. Did she really want Ethan to see her as a mature woman?

Tessa sighed. “Judging by your look, I’ll assume you’d like to pass.”

“Blessed be,” Daisy breathed. “I’m sorry, Tess.”

Leaving the clothes behind, Tessa took a seat on the edge of the bed beside her and reached across to lower the radio’s volume as the Madonna music carried on.

“What’s going on, flowers?” She reached to tuck a strand of Daisy’s long hair behind her ear.

“Don’t tell me you’re chickening out now! You’ve got a handsome knight in shining armor arriving in about an hour. ”

Daisy blushed. “I don’t think I’ve been this nervous since I first met Gary.”

“Really?” Tessa asked. “I thought you went on a few dates over the years.”

Daisy shrugged, twisting her hair around her finger nervously. “They weren’t anything serious,” she mumbled.

“So Ethan’s already serious, huh?” Tessa giggled, bumping her shoulder into Daisy’s.

Daisy let her head fall into her hands, unable to stop the embarrassment from showing.

“Relax, flowers,” Tessa cooed, running her hand over Daisy’s back. “I was only teasing. Is your date with Ethan really getting you this wound up?”

“The dates I’ve had after Gary felt forced, if that makes sense,” Daisy finally said.

“I was never ready, and it was never right. I pushed myself when I wasn’t actually meant to jump.

But now,” she paused, the smile finding her lips before she could catch it, “I feel something real for Ethan, Tess. It is so real for me, and it could all be because of that spell.”

Tessa frowned. “The spell?”

“What if he came back and asked me out on a date because I wanted it to happen?”

“Well, now,” Tessa shook her head, “we have no way of knowing that.”

Daisy shot up from the bed. “So shouldn’t I cancel the date until we know for certain?”

“Blessed be, no, Daisy!” Tessa exclaimed. “Are you truly that insecure about yourself?”

Daisy glared. “I am not insecure. This is a real concern.”

Tessa shook her head again as she crossed her legs. Her gaze was that of a disappointed mother. “Why can’t you just enjoy this?”

“If Ethan doesn’t really like me, why should I force him to go?” Daisy asked.

“It doesn’t have to be that negative, Daisy,” Tessa replied, her voice even and collected. “There’s nothing unusual about being nervous. Every woman and every girl gets nervous before their first dates. Don’t be ashamed of it.”

Daisy felt her embarrassment settle, but she stared into the closet still, the nerves

growing stronger.

“What if it turns out to all be real?”

Daisy frowned. “What?”

“The date,” Tessa replied. “Your feelings and Ethan’s feelings. What happens then? Wouldn’t you want to enjoy your night?”

The words sunk into her. Daisy pressed her lips together. Sometimes, without realizing it, Tessa managed to still surprise her. She knew very well that Tessa would grow to be a flourishing empath, but besides that and all the magic in the world, she proved herself to be a brilliant friend.

Despite that, Daisy felt the worry wade over her once more.

If the reason behind Ethan asking her out did coincide with the potion, it would mean that his interest in her would simply disappear.

Things would return to the way they were before, or worse.

Daisy swallowed down the stress, not wanting to disappoint Tessa any further.

Daisy couldn’t find the strength to conjure up another argument, even if she wanted to.

Instead, she waded back to the bed and took a seat beside her best friend.

“You’re right,” she finally said.

Tessa fist-bumped the air, the victory evident on her face. “Shall we go back to outfit

picking, then? There's still the hair and makeup, you know."

Daisy laughed, ready to tell her to carry on, when the phone started to ring. Holding her hand up to Tessa, Daisy raced out the room, tightening her hold on her warm bathrobe, and slid in front of the phone. She snatched it off the receiver right before the last ring finished.

"Hello?" she greeted, entirely breathless.

"Daisy! It's Grandma!"

Daisy's shoulders fell in relief. "Grandma Lotta," she said, pressing a hand to her heart. "You don't know how glad I am to hear from you."

"Whatever's the matter?" she huffed into the phone. "You sound winded! What's going on?"

"Nothing to worry about, Grandma," Daisy quickly said, leaning her shoulder against the wall. "I only wanted to hear your voice. It's been quite the week for me here."

"Really?" she asked. "I pray that the shop is treating you well. You know, you need to watch -"

"- How much I work, I know," Daisy finished. She smiled, taking all the reassurance she could get from her grandmother's presence. "You'll be happy to hear that Fields' Herbals has been flourishing lately."

"Flourishing?" Grandma Lotta repeated, the smile evident in her voice.

"The business has been skyrocketing," Daisy explained.

Telling another soul about the things that happened within the past week was relieving.

Daisy had known that her grandmother was an outrageously spectacular witch all her life and she wanted more time to disclose it all to her, but she hesitated on unpacking it all.

There wasn't a true need to get Grandma Lotta involved in something that could burden her to no end.

"For a few days straight, even," Daisy continued. "Honestly, Grandma, it was hard to believe at first, but we're soaking it up as much as we can. The business had...well, I'll say it had been resting on my shoulders for some time. This was a much needed relief."

Grandma Lotta was silent for a long moment.

Daisy could just imagine her sitting at her favorite rocking chair, one hand resting across her heart, another clutching at the phone, her head tilted back with eyes squeezed shut.

Her hair, once brown like Daisy's but grey with age, was pulled into a loose braid down her shoulder.

"What good work you've done, Daisy," Grandma Lotta cooed. "Your mother would be more than proud."

Daisy sighed and leaned her entire back against the wall. "I think she would be, too."

"Well," Grandma Lotta said after a long snuffle, "what're you up to now that you're off? Anything fun? It is a Friday, after all."

Daisy perked up. Perhaps she could revel in her date with Ethan, like Tessa had said. What if she never had the chance to do it again?

“I’ll actually be going on a date tonight, Grandma,” she replied.

“A date ?”

“Mhm,” Daisy said. “With Ethan -”

“Walker?” Grandma Lotta blurted, her voice loud with excitement.

Daisy laughed. “You got it. Do you remember him?”

“Oh, I know the name well enough,” she replied. “I never thought I’d live to see the day you’d be going back on dates.”

“Grandma,” Daisy whined. “I’ve told you of numerous dates I’ve been on since Gary.”

“Beeswax, that’s what those were,” she snapped. “This, this, is a real date. Ethan’s a good boy, from an even better family.” Grandma Lotta made a tsk sound. “Shame what happened in his first marriage, but sometimes, hardships like that make a man what he needs to be.”

Daisy smiled. “He is very kind, Grandma. I know you’d like him.”

“I’m sure I would.” Grandma Lotta sighed, the sound almost wistful in a way. “Daisy, there is only one thing that truly brightens my world, and it’s seeing you so happy.”

Daisy blushed, the smile stretching so wide it hurt her cheeks. “Grandma.”

“Knowing you are happy is all I need to get by,” she whispered. “And you deserve all the happiness the world has to offer.”

“I should see you more,” Daisy said in a small voice. For a moment she thought it had been in her head, but it wasn’t until she heard her grandmother’s sigh breathe through the intercom she realized she said it aloud. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited you recently, Grandma.”

“Silly Daisy,” Grandma Lotta cooed. “You have a successful business to run!”

“I promise I’ll be there soon,” Daisy added.

Grandma Lotta sighed, but didn’t argue. “Don’t you have a date to get ready for?”

Daisy laughed, eager to get off the phone but unwilling to say goodbye.

“I will see you soon,” Grandma Lotta said. “Go and enjoy your date, Daisy.”

“I love you, Grandma.”

Her smile could be heard over the phone. “And I love you more, Daisy.”

Daisy lowered the phone and set it back down on the receiver.

Making her way back towards her bedroom, she wrapped her arms tightly around her body.

A chill of excitement lingered within her still, blending alongside a constant blur of nerves.

She took every last bit of it. To experience her date with Ethan, she’d take it all.

Even if it did turn out to be a product of the spell that ominously loomed over her.

Tessa flung around when Daisy entered the room.

A stunning red dress was held up in front of her.

The bottom half came down to her knees, spreading out slightly as it tapered up towards her waist. From the waist up, the dress was form fitting and sleeveless, hugging her chin like a turtle neck.

Despite its simplicity, it felt oddly scandalous, a far too attractive dress for a woman like her to wear.

Daisy blushed. "I don't think that's appropriate."

"What's inappropriate about it?" Tessa pulled it back to look over it again before shrugging. "Looks perfect to me."

"I-I haven't worn it in years," Daisy said next, though her argument felt flat and Tessa obviously wasn't buying it. "I doubt it still fits."

"Perfect reason to try it on."

Daisy sighed, but took the dress from her outstretched hands.

Slipping within the walk-in closet, she threw off her robe and shimmied into the dress.

While it felt far too snug to reach over her hips for a moment, it fit like a glove in the next.

The zipper came up all the way with ease.

The skirt reached her bony knees. Daisy crept out from the closet, stepping into the frame of her mirror cautiously.

“Blessed be,” Tessa breathed, a hand over her heart. “If only the world realized that women over fifty could look like you do right now.”

Daisy covered her face but peeked through her fingers as she watched herself sway in the mirror. The confidence trickled into her slowly, like the beginning of rain, before it washed over her completely, the downpour fully falling over her. Daisy had never seen herself look so beautiful.

“How fast can you do my hair and makeup?” Daisy asked.

Tessa beamed, already grabbing onto the things she needed.

The next ten minutes were spent in the midst of intense concentration.

Tessa worked brilliantly across Daisy’s face, leaving the makeup to a minimum while highlighting the natural beauty in her face.

Her long brown hair normally flew all around her on a regular day, quite frizzy when Daisy couldn’t be bothered with it.

Tessa pulled her long strands into a bun at the back of her head, pulling a few long curls out to purposefully frame Daisy’s face shape.

By the time she was finished, Daisy stared into the mirror and wondered where that person came from.

Suddenly she was a different woman, one that she never expected herself to be.

Not that she meant it in a bad, vindictive way, but rather a kind of future she thought to be impossible for her.

Daisy touched the side of her face as if to make sure what she saw in the mirror was truly real life.

“Tessa,” she breathed. “I’m -”

Ring! Ring! Ring!

The musical doorbell rang through the house.

Daisy flung herself away from the mirror, frantically looking up at the clock and gaping at the time. “Blessed be, he’s here!”

“Breathe, flowers,” Tessa said giddily, a wide smile on her face.

“Here’s your purse!” She shoved it into her hands.

“And shawl,” she added while wrapping it loosely around Daisy’s shoulders.

When she was finished, Tessa gingerly held the sides of her face.

“No matter what happens,” she whispered, “you deserve this.”

Daisy beamed and left the bedroom behind her. With every step she took closer to the front door, her belly hummed with anticipatory nerves, but she merely let them push her forward. Once she reached the front door, Daisy exhaled, determined to not let this moment slip between her fingertips.

Daisy opened the door.

“Hello, Ethan.”

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Daisy

“When people mention lawyers, they don’t normally call them natural comedians, ” Daisy said as the live pianist transitioned to another song.

Reverie was the most popular and classy restaurant in all of Willowbrook.

It had opened a few years prior, and had gathered attention from outside of town.

Tourists came just for the elegant experience, not entirely sure why they felt at home the moment they entered.

Daisy knew the true reason quite well. Reverie was witch and warlock owned.

Small spells and gentle hexes were streamed constantly into the air, leading the patrons to always be at ease and enjoy the food even more than they expected.

The Witch Council Elders found themselves to be in a moral quandary in the matter of keeping the business open or not.

On one hand, Reverie happened to be manipulating the emotions and feelings of anyone who walked through their doors without their knowledge.

On the other hand, Reverie offered pleasure and happiness, lifting stress and raising spirits.

Either way, the business was still standing and welcoming patrons with open arms.

Ethan sat across from her, his long hair pulled behind his ears. He wore a suit, though it was more on the casual side. A flower poked out of his pocket. A shadow of peach fuzz grew along his jawline. He was ruggedly handsome, and Daisy doubted he was even aware of it.

“Well, most people don’t know me ,” Ethan teased before laughing at himself. “Let’s just say that my clients tend to find me on the amusing side.”

Daisy took a sip of her chardonnay, leaning forward curiously. “I’d love to hear about them.”

“My clients?”

She nodded eagerly.

Ethan laughed and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “What for? Y-You don’t want to hear about those stuffy complainers, do you?”

Daisy tilted her head at him. There was something charming about his shyness, about how he was reserved and not entirely secure with himself. The date had only carried on for an hour or so and she was entirely enthralled, not daring to pull her attention away from him for even a split second.

“They know you,” she replied with a shrug. “I want to get to know you. Sounds like the right way to go for me.”

Ethan’s lips parted, the surprise evident in his face.

For a moment, Daisy retracted, believing she’d overstepped or pressed too hard upon him.

Had she managed to ruin the entire night before it really began?

It wasn't like she wished for something like that.

Daisy shoved her thoughts away. The moment she dared to even think about wishes, the entire evening would come tumbling down.

She refocused herself on Ethan, giving him a small, embarrassed smile.

"Alright," he finally replied, a smile pulling back at his lips.

Daisy held back her relief.

"One of my clients, we'll call him John, came in the other day to discuss how he wanted to sue his previous employer," Ethan began, his eyes lighting up as he began to talk about his work.

"I hadn't met him in person yet, but I knew from my colleagues that John happened to have quite the 'long face.' Always sad looking.

So, I thought a good way to break the ice with your lawyer would be some practical jokes. "

Daisy giggled, unsure of where the story was heading.

Ethan leaned closer to her, his voice lowering. "Well, I came into the meeting room, and John was already there. I came walking around his seat, gearing up to deliver the ice breaker my kids told me to do: instead of giving him a hand shake, go for his leg. "

"W-What?" Daisy asked, already laughing. "I think your kids might've been trying to

embarrass you, Ethan.”

“You know what,” Ethan teased, giving her a small wink, “I think you might be right.”

Daisy laughed again, this time raising her glass to hide the feverish blush spreading across her nose.

“Anyways,” he continued, “I came around and reached for John’s leg to shake, already halfway through introducing myself, when I realized...” Ethan sighed and shook his head. “John, unfortunately, was suing his previous employer due to negligence that led to him losing his leg.”

Daisy gaped.

“Yeah,” Ethan drawled. “But, before you start second guessing this entire date, I’ll have you know that John found it to be very funny.”

Daisy laughed. “Seriously?”

“Believe me, I was more surprised than you are now,” he said. “But he laughed it off and made some jokes himself. Needless to say, we get along quite well now.”

They laughed together as the busy restaurant carried on all around them.

When the laughter settled, their entrees arrived.

Grilled steak and luscious mash potatoes decorated the steaming plates, and a stunning and deeply savory demi-glace oozed across the food.

The steak, Daisy noticed, was cooked to a brilliant medium rare, the brick red color

shimmering with moisture.

“This is my first time at Reverie , ” Daisy said. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to the food.”

Ethan grinned. “I’ve become a pretty big foodie these past few years,” he mentioned. “So I’ve been looking forward to it, too.”

Daisy met his gaze and felt as though she would have melted beneath it. Pulling herself away sharply, she stared into her plate, clutching at her fork and ignoring the way her heart slammed against her chest.

“How does your business treat you these days?” Ethan watched her closely. “It’s looked pretty busy lately.”

Daisy gulped, containing her nerves after a quick sip of wine. “More than busy,” she said with a laugh. “More than we’ve seen in a while. I won’t call it anything but a blessing.”

“It can still be a lot to handle,” Ethan added. “Are you okay?”

Daisy looked up at him, her eyes growing wide.

There was nothing short of genuine interest in his eyes, and the notion was more startling than she realized.

She had long forgotten what it was like to have a stranger enter one's life with the intention of becoming something more.

It was a trust fall, one that Daisy found herself to be a bit rusty with.

“I’m handling it,” Daisy replied with a small smile that she hoped was reassuring.

The spell lingered in the back of her mind, but she didn’t dare give it the time it needed to overtake her thoughts.

“Anyways, I wouldn’t trade it for anything else.

Seeing the patrons happy is more than I could ever ask for. ”

Ethan’s smile grew till dimples appeared on his cheeks. “You haven’t changed, you know. Since high school. You’re the same Daisy.”

“Oh, well,” she fumbled, too embarrassed to meet his gaze. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“I remember in English class one year, we had this huge project,” Ethan began, not even hesitating for a second.

“And no one else in your group was helping. They were talking, messing around, not paying attention. I was in the other group, but I-I saw your frustration get louder and louder. But when the teacher came by to ask how it went, you said: ‘I’m -’

“- Handling it,” Daisy whispered. She lowered her fork, ignoring how it clattered against the plate. “You remember that?”

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck, a habit, it seemed, for when he got nervous. “I try to remember the important things,” he murmured. “And I remember you, Daisy.”

Daisy couldn’t count how many times that night that Ethan managed to render her speechless.

She stared across the table at him, the entire world fading away all around them.

He was all she could see, and there wasn't any other way she wanted it.

Immediately she needed him to know how important he was to her, in case he was still questioning it.

"How are your kids?" she asked. "Daniel and...and Vivian, right? Vivi?"

Ethan beamed. "Exactly right." The tension left his shoulders the moment he talked about his kids.

"Well, Daniel started college last year, so it's his spring semester of freshman year.

Vivi is a junior at the same school. They've both excelled so quickly that it's hard to believe.

Dan took a hankering to the debate team and has championships in the next few months. "

"A debater, huh?" Daisy laughed. "I remember him being a shy youngster. Not much for crowds."

Ethan's smile grew wistful. "He's grown so much since then," he murmured. "You know, I..." His words grew quiet and trailed off.

Daisy reached, not even thinking when she grabbed onto his hand. "You're okay," she said. "Don't talk about things you aren't comfortable sharing. You won't hurt my feelings, if that's what bothers you."

Ethan's eyes trailed over Daisy's face, the smile returning to his lips.

"I always thought Dan would be that small, reclusive kid," he said.

“After his mom left, I didn’t think he was capable of change, or that I would be the one to bring it along.

But...pain comes, and pain goes. All we can do is keep marching forward.

Once the pain makes us stop, that’s when hope is lost.” Ethan chuckled, his cheeks growing flushed as he became embarrassed. “You know?”

“I can’t imagine a better father for Dan and Vivi.”

Ethan met her gaze, lips parted. “What?”

“You should give yourself more credit,” she said quietly.

“Not once did anyone in Willowbrook question the upbringing of those kids. You became the father they needed overnight. No matter what your wife left you with, no matter what way she left you. I never saw you crumble.” Daisy intertwined her fingers around his, giving him a tight squeeze. “It is beyond admirable, Ethan.”

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Their laced hands sent chills through Daisy's spine.

He ran his thumb across her hand, his gaze following the movement with a gentle smile pulling across his lips.

Daisy was caught in a trance, entirely engrossed by him and unable to pull away.

She didn't even want to try. The wonderful food and delectable wine mattered little when it came to the true gift sitting across the table from her.

As a comfortable silence settled over them, Daisy looked down to her food, her hand humming with energy as Ethan's hold remained tight around her.

The longer she concentrated on the feeling, the quicker her mind began to imagine how it would be when it disappeared.

The emptiness, the hollowness, was that something she could endure another time?

Already she'd fallen heavily into Ethan, just from the fledgling interaction, and she couldn't fathom what it would be like when the spell's effects were washed away.

What would remain of this?

Daisy slowly pulled her hand out of his. "Ethan," she began in a small voice, "have you ever...used magic to get something that you really wanted?"

"Something I really wanted," he repeated, setting his fork down against his plate. If

he was confused by the question, he worked hard not to show it. Ethan pressed his lips together. “Well, how honest are we being?”

“Entirely,” Daisy murmured.

Ethan smiled mischievously. “I may have used an illusionary spell to hide my wrinkles for an hour or two,” he confessed sheepishly. He sighed before waving a hand across his face a few times, as if he was shaking the magic away.

When he lowered his hand, Daisy barely noticed the difference.

If anything, something felt more homey about his face.

Simple lines creased around his lips, signs of a lifetime full of smiles.

Short wrinkles curled around his eyes, but Daisy only recognized it as moments of laughter permanently etched onto one’s face.

He only looked more like himself, and Daisy was so glad to see every bit of it.

“Perfect,” she cooed, barely even realizing the word left her mouth.

Ethan grinned, his eyes finding her lips for a moment, pulling the very breath from the back of her throat. “If a spell isn’t hurting anyone, Daisy, it’s harmless,” he said. “That’s what you were asking, right?”

She nodded.

“Then that’s my honest opinion.” He grasped his wine glass and held it up for a toast. “But, in the meantime: to our perfect selves,” he said.

“To our perfect selves,” Daisy agreed, raising her glass and tapping the rim against his own. The short ding rang through the rowdy restaurant, and Daisy beamed, unable to hide the happiness rushing through her.

The rest of the dinner continued on in a pleasurable way.

They finished their meals and scooped their way through a desert they could hardly stomach.

And when Ethan paid the bill, Daisy eyed the tip he entered when he turned away, and held back her immense pleasure at his kind self.

There wasn't a doubt she had about the man who was sweetly walking her home.

Somehow, after all that time, Gary had been waiting for her to find Ethan, and he had been more patient than she had ever been.

The evening air was warm that night. It smelt of faraway rain and leftover heat from the blistering afternoon.

Daisy was woozy from the dinner and the feeling of Ethan's hand wrapped around her own.

He kept her close to his side, walking entirely in time with her, never once changing their pace.

The quiet around them was more than comfortable, as if each other's presence was all they could've asked for.

“You know,” Ethan finally said, “I feel as though I've been waiting for this moment since elementary school.”

Daisy laughed. “Don’t tease.”

Tugging on her hand, Ethan paused in the middle of the sidewalk. “Daisy,” he said, his voice firm but not aggressive.

She turned, a street light casting a hazy amber glow down upon her. “Ethan.”

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “And, every day, I’ll wish I would’ve said it sooner.”

The breath hitched in the back of Daisy’s throat.

The word wish hung on the back of her mind as he stepped closer, entering the disc of light she already stood in.

The entire town of Willowbrook faded away.

There was no longer any distance between them, only the gentle inhales and sharp exhales they both gave in anticipation.

Ethan dipped his head, his lips testing and wanting before capturing her own in a gentle kiss.

The motion made Daisy’s legs wobble till he snaked an arm around her waist, keeping her upright.

She touched the side of his face, the scratchiness of his stubble rubbing against her palm.

When he pulled away, Daisy was breathless and whole again, holding onto him as though she would disappear the moment she let go.

But, then again, as Ethan led the way to her house, Daisy wondered how long it would be till it did all fade away, if his feelings came from the spell. The fear was as resounding as the pleasure, the emotions clashing through Daisy's life like an unstoppable hurricane.

Daisy clutched onto his hand as they walked further into the night.

Daisy

A grey hue had overtaken the sky early that morning.

Daisy stared up as she walked alongside Tessa, her eyes stuck on a flock of geese that made their timely flight above them.

The previous night's events with Ethan remained prominent in the back of her mind.

Every time she managed to day dream, to drift away from what she needed to do, Daisy found herself caught in an irreversible reverie, one that had entirely everything to do with the man next door.

"You've got that look on your face again," Tessa teased.

Daisy shrugged, heat rising to the center of her cheeks. "There is hardly a look."

"Let me guess," she continued, reaching to pinch Daisy's elbow playfully. "You're thinking about what a great date you had with Ethan. Is that it?"

Smiling sheepishly, Daisy pushed her best friend's hands off from around her, the giggles already filling the morning air, when it was far too early for a laugh.

And as the laughter settled, Daisy remembered what it was they had planned for the dreary day.

If she had the option of reliving her date for all the hours of the day, Daisy would

have rather done that instead of heading towards another one of her “enemies” businesses.

Ashford Groceries was the largest supermarket in Willowbrook.

That might make a mind believe it to be a wide store, or even one with multiple stories, filled to the brim with products.

But that wasn’t entirely the case. Willowbrook’s size allowed it to cater to a small population, which meant a handful of grocery stores were enough to feed all the mouths within.

Ashford Groceries had been around long before Fields’ Herbals , if that could be believed.

Sitting on the corner of the neighborhood and downtown, it was the perfect stop for families to make before heading home for the day.

Unfortunately for Daisy and Tessa, they were not seeking out some after work groceries.

“What on earth could you two be smiling about?” a familiar older woman’s voice asked incredulously.

As they carried on past Daisy’s house, they realized that a familiar face watched them from a shrouded porch, the tall bushes in front almost blocking them out entirely. Daisy glanced over, craning her neck to try and get a glimpse at them.

“Mrs. Witherford!”

Without waiting for Tessa, Daisy ran up the driveway and rushed around the

Witherford residence's porch, eager to see the old woman.

She hadn't realized they'd come home from the hospital after her dramatic fall off the ladder.

As Daisy ran up to her, she whispered a mantra in the back of her head, desperate to make sure that the curse placed upon her did not truly harm an old woman like Mrs. Witherford.

"Now what're you gawking at?" Old Lady Witherford snapped when Daisy whipped around the porch.

Old Lady Witherford looked quite small and frail in her wide wheelchair.

The sleek black chair seemed incredibly out of the ordinary on her front porch, where a few rocking chairs sat empty beside her.

The old woman's leg had been wrapped with a thick cast and was raised slightly, her toes sticking out of the very tip.

She looked normal besides that, but Daisy couldn't shake the growing feeling of dread within her stomach.

Perhaps it was the wheelchair that made Mrs. Witherford look extraordinarily smaller than she truly was.

Perhaps it was the cast itself, which probably weighed the same as the old lady, that made her seem sickly.

Even though Daisy couldn't put her finger on it, there was one thing she was more than aware of.

Everything ailing Old Lady Witherford came from Daisy, and Daisy alone .

Daisy gulped. “That’s quite the cast, Mrs. Witherford.”

“The doctors said I broke my leg,” she explained with a dismissive wave.

“Blessed be,” Daisy whispered as she trekked closer.

Mrs. Witherford eyed her. “What’s got you looking so pale? I told you before, and I’ll tell you again,” she paused to waggle that familiar judgmental finger in the air, “all the time you spend in that shop drains the color from your face! Get some sun!”

Ignoring her, Daisy stepped closer as Tessa’s footsteps approached the base of the porch. “I made some fresh strawberry jam the other day,” Daisy said. “Why don’t I bring you some later, and if you need any help with anything I can -”

“The doctor didn’t say I was dying now, did he?”

Daisy blinked. “Well, I don’t know your doctor, but -”

“Then what’s all the fuss about? I am plenty fine, Daisy,” Mrs. Witherford snapped. “Until you can get me a ladder I don’t have to stand on, I don’t need no assistance!”

“What’s that about a ladder?”

Mrs. Witherford gestured over her shoulder towards the backyard. “You won’t find me standing on ladders anytime soon,” she mumbled, obviously displeased.

“ Daisy! ” Tessa whispered from the first few steps. She waved her hand, mouthing the words let’s go repeatedly.

Turning back to Mrs. Witherford, Daisy searched for the words to say.

The guilt rested so easily within her, practically on the tip of her tongue, that she could hardly imagine walking away without taking the blame for the old woman's fall.

Even if she didn't claim the fault for the accident, the truth of the matter would lie in the forefront of Daisy's mind.

Pressing her lips together, Daisy reached to give the old woman's hand a quick squeeze before turning around on her heel.

The pair made their way back down Old Lady Witherford's driveway, and onwards towards town.

A few mourning doves flew by, landing on the empty streets and waddling their way around in search of food.

Daisy kept her gaze focused forward, entirely aware of how Tessa watched her, waiting to hear some sort of reasoning as to why she went to speak to the old gossip.

But the silence seemed to be enough to convince Tessa not to ask, as Daisy was too involved in her racing mind to even think about explaining.

After a while, they reached their destination.

Ashford Groceries expelled amber lights from their sliding doors.

Though the rest of the town was quiet and rather dreary, the grocery store remained a bright fixture at the border of downtown Willowbrook, where Fields' Herbals waited patiently for its doors to be opened to the public.

“Should I go in alone?” Tessa asked when they neared the front doors.

Daisy’s brow rose. “What for?” She smirked, nudging her shoulder against Tessa’s playfully. “Think I’m gonna fist-fight Drusilla in her own store?”

Tessa laughed. “Daisy, if I thought you’d do something like that, I would’ve sold tickets to a crowd before going in.” Her face grew serious. “You seem more affected than I thought in regards to all of this.”

“It’s hard not to be,” Daisy murmured.

Tessa sighed. “And I wouldn’t dare to argue that fact. But Drusilla Ashford...she’s something else in comparison to someone like Marigold.”

“Believe me,” Daisy replied, “I know.”

“So if you want me to go in alone, then I -”

Daisy reached to clasp down on Tessa’s hand. “The hate Drusilla houses for me is nothing more than consequences from her own actions. If she wishes to hold onto it still, that’s her prerogative, not mine.”

Tessa pressed her lips together. “It became your prerogative the moment she placed that curse on you.”

“Do you think she did it?”

“A woman scorned is capable of more than we might realize.”

Daisy, now filled with determination to be rid of the curse that managed to put Old Lady Witherford in a wheelchair, marched forward into Ashford Groceries .

That early in the morning, the store was incredibly quiet.

Ever since Daisy was in grade school, the entire Ashford family worked within the store.

Whether it be the mother or father, a daughter or a cousin, they spent their spare time in Ashford Groceries .

Daisy was in the same class as Drusilla every year, and yet they never grew close enough to be considered friends.

It was as if they were bound to be something else entirely, a path Daisy never chose but was placed upon after Drusilla's irreversible actions in their last years of high school.

A teenage girl was near the front of the store, running a rag across the main counter.

Daisy stepped towards her. "Excuse me," she politely began.

"Good morning," the girl said in a sweet voice.

"I'm looking for -"

A familiar face whipped around one of the aisles, storming forward before standing directly behind the young girl.

Voluminous grey hair streaked with strands of pure white were pulled into a loose braid down Drusilla Ashford's shoulder.

She was as stunning as she was in grade school, with deeply tanned skin and no need for the slightest tint of makeup.

Her natural beauty alone attracted countless opportunities to Drusilla's hands, but it was the inevitable darkness within that drove them all away.

"What a surprise," Drusilla drawled as her sharp gaze struck them. "Daisy Fields walks into my family store."

Daisy pulled the best smile she could across her lips. "It's been a long time, hasn't it? The store looks -"

"My daughter, Lorna," Drusilla interjected, her hands gripping onto the young girl's shoulders tightly, "excelled through school, and has just received a full-ride scholarship to the most prestigious -"

"Mom," Lorna whined, an embarrassed pink hue sliding across her cheeks.

Drusilla continued, entirely unbothered. "The most prestigious school on this coast. Isn't that marvellous, Daisy? My eldest girl, following in her mother's footsteps."

Daisy pressed her lips together, more than aware of where the conversation was heading. "Congratulations," she managed to say before Drusilla began ranting again.

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“Lorna will be the first in multiple generations to get out of Willowbrook,” she continued, her praising voice beginning to warp into something sharp and calloused.

“No more working at the store with the rest of the Ashfords. Luckily for dear Lorna,” Drusilla paused, leaning over the counter with a venomous stare, “ she didn’t have a backstabbing classmate to worry about. ”

Daisy sighed. Not that she expected the woman to forget the issues of their past, but Daisy hardly expected her young daughter to be caught in the middle.

Perhaps it was Drusilla who sent the potion.

The anger she held could have fostered a vengeful future, a need to see things follow the story Drusilla had written for herself.

“Can we speak in private, Drusilla?” Daisy asked.

Drusilla glanced between Daisy and Tessa before she rolled her eyes and let her hands fall off from around her daughter’s shoulders.

“Well, I wouldn’t want your presence to disturb my customers, would I?

” With a snarky smirk, Drusilla twisted around from behind the counter.

Her airy dress flowed behind her as she led the way to the back of Ashford Groceries

.

Near the back of the store were Drusilla's parents.

They stocked cans in the aisles, watching warily as Daisy passed them by.

She offered them a polite smile, but merely received a pressing stare in return.

Taking in a deep breath, Daisy did her best to remind herself that the anger Drusilla felt was nothing she was capable of preventing.

The truth of the matter was, simply, that Drusilla had been caught in the wrong and she couldn't handle the following consequences. That was hardly Daisy's fault.

Drusilla led them into a back store room that doubled as a small office.

She curved around the long desk and took a seat, returning to whatever work she was in the middle of doing.

Across from her were a few monitors showing the security camera's footage, one aimed directly at the front doors.

Daisy looked over her shoulder at Tessa, who noticed it in the same breath.

Drusilla saw them enter the moment they did.

"I presume you aren't here to request special shampoo be delivered to the store," Drusilla muttered as she leaned back in her seat. "Unlike some other people in Willowbrook, I happen to be too busy for useless conversation."

Daisy stepped closer to the desk. "Can't we talk about our issues, Drusilla? I-I can hardly remember how many years it's been since -"

“Thirty five.”

“What?”

Drusilla huffed, tapping her long nails against the desk. “It’s been thirty five years,” she murmured. “Thirty five years since you ruined my future. Funny how easy it is for you to forget, isn’t it?”

Tessa was about to step forward and argue, but Daisy stuck her hand out.

“What you so readily blame me for, Drusilla, is no one’s fault other than your own.

” Daisy’s confidence stuttered, but she kept her head up.

It was her own fight, one that she wholeheartedly knew herself to be on the right side of.

If she couldn’t stand up for herself, what was the point in coming in the first place?

“Did you truly think you’d be rewarded for stealing another student’s essay?

That your university wouldn’t have found out at the end of the day, even without my intervention? ”

Drusilla launched to her feet. “Look around, Daisy! Not everything is simply handed to you! Some of us need to sacrifice our morality in order to achieve the things we deserve!”

“Is that the lesson you wish to teach your daughter?”

“You have no right to talk about my Lorna.”

Daisy pressed forward. “Maybe not,” she snapped. “But I have a right to defend what I did. Honestly, Drusilla, did you think I’d let you use the essay I wrote about my lack of a father? About something so personally mine ?”

“Just because you chose to stay in Willowbrook doesn’t mean that I needed to succumb to the same fate.”

“If you couldn’t get out through your own merit,” Daisy threw her hands up in exasperation, “perhaps you were never meant to!”

Drusilla began to curve around the desk, the anger growing so sharply within her that her cheeks took on a scarlet coloring. “You know, Daisy, you are the most -”

Tessa shot forward, stepping directly between the bickering pair.

She raised her hands out to either side, a warmth beginning to radiate from the center of her palms. The magic seeped out of her skin unseen, filling the atmosphere with a calming draft.

Lavender, Tessa’s signature relaxing scent, slipped beneath Daisy’s nostrils.

Instantly, the growing irritation trailed out of her.

Across the way, Daisy watched Drusilla’s shoulders droop, though her harsh stare and tugging frown never left.

“I think we can all agree that there are some things in the past that cannot be forgotten or forgiven,” Tessa said as she turned to face Drusilla. “Whatever it is, nothing can defend placing a curse upon another witch.”

Drusilla’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Does your anger justify putting a curse on Daisy? What would your daughter think if she knew her mother would go to such lengths for revenge?”

Whatever calming magic Tessa managed to seep into the room dissipated in seconds. The relentless anger Drusilla held within her chest surged to the forefront once more, her shocked look becoming something else entirely.

“Do you know how long I’ve worked alongside the Witch Council?” Drusilla snapped, her hands firmly against her hips. “How long I’ve had their favor? They’re the reason we’ve had this store for so long, the reason Lorna had the chance to get into a good school in the first place!”

Drusilla’s voice reached a higher pitch as she screeched, “If you think for one second I’d risk everything I have worked for just to curse someone like Daisy, you don’t know me at all! The Council could expel me from town if I did something like that! Then where would I go?”

“If you’re so confident,” Daisy said, stepping out from behind Tessa, “then you’ll let me perform a truth spell, won’t you?”

Drusilla jerked backwards. “I am not letting the likes of you get your hands on me!”

“So you expect us to just believe you? After all those nice things you said about me?”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “Either way, you can’t force a spell on me.”

“Look,” Daisy snapped, stepping closer to the witch, “do what you will, but Tessa and I have more than enough reason to believe you cursed me from our history alone. Refuse a truth spell at my hands, and I’ll be forced to go to the Witch Council, where they can do it themselves.

” Daisy shrugged. “Which would you prefer?”

Drusilla went still, her eyes glancing between Daisy and Tessa.

To have a complaint brought up to the Witch Council was just as bad as being guilty.

The Elders would fix their eye on the magic user for months on end, even years, just to make sure there wasn’t any truth behind the original complaint.

Drusilla was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and Daisy could only hope she’d choose the right path to go down.

Falling into her seat with a loud, annoyed huff, Drusilla crossed her arms. “Do the truth spell,” she snapped through clenched teeth.

Daisy breathed a sigh of relief and walked forward. In the same fashion as Marigold, Daisy placed her dominant hand over Drusilla’s forehead. With her thumb pressing into her skin, the energy flowed between them instantly.

A world of memories flashed through Daisy’s mind.

When she saw herself, younger and unscarred, Daisy jerked backwards, almost surprised enough to break the spell before finding what she needed.

But she stayed focused, searching through the pool of memories till she landed on the most recent weeks.

In the end, Daisy and Tessa’s speculations were proved wrong.

Drusilla Ashford held grudges like a professional, but could hardly be considered a villain.

Daisy pulled her hand away, slightly drained but satisfied. Turning, she met Tessa's gaze and shook her head.

"Happy?" Drusilla snapped.

Daisy faced her. "No, Dru. We happened to be friendly once, didn't we?"

With her slender brow knitted together thoughtfully, Drusilla stared up at her with widening eyes.

For a moment, a recognizable familiarity passed through her gaze.

Daisy grew hopeful. Perhaps the past could be left where it belonged, and all the trouble she went through could end up with a renewed friendship from her childhood.

But then a sneer crept over Drusilla's face, and the recognition was gone.

"It's the funniest thing," Drusilla murmured. "I can't seem to remember."

Daisy pressed her lips together. Whatever she wished to hear wouldn't be leaving Drusilla's mouth anytime soon. Turning around without another word, Daisy pulled Tessa out of the back storeroom along with her.

Ashford Groceries was beginning to get some early morning customers when they reentered the storefront.

Willowbrook remained gloomy and quiet as they stepped back outside, the humidity almost sucking the air right out of them.

There was only one thought in Daisy's mind, and it resembled the grey atmosphere all around her.

Who would have done this to me?

Daisy

“I think this level of disappointment requires three scoops of ice cream,” Tessa was in the middle of saying as they walked through downtown Willowbrook.

Daisy raised a brow. “It’s hardly even nine in the morning.

” Besides that obvious point, Daisy had a peculiar swirling sensation in her stomach.

Perhaps it came from her empty belly, or the fact that all she’d consumed by that point was a cup of ginger tea.

Daisy shook her head. It was all the fuss over the potion and the hectic life it brought.

“We’re old enough to choose to have ice cream for breakfast, aren’t we?”

Daisy pressed against her stomach. “I’ll pass on that one.”

“What’s with the frown and,” Tessa paused, waving her hand in a whimsical fashion around Daisy’s face, “that energy all over you?”

“I didn’t think I had a reason to be all that happy.”

“You heard me mention ice cream for breakfast, didn’t you?”

Daisy chuckled lightly. “This situation has got me too wound up for anything simple and nice,” she murmured. “You know what I realized?”

“Hm?”

“If Drusilla and Marigold passed the truth spell,” Daisy began, “Then that would mean there’s only one person left in Willowbrook who’d have reason and enough power to curse me like this.”

Tessa tilted her head, not a lick of recognition crossing her face. “I-I don’t get it.”

“Sebastian Crowe!” Daisy shook her head as she playfully bumped into Tessa’s shoulder. “Maybe some ice cream would help your noggin this morning.”

“My plan all along,” Tessa teased, though a serious expression was beginning to stretch across her face.

She twisted her arm around Daisy, pulling her close.

The calming energy wafted off of her in short bursts.

“That Sebastian Crowe. Always gave me a bad feeling, even before everything he did.” She shook her head, grumbling something beneath her breath.

Daisy didn’t need any reminders about Sebastian Crowe’s character.

Out of all three of the suspects they’d managed to think up, he was the most serious, the most powerful, the most inherently dangerous.

Maybe women like Marigold and Drusilla gathered the courage to act upon their anger, but it would never amount to the power of a curse.

Someone like Sebastian Crowe, who came from a legendary family of Willowbrook-born witches and warlocks, was more than capable.

“We can’t handle him like the others,” Daisy said.

Tessa’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Can you imagine trying to talk a man like him down?” She shook her head. “The only reason Sebastian ever listened to is his own. We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“I’d call him crazy, but I wouldn’t go so far as to think him capable of real harm.”

Daisy eyed her. “Is that your expertise as an empath, or as my friend?”

Tessa hesitated. Even if she didn’t say it, the look on her face proved it all. There was a sort of fear there, where Sebastian was concerned.

“We can get the Council involved this time,” Tessa said.

“I don’t -”

“Why not?” she blurted. “After everything he did, Daisy, how can the Council not be concerned? He is a magic user!”

Daisy pressed her lips together.

“All we’d have to do is tell the Elders what he did.”

“No,” Daisy said.

Tessa tilted her head.

“I-I can’t, Tess,” she murmured. “Sebastian was supposed to be my friend after Gary passed. The hurt, the betrayal, of how he tried to manipulate me...it isn’t a pain I’m

ready to give away so easily.” Her stare hardened. “I plan on handling this myself.”

After a moment of silence, the pair kept on walking, Tessa’s hold over her arm growing tighter the further they went.

Daisy, then, grew overwhelmed with emotion at the idea of not having Tessa around.

Everything in her life would’ve been different if it wasn’t for her best friend, especially in these very moments.

Tessa steered them through downtown, but slipped past the local ice cream parlour.

When Daisy was about to ask where they were headed, they stepped into a courtyard, where garden benches and trimmed bushes lined up to create a cozy seating area in the shade.

The local animal shelter had turned the courtyard into an adoption expo, with kennels and roped areas to section off the different strays.

Dogs yipped from their kennels, standing over each other to get a look at the street.

Cats curled within their carriers, not caring for the noise too much.

At the center of it all, little old Anne wandered about the small path between the cages. She pushed around a tray of food and bowls, struggling to handle the excited animals and prepare their breakfasts.

“Changed your mind on the ice cream?” Daisy asked.

Tessa shrugged sheepishly. “Maybe playing with some dogs would help you feel better.”

The pair entered the courtyard eagerly, surprised to not see any interested patrons.

Despite being early in the morning, locals and tourists lingered in the streets, window shopping and slipping into cafes.

A few glanced in their direction, but didn't pay the animals' attention.

Daisy frowned. Since when was adopting strays unpopular?

"Morning, you two!" Anne called out from within the pack. "Come to play with the animals?"

Tessa grinned eagerly, already stepping within one of the kennels.

She had a wondrous way with animals, which happened to be a side effect from the empath training.

Not only had she grown up with handfals of dogs and cats, but Tessa's inherent ability naturally drew them closer to her.

She knelt in the kennel, greedily swooping the dogs up.

Their frantic excitement settled into a need for human contact.

"Are you running all this yourself, Anne?" Daisy asked as she twisted around the cages to help the older woman feed the rowdy animals.

A few dogs, too mixed to know exactly what they were, leapt to lick at Daisy's hands.

She gasped, holding back a loud laugh as the animals howled and barked for her

attention.

“Well,” Anne breathed, “you know how things are!”

“Sure, but this seems like quite the feat for one person.” Daisy scooped into the kibble, filling bowls and lowering them into crates. “I remembered that you volunteer with the local shelter, can they send some more help?”

Anne shook her head. “Everyone else is quite involved in more important work, Daisy. Unfortunately for Willowbrook, there isn’t a great need for strays, it seems.”

“When is there never a need for strays?” Daisy shook her head and huffed.

“Only so many volunteers can be spared,” Anne continued.

“Especially for cases like ours. All these creatures are out of a home! I’m afraid for their future, if the event happens to go as poorly as suspected.

” Turning away, Anne began to push the cart through the pathway, her eyes kind but her smile heavy with sorrow.

Daisy raised her hands, overlooking the crowds beginning to gather as the shops and restaurants slowly opened their doors.

Her gaze landed on small groups of children, not too many adults with them.

Hope rose in her chest. If there was one thing children wanted to do, it had to be to play with as many dogs as they wanted.

And yet, Daisy watched them pass the adoption center by, not giving them a second glance.

Her hands tightened into fists. There were posters hanging around the courtyard, a few within downtown itself.

Why wasn't there a crowd at the adoption center already?

The thought that came to Daisy's mind was dangerous and foolish, though she couldn't quite get rid of it.

While the spell resting against her skin was something with dark tidings, Daisy couldn't shake the feeling of its power.

Anything she wished came true, it seemed.

What happened when she used it to her own will, shaking the curse into something more positive than negative?

She glanced over her shoulder at Tessa. The empath watched her closely, as if she could sense her thoughts from the energy wafting off her.

Daisy breathed in deeply. "I wish -"

"Hey!" Tessa hissed as she rose from the kennel, stepping over the rowdy animals to follow the path towards Daisy. Fur and stray hairs coated Tessa's clothes, down to her feet. "You know you can't say that, Daisy!"

"Why not?"

Tessa's eyes widened. "That's thinking that can get the Witch Council involved. You know that."

"Does it make it inherently bad if I use the spell to get these dogs adopted?"

“I can’t answer that.”

Daisy raised a brow. “Why?”

“Because,” Tessa mumbled irritably as she crossed her arms tightly over her chest, “I would tell you to say the spell when we both know it isn’t the right thing to do.”

Daisy looked over the crates of animals.

They whined and howled relentlessly for some sort of attention.

Each sound broke her heart more. To her, there wasn’t a need for such despair, for the animals to be wallowing when they didn’t need to be.

Countless families lay waiting for them, unaware that a stray dog was what they were missing.

Was it so wrong for Daisy to help them find happiness?

She knew what she was going to do long before Tessa interjected and tried to get her to choose otherwise.

Daisy thought about her night with Ethan, and how he made the argument for harmful magic that affected others, and how there was a fine line between morally good and morally bad.

What she was set on doing was something good for everyone, from the smallest dog to Anne herself.

“I wish,” Daisy began, ignoring the feeling of Tessa’s hand clamping down on her elbow, “I wish all these animals could find good, loving homes.”

There was an eerie stillness all around them as Anne came back to the crates. She tossed toys into the pens, reaching in to scratch behind a few ears with a smile growing across her face. She waddled through the path till she came back to Daisy and Tessa.

“What are you two whispering about over here?” Anne teased.

Daisy had her gaze focused on downtown, waiting for the onslaught of people to arrive. A moment or two passed, Anne and Tessa deep in conversation, and not a thing had happened. The stillness remained, the animals beginning to settle down and curl up within their crates.

“Tessa tells me you’re disappointed in the turn out,” Anne said as she grasped onto Daisy’s wrist, pulling her over to them. “These sorts of things happen, Daisy. They happen more times than not.”

Daisy pressed her lips together. “Aren’t you upset?”

“If I was, would that help the animals any more?”

“I-I suppose not, but -”

Anne reached down into one of the pens and retrieved a golden puppy, whose paws were far too large for his small body. The rowdy dog yawned so widely that a sharp, high-pitched howl came out.

“These dear animals will remain, Daisy, even when the world seems to forget they exist,” Anne said in a gentle voice.

“Sometimes, all we can do is build the bridge, but we are incapable of forcing people through. You understand that, don’t you?”

Whatever will be, will be.” She shrugged and held the puppy up in front of her face as he licked and nipped at her nose.

Anne laughed, the smile filling her aged face.

Daisy watched the old woman’s interaction with the puppy, and could only feel herself grow seeped in dread.

If the spell hadn’t worked at that moment, perhaps it had ill intentions only, and was so strong it rendered Daisy incapable of manipulating it.

As the defeat began to sink into her, footsteps grew louder from the direction of downtown, muffled mingling growing more and more clear.

Daisy turned, and her eyes went wide.

A crowd of people, families and singles, came rushing towards the adoption center.

The animals sensed their approach and grew rowdy once more, standing up on the sides of their crates, desperate to capture a bit of their attention.

Anne placed the puppy back in its crate before throwing her hands in the air, rushing to collect adoption forms and meet the oncoming crowd.

Before Daisy could offer help, Tessa snatched onto her wrist, pulling the pair away from the crates.

“You can’t pick and choose when the spell is good and when the spell is bad, Daisy,” Tessa muttered.

“Tell me this is a bad thing!”

Tessa shook her head. “You know I can’t. But I can’t tell you this is what we should be doing, either.”

Daisy’s spirits fell as Tessa turned back to the event, rushing forward to help Anne with her paperwork.

People were already picking out animals, already waiting for their adoption forms and leashes.

While the spell obviously worked, Daisy couldn’t ignore the growing unpleasantness in her stomach.

It was too much power, too much of an ability to stand between right and wrong yet not realize which was which.

Forgetting about her squabbling morals, Daisy pressed forward, determined to see Anne through with her volunteer work.

A few hours passed, and the kennels were wiped clean of every dog, cat, and bird.

There wasn’t a single stray left behind.

As they cleaned up the crates, putting the courtyard back to what it once was, Anne’s shoulders shuddered and trembled as she fought away her tears.

Daisy and Tessa were already reaching for her before they even realized it, feeling the change in her emotions almost instantly.

Anne waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about me,” she mumbled in a quiet voice, though the tears were already streaming down the sides of her face. “There isn’t an ounce of sadness here, believe that.”

“But you’re crying,” Daisy murmured, already pulling the woman into a tight embrace.

“Happy tears, dear.” Anne breathed deeply against her shoulder. “Purely happy tears.”

Daisy held the woman as she wept, one hand reaching out to grasp onto Tessa’s.

The three of them remained in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by empty crates, the sounds of once stray animals barking excitedly as they headed towards their new homes echoing in the distance.

It had barely stretched into the morning, and so much had already happened.

Daisy wrapped her arms around the woman, desperate to understand the power behind the spell, something she realized was extremely out of her league.

The danger of it still lingered, still frightened her.

Daisy only wished - no, only wanted to know the truth behind it.

Daisy

For the first time since that odd potion arrived in Fields' Herbals, Daisy felt free of its burden.

Sometimes, she realized, all that it took was a busy day and tonic brewing to get rid of the stress that easily rested against her shoulders.

In the end, magic was the thing Daisy cherished most, and it got her through everything that dared to overpower her.

When Gary passed, Daisy dove into her studies, fine tuning her ability in order to effectively take over the shop.

Even then, as the curse and the culprit behind it remained over her head like a storm cloud, Daisy could only feel the warm sunlight and could only see the approaching rainbow.

She finished another batch of minor ache and sore tonics, using a plastic funnel to pour the clear liquid into different sized vials.

With labels already made, all she needed to do was stick them on and they'd be ready for the shelves.

Carrying a tray full of wobbling bottles, their corks already tightly wedged into the openings, Daisy reentered the storefront.

The early afternoon crowd made its way downtown the moment Daisy and Tessa opened after the animal center's adoption event in the courtyard.

An entire day's worth of business had already swept through the shop.

Tessa was in the middle of sweeping leaves and such out the front door when a familiar figure stepped around her, careful not to get in the way of her cleaning.

Carrying a large bouquet of daisies, Ethan slipped inside Fields' Herbals, a charismatic smile spreading across his face.

Daisy glanced over her shoulder from one of the aisles, almost dropping the entire tray when she realized who it was. Tessa, like the supportive friend she was, slipped behind her, taking the wobbling tray from her hands.

"But -" Daisy was in the middle of saying.

Tessa yanked the tonics from her hands. "You know," she murmured, "I think these tonics aren't labeled right!"

Daisy frowned. "But I -"

Leaning in close, Tessa lowered her voice to a whisper. "Talk to him!"

"Have you forgotten about the spell?" Daisy hissed back.

"Just admit you're using the spell as a reason to avoid real attachments to someone who actually likes you!"

Daisy's eyes went wide, her jaw falling slack. "I never said I -"

“Oh, look!” Tessa exclaimed, looking over at Ethan who waited beside the counter with a sheepish smile.

“A customer!” She was already backing into the storeroom, the vials wobbling as she carried the tray.

“Too bad I’ve got my hands full!” Glancing in Ethan’s direction, she gave him a quick wink before disappearing into the back room.

Daisy, fully aware of her feverishly visible blushing, crept around the counter, finally facing him.

The moment her eyes met his own, Daisy’s heartbeat slammed against her chest. How was it that a person could grow more beautiful with each passing day?

Daisy was enamored with him, as if it was the first time she was ever laying eyes upon him.

Ethan was dressed in a simple button down and navy dress pants, the tie already lost and the first few buttons undone.

Chestnut colored hair poked out from his shirt, curly and soft.

It must have been an important day at the office - Ethan’s hair had the remnants of gel within it, though the strands fought the product and fell across his face dramatically.

Daisy was brought back to their first date and the kiss that followed, how perfect it was and how it was more than she’d ever imagined it to be.

Now, as Ethan stood in front of her with a beautiful bouquet of flowers, Daisy

stammered and grew flustered, the potion and curse she fought so hard to forget swimming back to the forefront of her mind instantly.

Perhaps Ethan's eagerness had everything to do with it.

Despite the spell having a few good outcomes, Daisy grew overwhelmed with the idea of Ethan's feelings being nothing more than a figment of her imagination, a desire that was felt by her, and her alone.

"Daisies," she finally said, reaching to take the bouquet from his hands.

Ethan blushed, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "Maybe it's a bit cliché," he murmured. "But -"

"It isn't that at all." Daisy held them beneath her nose, inhaling deeply as the light floral scent washed over her.

As if the flowers had a spell of their own, a wave of calm energy passed through her, the joy of seeing Ethan finally coming back.

"They would look beautiful on the counter, wouldn't they?"

"She was already snatching an empty vase to display them in, entirely unaware of how Ethan watched her.

"Yes," he whispered. "Beautiful."

Daisy's face grew beet red as she poured some water into the vase.

Clearing her throat, she glanced up to see a genuine smile slipping over his face as he leaned over the counter.

The closeness sent a chill down her spine.

The musty and earthy cologne he wore filled her senses as he leaned in closer.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

She gazed up at him. “Tomorrow?”

“There’s a showing of Casablanca at the drive-in theater,” he explained with a shrug.

“I used to force my kids to watch it when they wanted nothing to do with black and white movies. I figured you’d like to see it,” Ethan paused, pulling himself away as he gulped loudly, “with me. On a date. Another date, if you wanted.”

Daisy held back her laugh. His sheepishness was perhaps the most charming thing about him.

It was as if he didn’t realize what sort of hold it had over her, how drawn to him she already was.

When he grew nervous and anxious over asking her out a second time, Daisy was already knee deep, saying yes before he had a chance to truly ask.

“Well, I -” Daisy stopped herself halfway.

Despite leaving her for an hour or two, the burden of the potion came back to her, comfortably resting itself against her shoulders.

Perhaps Ethan had nothing to do with the spell.

Maybe his interest was as true as she yearned for it to be.

All of it, however, still hung in the air.

How could she continuously go forward with him, if it soon became realized that his feelings weren't real at all?

Any mistake that could've come from the potion, like Old Lady Witherford's fall off the ladder, would be hardly a blight when compared to forcing another to fall in love with someone.

It felt far too cruel. Someone like Ethan, who'd already had to deal with his ex-wife cheating on him and deserting the children, deserved something true and real, with the person he truly wanted.

Daisy watched his face, the hope and expectation lingering in his eyes still.

She breathed deeply, ignoring the pain that began to burrow within her chest.

"Ethan," Daisy began, her voice smaller than she expected it to be, "I would love to go on another date with you."

He breathed out as if he had been holding his breath. "Well, that's a relief," he said with a loud laugh. "How about we -"

"But," she interjected, her heart shattering the moment she did, "I don't think we can schedule anything just yet."

Ethan tilted his head, pulling back from the counter ever so slightly. "Oh," he said. "I-I hope you don't feel like I was forcing it down your throat all of a sudden. The drive-in will always be there, and -"

"No, no," she murmured, reaching to grab a hold of his hand.

Instantly, she was shocked by his warmth, even though the air conditioner hummed loudly overhead.

Daisy ran her thumb over his knuckles, feeling the grooves and calluses along his palm.

Beneath her touch, Ethan grew incredibly still, his fingers twitching as though he held himself back from holding her hand.

“If I asked you to wait,” Daisy whispered, “would you?”

Ethan’s face softened. Though the disappointment did not dare to leave his gaze, a sweet smile tugged at his lips.

“Daisy,” he said gently, “If you and I are moving faster than you are ready for -” He stopped himself, looking away as he gathered his thoughts.

“I know people say that time heals all wounds, but I’ve found that not all the time in the world can erase the deepest of scars.

If...if you aren’t ready to date after losing Gary, then I need you to know how fine that is. ”

She opened her mouth to speak, but he tightened his fingers around her hand.

“And for the record,” Ethan continued, a teasing smirk appearing on his face, “I’d wait as long as you’d ask.” He lifted his shoulders. “It’s as simple as that for me.”

Daisy’s heart softened more than she ever thought capable. “I don’t want you to think I’m not ready,” she finally said. “I know what I want, Ethan.”

His face flushed.

“But there’s something that I need to do first. Something that requires my full attention, and when you and I go on that second date,” Daisy paused, unable to meet his gaze as her smile grew, “I don’t plan on having my attention pulled anywhere other than towards you .”

Ethan grinned. Pulling his hand away, he glanced down at his watch before tilting his head. “I’ve gotta get back to the office,” he murmured. When he looked back at her, the smile couldn’t leave his face. “So I’ll see you soon, won’t I?”

“You will,” Daisy whispered.

As Ethan began to leave the shop, he took one more look over his shoulder at her, his gaze holding onto her figure a moment longer than she expected, before he slipped out and disappeared down the street. Daisy sighed, her heart struggling to return to its normal pattern.

“He brought you daisies, ” Tessa exclaimed the moment the door stopped swinging, stepping out into the storefront, “And invites you to the most adorably cliché date at the drive-in, and you say no ?” She shook her head as she placed the tray of vials on the counter. “Have I taught you nothing?”

“Look,” Daisy started, “I can’t be sure what Ethan feels. Till then -”

“Well, it’s obvious to everyone in this town besides you, Daisy.”

Daisy’s brow shot up. “I’m just trying to cover my bases.”

Tessa shook her head, though she didn’t continue to argue. “All I’m saying,” she blurted, raising her hands defensively, “is that you’re on the brink of ruining it before

it has the chance to begin. That's all."

Daisy sighed as she leaned over the counter, running her hands all along the tops of the vials and listening to them clatter against each other.

The last thing she wanted was to ruin what she already had, but once they were rid of the spell, and the feelings Ethan had were whisked away, wouldn't she suffer less heartache with the distance?

Daisy shook her head at her own thoughts.

Ring! Ring!

The bell above the front door clapped a few times as Susy entered Fields' Herbals . Dressed in a denim overall dress with a bright yellow tee underneath, Susy skipped into the store with her backpack dragging against the floor. Instead of her classic pigtails, Susy wore a pair of french braids.

"Ready for an afternoon off?" Susy asked in a sing-songy voice as she steered herself around the counter.

Daisy snatched onto her things and gave Susy free reign behind the counter. "As ready as we'll ever be," she muttered, the distaste of what she and Tessa were about to do bringing a swirling sensation to her stomach.

As Tessa and Daisy left the storefront behind, going towards the rest of the shops running along main street, a sudden chill seemed to grow all around them.

"When was the last time you saw Sebastian Crowe?" Tessa asked.

Daisy sighed. "About a month ago," she muttered.

“I heard from Old Lady Witherford that he got out of his most recent relationship and the next thing I knew, he was stalking the store nonstop. It wasn’t like he ever came in or dared to follow me home, but just seeing him after everything was just... ” Daisy shuttered. “You know.”

“I’ll never forget the day he laid his slimy hands on you.”

Daisy pressed her lips together. The months after Gary passed were the hardest she’d ever endured.

Not only was she reeling over her husband’s death, but there was also the baby in her belly that perished from the stress.

Daisy felt more alone than she ever had, but then Sebastian was there, and he allowed her to lean on him more than anyone else.

Daisy missed the comfort of those days, right until the moment he swooped in for a kiss, ruining the friendship she relied so heavily upon.

“Isn’t it crazy how a single moment like that manages to change an entire relationship?” Daisy murmured, her mind lingering in the past. “And to think, after all this time, he still believes himself to be the perfect partner for me. After everything.”

Tessa grabbed a hold of her hand as they drew nearer to Sebastian’s mechanic shop.

All the hope and desire she felt around Ethan disappeared as if it never existed in the first place.

Sebastian managed to bring a dark side of Daisy to the surface, one that was full of pain and despair, one that she never wished to come face to face with again.

But the next thing she knew, they were suddenly in front of his shop.

The front garage was pulled open, and Sebastian's tall, lanky figure could be seen from across the street, where they steadily approached from.

He pulled himself out of the car he was working on, the work suit he wore smudged with oil and grease.

Sebastian turned, swiping a rag over his hands, and his eyes landed on Daisy within an instant.

He only stared for a second before taking off, whipping out of his garage and slipping around the back of the building.

There were a few more streets behind his shop, including a plaza and a wide parking lot.

Beyond that was the approaching tree line.

A forest crept into Willowbrook from behind main street, a place for an easy escape for someone that happened to be guilty of something.

Daisy clenched her hands into small fists. "Let's go!"

The pair of witches shot across the street before following in Sebastian's footsteps, the dark woods eagerly ready to swallow them up whole.

Daisy

“Sebastian!”

Daisy ran around the mechanic shop, immediately diving out the way of a family that walked along the sidewalk.

They yelped and jumped in surprise, but she was already too full of adrenaline to stop herself and apologize.

The plaza behind main street was full of crowds and oncoming vehicles.

Behind the plaza, the treetops of Willowbrook’s shadowy forest loomed.

Sebastian seemed to course towards the direction of the woods, leaping over parked cars and shimmying past families.

“He’s trying to get to the woods,” Tessa shouted as they shot into the busy parking lot. She waved a hand towards him, where he was already nearing the front of the plaza. “We can’t let him get to the woods!”

Daisy pushed herself even further. The only avenue available to get a hold of Sebastian was out racing him.

There were far too many people nearby to try and use magic against him, and Daisy could hardly get a good look at him.

The plaza was busier than usual, with kids and teens riding their bikes and skateboards through the already packed lot.

Daisy skidded by a few of them, almost falling over herself until Tessa appeared at her left, hoisting her back onto her feet.

They kept going, despite the familiar faces they passed that called out their names in confusion.

Sebastian glanced over his shoulder at them, and Daisy could've sworn she saw a hint of a smile. But, she quickly told herself, he was quite far ahead of them, and what could there possibly be to smile about in a moment like that?

The more he ran, the easier it was for Daisy to believe that Sebastian sent her that potion.

If he didn't have anything to hide, he would've taken off the moment he saw them coming up to his shop.

It was as simple as that, and Daisy was desperate to hear his confession.

The sooner they removed the spell from her, the sooner she could return to Ethan with open arms. The sooner her life would return to as normal as it possibly could be.

Sebastian ducked around the plaza, dipping towards the woods effortlessly.

Letting out a frustrated groan, Tessa glanced over at Daisy as they paused in their chase beside the plaza buildings. With the forest in front of them, the shadows and darkness almost begging them forward, Daisy drew in gulps of air to try and catch her breath.

“What now?” Daisy stammered breathlessly.

Tessa shook her head. “Only guilty people run like that.”

“I doubt he’ll be willing to write a confession down.”

“If he’s so desperate to run,” Tessa said, “let him run.”

Daisy narrowed her eyes. “But -”

“The only way to get him is through magic. You know that.”

“We could get in trouble with the Council as easily as he would.” Daisy eyed her friend. “You’re testing for the empath license soon, Tess. Maybe you should go back, and I’ll -”

Tessa grabbed onto Daisy’s wrist, her grasp tight and serious. “If you think I’d let you go after him alone, you don’t know me at all.”

“But -”

“We’ll go after him together,” Tessa interjected. “And when we need to use magic against him, we’ll do whatever it takes. Won’t we?”

Daisy felt the determination seep into her as Tessa allowed it to trail through their intertwined hands.

Even if she didn’t quite agree in her own mind, Daisy was in no place to fight Tessa’s empathic abilities, and eagerly soaked up the confidence she was freely giving.

With their hands still bound together, they shot off towards the woods, following in

the path Sebastian left behind.

The woods surrounding Willowbrook were old and even more powerful than all of the Elders on the Witch Council combined.

The trees came from a time before every last one of them, when witches and warlocks ruled the land and shadowy creatures resided in the darkness.

Even then, as Daisy and Tessa chased after the warlock through the woods, the energy radiated all around them, almost fueling their steps forward.

Daisy ran faster than she ever thought she could, not a clumsy bone popping out to force her to trip or slow down.

Beside her, Tessa ran with an unmatched determination, her brow furrowed in a dark line.

Daisy suddenly felt lost in a reverie, remembering the last time she and Tessa found themselves within the woods.

They were a few decades younger, less wrinkles clouding their face and more energy filling their bones.

After long hours in school or at the community college, the pair found themselves beneath the canopy of trees, desperately practicing their magic and tonic brewing skills without any prying eyes to stop them.

They would spend ours out there, fine tuning their trade before returning to town, dirtied and exhausted.

For a moment, Daisy wondered what it would've been like if she could return to her

younger self.

What would she say? Was there a warning broad enough to prepare her for the very moment she suddenly found herself in?

Daisy pushed herself harder, desperate to go faster.

In front of them, twice their size with long legs, Sebastian weaved around the thick tree trunks effortlessly, as if he had spent his entire life within the forest. From what Daisy knew about him and the rest of the Crowe family, Willowbrook had been their home for generations, and their magic came from the place itself.

They were powerful magic users who depended on the land itself to gather their strength.

While most other witches and warlocks in Willowbrook merely had an inherent power to wield magic or an unstoppable determination to learn, the Crowe family relied on their ancestors to practice magic.

The moment they dared to step over the town lines, they would feel their magical energy deplete by the second.

It made more sense than ever before that Sebastian retreated into the woods.

As far as Daisy knew, the old witches and warlocks who once filled the town had long since been buried beneath the trees, their magic seeping into the very soil beneath their feet.

Though Daisy wasn't a member of the Crowe family, she felt the growing energy all the same, and planned to use it as much to her advantage as she possibly could.

“He isn’t slowing down!” Tessa shouted as they kept dipping and weaving around the trees. Her height forced her to duck every now and then, a few low hanging branches threatening to knock her over if she wasn’t paying close enough attention.

Daisy gritted her teeth together. If anything, it looked like Sebastian was merely growing faster, his figure disappearing into the dark woods. There was only one way to level the playing field, and it was to use the magic as much as they possibly could.

“Mother Hecate,” Daisy whispered as they ran, the words coming out jumbled with every rushed gasp of air she took.

“Bring your power onto me, let this man fall over a tree !” She thrust a hand out, and the magic rippled out of her skin, flying through the air till it came upon Sebastian in the distance.

A tree cracked and moaned as it fell from its spot, splaying across the floor that Sebastian was moments away from coming upon. Even from their distance, they could see him flail his arms in the air before leaping over the thick trunk.

“Rats,” Daisy snapped as they pushed forward.

Tessa grumbled and she rubbed her hands together, beginning to breed some magic of her own. “Tunnel of wind, tunnel of air,” she chanted, her short and spiky hair beginning to rush in every direction as the wind funneled towards her hands. “Knock this Crowe through the air!”

Tessa thrust her hands forward, and the wind rushed towards Sebastian.

It surged together like the funnel of a tornado, whipping loose branches and leaves and twigs all around them.

Daisy shoved the hair out of her face as everything rushed chaotically in all directions.

The wind carried itself yards ahead, seeking out Sebastian's feet before dissipating.

The magic reached him, but Crowe happened to be far more clever than they'd realized.

Sebastian flipped around, almost catching the wind himself.

Even at their distance, Daisy could make out his lips moving, the sound of his words barely carrying down to where they were.

It was muffled and hard to hear, but Daisy pushed Tessa behind a thick tree trunk either way, fully aware that the man was gearing up to send the magic right back at them.

The moment he shot his hands forward, the wind rushed back much quicker than before, almost catching Daisy by the foot.

She dove behind a tree, wrapping her arms around the thick trunk instinctively as the funnel of wind passed between her and Tessa.

The screaming noise of the air screeched by them as it melted into nothing, the trees no longer shaking or quivering.

Leaves fell like rain from above as the magic settled.

Daisy gritted her teeth together.

All her life, Daisy had allowed the world to walk over her.

Whether it was through Gary's passing that brought her to her knees, or something as simply foolish as Drusilla hating her for telling the truth, Daisy never once fought back, never once raised her voice, never once said enough was enough.

Perhaps it was because her mother taught her otherwise, or because her grandmother preached a much different way to handle approaching darkness.

But, by that point, Daisy was sick and tired of playing it easy.

She'd allowed the bad guy to slip through her fingers more than once, and with her future and happiness on the line, Daisy was in no hurry to let it ever happen again.

Whipping out from around the tree, Daisy held her hands out, the magic and energy racing through her long before she thought of what she wanted to say.

"Mother Hecate, bring yourself to me," she chanted, her eyes focusing on Sebastian, who was moments away from disappearing within the darkness of the woods, "and use your power to set me free! "

Out from the center of Daisy's hands came an unstoppable surge of power.

The force ricocheted through the woods, knocking down thin trees and shoving the older ones aside.

It shot forward till it hit Sebastian's back.

He let out a faraway yelp, tumbling over his own feet and falling through the underbrush.

The large bushes swallowed him whole, the sound of his body hitting the earthy floor echoing out to where Daisy stood.

She staggered for a moment, the feeling leaving her legs.

“Blessed be,” Tessa breathed as she caught her and held her upright. “I haven’t seen power like that in a long time.” She rested her palm against Daisy’s forehead. “How do you feel?”

Daisy kept her hands in fists. “Determined to see this done.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tessa teased with a whistle. “Won’t catch me arguing with a witch like that.”

Hiding her flushed embarrassment, Daisy pushed herself out of Tessa’s hands and jogged towards the last place she’d seen Sebastian.

Every movement threatened to bring her down to the ground, but she kept herself moving.

The energy and ability to stand could leave her the moment it was all said and done, but that was far from now.

When they reached the thick bushes where Sebastian had fallen, they realized the greenery was so bushy and wide they could hardly see through it.

Daisy dug her arm through it, searching for the other side, when her foot slipped on the leaves and she began to tumble forward.

Tessa yelped, one hand fisting the back of Daisy’s shirt, but she only managed to fall in right after her.

The pair shouted and gasped in surprise as they fell through the bushes in the same fashion Sebastian once had, the world around them growing dark and muddy, till

their backs landed against the hard ground.

Daisy blinked a few times and groaned as she pushed herself back onto her feet.

While there wasn't enough pain to be worried about, the aches and sores beginning to fester within her limbs were enough to promise a new slew of bruises for the morning.

Beside her, Daisy reached for Tessa, helping her up as she let out a few similar groans. Daisy glanced around.

They'd fallen right into a deep pit. While Daisy was sure they could find a means to climb their way out, the pain throbbing in her arms told her an entirely different story.

As far as she was concerned, the only thing strong enough to rescue them from where they were now was magic.

And unfortunately for Daisy, she felt as though she was a dried up well, without an ounce of magic left to spare.

“Well, well.”

Daisy lifted her head towards the top of the pit. Crouching where the ground sloped downwards was Sebastian Crowe, a proud and smug look on his face. Dirt and mud and grease stained his cheeks and sandy blonde hair.

“Looks to me like you, Daisy Fields, have no choice but to finally listen to me ,” Sebastian mocked, his smirk growing wide and toothy.

Daisy gulped.

And, for the first time in a long time, the only feeling she could feel from Tessa's radiating power was nothing more than fear.

Daisy

Sebastian Crowe was once a highly respectable man in Willowbrook.

While it partly came from the power and work his family had done for generations, Sebastian had skyrocketed through school, looking as though he might even rise towards becoming an Elder on the Witch Council.

Plenty of men and women from the Crowe family went on to govern on the Council, and most of the town was expecting him to do the same.

When his grandfather stepped down years ago, all of Willowbrook waited to hear from Sebastian, waited to see him step up, waited to see him continue the legacy that had been left for him.

But, surprisingly, the time never came.

Sebastian opened his mechanic shop instead, allowing himself to become a recluse from the community.

The time after Gary's death was when everything changed, when Daisy witnessed a man who was destined for greatness become nothing more than a greedy warlock.

When Daisy denied him the things he wanted, the life he begged to have alongside her, Sebastian went so far as to threaten her with magic.

He was a powerful member of the Crowe family, after all.

Test him too much, and the wrath of generational power would be thrust into Daisy's life.

While Sebastian never did follow through on his threats, the danger remained.

When he found himself lingering outside of Fields' Herbals, Daisy watched with a wary eye, expecting that he would burst in at any second with a slew of spells.

Unfortunately, that was all it would take.

Enough power and enough perfectly done hexes would've landed Sebastian the woman of his dreams, the person he believed he deserved, the one he claimed to be owed to him.

Daisy watched him from within the pit, reliving every single heinous thing he'd forced her to experience.

Perhaps if she had been stronger back then, Daisy would've noticed how much Sebastian clung to her, how he demanded to be around whenever he could, how he was the only one who lingered after everyone else had gone.

At the time, Daisy couldn't have asked for a better companion.

That was the sentiment, right until he pulled her in for a kiss, right after she had been through crying over her dead husband.

"I don't blame you for forgetting who your best friend is," Sebastian was in the middle of saying as he paced around the pit.

Each step he took sent more dirt down into the hole, a few pebbles and rocks flying in next.

“I-It’s hard to see the truth when there are so many lies being waved in front of you. ”

“Lies, Sebastian?” Daisy called out. “What lies?”

He thrust an accusatory finger towards Tessa. “I know that little empath was whispering things in your ear while we were together.”

“That’s the thing,” she continued with a shake of her head. “We weren’t ever together . You realize that, don’t you? We weren’t -”

“You’ve really been brainwashed, haven’t you?”

Daisy blinked. “N-No, I don’t think I -”

“You see,” Sebastian interjected as he continued his tirade, still pacing around the pit’s circumference.

“You and I were bound from the very moment I laid eyes on you. You were leaving the community college. You took a year off when Gary got sick and started to go back after he passed. I was standing by the water fountain and I,” he paused, stopping in his tracks as though he had been thrust back into the memory, “I heard the voice of Hecate in my head.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “Every Crowe says they’ve heard testimony from Hecate,” she whispered to Daisy. “A load of baloney, if you ask me.”

““Go to her,’ Hecate said,” Sebastian continued. ““Heal her. Heal that which belongs to you.””

Daisy’s face scrunched up.

Sebastian shrugged, as if it was as simple as that. “It was written by the Mother herself,” he said. “You and me. Bound for eternity. I have been the man of your dreams before you ever knew it.”

She looked away, barely able to stomach the words he said any longer.

The more he talked, the easier it was for her to think of Gary.

The sadness came as fast as it always did.

No matter how much time had passed since she last saw her late husband, Daisy remembered him as though he’d only perished the day before, as if the wound he’d left upon her had never fully healed all those years ago.

It remained with her, still, and even more so as Sebastian continuously spoke against Gary’s good name.

“After all this time,” Sebastian was still saying, “you never saw how much I was there for you, Daisy. Who else wiped your tears when you thought the world was caving in on you? Who else made you dinner when you hardly had any energy to feed yourself? Who cut your grass? Who cleaned your gutters? Who was always there?” He flung around, leaning forward till the dreadfully terrifying look on his face was visible. “It was me , Daisy. It was always me .”

He pulled himself up and straightened his work overalls. “You know,” he continued, “I never once stopped loving you. Even when -”

The words continued but Daisy found herself hardly able to listen.

As far as she was concerned, the more he spoke, the more he disrespected Gary, the more he drove a wedge between himself and Daisy.

Not that she would've found herself ever turning towards him in the way he sought, but perhaps she could have been softened towards him, more understanding of his plight.

Any chance he had for sympathy was gone long before he ever decided to open his mouth or trap them in the pit.

"He's hardly paying attention to where he walks," Tessa suddenly whispered.

Daisy glanced at her. "What?"

Tessa nodded her chin towards Sebastian's path, her eyes flaring as something brewed within her mind. "He's practically inches away from falling into the pit himself. He's not paying attention."

Following her gaze, Daisy turned back towards Sebastian. He spoke and looked ahead absentmindedly, entirely unaware of how the walls of the pit grew less steep with every step he took. Soon, if he kept it up, they would be able to climb out without needing too much extra effort.

"That's good and all," Daisy muttered, "but he can push us right back in the moment we start climbing."

Tessa nodded. "We need a spell."

"You've got magic left still?"

"Hardly," Tessa whispered. "But together, we could be strong enough."

Daisy focused her attention back on Sebastian.

“That woman I found myself with,” he was in the middle of saying, “is miles upon miles away from you, Daisy. I hope you see how I made a lapse in judgement by turning away from you, but perhaps that might all be forgiven.”

Daisy pressed her lips together, holding back her bitter laugh.

Suddenly, then, an idea presented itself to her.

There were a few things Sebastian wanted to hear.

What, she wondered, would happen if she managed to give those over to him?

How far would his barrier fall? How distracted would it render him?

Glancing to her side, Daisy met Tessa’s gaze, and mouthed: trust me .

“Sebastian,” Daisy called out, turning to face him once more. “I forgive you.”

He froze and faced the inside of the pit. “W-What?”

“You’re right,” she continued. “You had a lapse of judgement, but all is forgiven.”

Sebastian blinked a few times before his eyes grew wide. “Daisy,” he murmured, “you see me now, don’t you?”

“I see that the only way for people like you and me to survive,” she said, “is for us to stick together like glue !” Her eyes flicked over to Tessa, who didn’t seem to understand at first.

Sebastian nodded rapidly.

“I mean,” Daisy held her hands up, “what better way to get out of a situation like this, other than sticking together?”

“Bound!” Sebastian said. “Bound together!”

By that point, Daisy glanced back towards Tessa, and she had wide eyes, finally seeing the point.

Sebastian beamed with excitement. His feet hung over the sides of the pit, arms outstretched and beckoning for Daisy to come closer.

She crept forward, entirely aware of Tessa moving alongside her, though Sebastian was too deep within his own mind to notice it.

“By the power of Hecate,” the pair of them whispered once they were side by side, as close as they could get to Sebastian.

Daisy snatched onto Tessa’s hand, clutching onto her as tight as possible as the magic coursed through them both.

Raising their other hands, a surge of energy shot out from their palms, flying through the air and landing directly onto Sebastian’s chest. With a surprised grunt, he flew backwards, the sound of his back hitting a tree resounding loudly through the empty woods.

“You were thinking of glue, right?” Tessa asked.

Daisy shrugged. “Glue, sticking, same thing.”

Tessa winced. “Hopefully he’s only glued to the tree.”

They both climbed out of the pit, and Daisy was more than surprised by the amount of feeling and strength she had left within her limbs. Once they made it to the top, resurfacing on the grassy floor, their eyes landed on Sebastian.

He writhed and jerked, trying to pry his back off the tree trunk but he couldn't budge. The spell worked soundly in gluing his entire backside to the wood. Sebastian's eyes grew wild with anger as he saw them, his mouth opening to spew more words that Daisy could hardly handle.

She surged forward, barely recognizing herself as the anger she kept so close to her heart finally found its way to the surface.

"Now you're going to listen to me, Sebastian," Daisy snapped, pressing her finger into his chest. "Don't you dare act as though you were always there for me.

Each time you came by my house, offered to do those things or did them without even asking, you had one motive - one disgusting - motive.

"The confidence surged through her without Tessa's empathic abilities needing to intervene.

"Claim to be my friend all you want, but you only wanted to sleep with me. You wanted to be in all the places you weren't allowed, even though my husband had just died. "

Sebastian stared with wide eyes, his mouth slack.

"You hear how that sounds, don't you?" Daisy shook her head at him.

"One of the great members of the Crowe family, manipulating a grieving widow in order to get her into bed! What would the Council think if they knew a great warlock

like yourself played the ‘nice guy’ in order to take advantage of a widow? What would they think, Sebastian?”

He stammered, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

“If there’s one thing you can walk away knowing,” Daisy whispered, directly upon him, “it is that I will never, ever, succumb to the likes of you. My heart is mine alone, and it was never bound to you.” She leaned closer still. “And it never will be .”

Backing away, Daisy breathed heavily, the anger leaving behind a rush of adrenaline that had nowhere to go.

When she looked back up at Sebastian, he looked rather stunted, not like the man that they had chased, not the man that had watched them fall into the pit.

He was simply a man scorned, one who’d faced the mistakes he made long ago, and who now had to live with every bit of the consequences they brought.

Sebastian snapped his mouth shut.

“Tell us about the spell you put on Daisy,” Tessa said.

He glanced between them. “S-Spell?”

“The potion,” Daisy snapped. “The one you mailed to Fields’ Herbals . The one that has cursed me. You’re going to remove it, or we’ll go straight to the Witch Council with everything we’ve learned.”

Tessa nodded determinedly.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sebastian murmured. “What spell? I-I

haven't mailed anything to your shop!"

"Now is a terrible time to lie," Daisy hissed. "Tell us the truth, or -"

Tessa's hand snaked around Daisy's wrist. "He isn't lying."

Flinging around, Daisy eyed the empath. "How can you be so sure?"

"I can just feel it," she whispered with a shake of her head. "He isn't lying."

Daisy turned to face Sebastian once more.

There was a pleading look in his eyes, though he didn't dare speak unless spoken to.

While she wanted to revel in the strength she found within herself, Daisy knew just as well as Tessa that he wasn't the culprit they were looking for.

Even after everything, it was as clear as day.

Daisy's shoulders fell. "You're right."

"C'mon," Tessa whispered. "Let's get out of here before nightfall."

Dejected beyond belief, Daisy allowed Tessa to turn her away from Sebastian and steer them back towards Willowbrook.

"H-Hey!" Sebastian called out. "You're just gonna leave me stuck here?"

Tessa peered over her shoulder at him. "It'll wear off in a few hours. Maybe you can use the time to think!"

As they moved closer to town, Daisy could only feel steeped in more and more dread.

The person behind the spell placed upon her grew no clearer than before.

If anything, she felt further in the unknown, more unaware of her future than she had been before tracking down Sebastian.

She gripped onto Tessa's arm like it was her lifeforce.

Blessed be, she thought to herself.

Hecate, protect me.

Daisy

Tomorrow is a new day.

Quite a common phrase, but it was one that Daisy had lived all her life hearing.

Grandma Lotta, who resided in a delightfully small nursing home on the edge of Willowbrook, spoke the phrase almost on a daily basis, living each day by the simple words.

After everything that had happened with Sebastian, Daisy found herself craving the phrase more often than not, desperate to hear it come straight from her grandmother's mouth.

While Tessa ended up going back to Fields' Herbals after their rendezvous in the woods, Daisy could only wander home and slump in her bed, drifting in and out of a restless sleep.

When she woke up the next morning, all Daisy could think about doing was going to visit Grandma Lotta.

Tessa met her on the driveway, already stocked with a small lunch and slices of cherry pie from Ronald's.

The busy restaurant used to be her grandmother's favorite, where she would always find herself after long days at the store.

When Daisy stumbled into the car, she ignored Tessa's pressing questions and allowed the empath to sink contentedness into her mind.

Perhaps that was all it took. Some swirling magic and the growing power of an empath, and Daisy felt almost as right as rain once more.

Tessa's small car rumbled as they pulled up to the nursing home.

It housed only a handful of seniors, each with bountiful magic still resting within them.

According to the Council, witches like Grandma Lotta deserved only the best in her old age and retirement.

They'd built the nursing home for spectacular witches and warlocks, ones who practiced their abilities and needed a safe space to do so.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Tessa asked as they walked towards the front entrance.

Daisy shook her head. "I can't quite imagine myself being up for anything," she said, though the sorrowful emotion behind her words could hardly be heard or felt. "But I should've done this long ago."

Tessa pressed her lips together. "Have you thought about asking Grandma Lotta for help?"

"Why would I?"

Tessa chuckled. "She does happen to be one of the most well known and powerful witches of her time."

“I can’t ask her to step out of retirement for something as silly as this,” Daisy muttered. “Maybe we were wrong, and Sebastian did do it, and -”

Tessa grabbed onto Daisy’s arm, giving her a tight squeeze before shaking her head like a disapproving mother. “You know as well as I do that Sebastian didn’t do it. We can hope all we want, but it turns out to not be as simple as that.”

Daisy sighed. “I know.”

“I said it before,” Tessa began, “and I’ll say it again. Maybe now’s the time to start thinking about going to the Witch Council for help.”

“If they knew the things I willingly did while beneath this spell, I’d be just as liable to lose my magic.”

“You really think so?”

Daisy shrugged. “Do you want to test it?” she asked.

“I made the adoption event successful. I brought the business back to Fields’ Herbals .

I made Rebecca Mitchell embarrass herself, just as much as I made the paint bucket fall over Richard Martin.

And don’t even get me started on what happened to Old Lady Witherford.

That is enough alone to get my powers stripped from me.

” Daisy shook her head. “There has to be a better way to see it through.”

With a heavy heart, Daisy went inside the nursing home.

The halls were warm and beige colored, opening up into a large living room with a few televisions and a small cafe.

Despite only housing a few seniors, the building was rather large.

They had a bountiful garden behind the nursing home, a small gymnasium at one end, and a wide study on the other.

The study was full of bookcases and tables, giving the seniors more than enough things to do while staying there.

The living room had a few plush couches, and nurses and attendants were cleaning the rugs and walls as Daisy and Tessa passed by them.

Grandma Lotta's room was near the back of the building and on the second floor, giving her a wide patio that overlooked the expansive garden and nearby lake.

When Daisy rapped her knuckles against the door, it opened without a person on the other side, the sweet smell of freshly baked cookies and rising bread immediately hitting them.

Daisy moved into the room as if she was caught in a daze, merely following the smell towards her grandmother.

“What a delightful surprise!”

Grandma Lotta rose from her seat on the patio and waddled into the room.

She was incredibly thin and full of wrinkles, very much fitting for her age.

Hair that was once a brilliantly dark brown faded into wispy strands of grey, was now pulled into a loose braid down her back.

She dressed in a floral blouse that was tucked into a pair of neat slacks, a pair of slippers resting on her feet.

She swept through the room eagerly, immediately snatching Daisy up into her arms for a tight embrace.

“I told you I’d come visit,” Daisy said in her ear.

Grandma Lotta squeezed her real tight. “Call me an old crone,” she drawled as she pulled away, “but do I smell cherry pie from Ronald’s?”

Tessa stepped forward, pulling the containers out of her bag. “Freshly baked this morning.” She gave Grandma Lotta a kiss on the cheek. “Ronald sends his love, by the way.”

“Better yet, he sends me more pie!” Grandma Lotta laughed as she took the box into the small kitchen.

“We brought lunch, Grandma,” Daisy told her as the woman began opening the container to pull out a few slices of the bright red desert. “You don’t want to spoil your appetite, do you?”

Grandma Lotta waved her hand in the air. “I’m at the point in my life where I must do as I please, or I might never have the chance to do it again,” she said. After making three plates, she stacked them on a tray and began to go back towards the patio.

Tessa easily took the tray from her hands and went to put it outside herself.

“I brought you some new tonics I made from the shop,” Daisy said as she pulled out a pouch that jingled with thin vials. “There’s one for your fertilizer, and another for the insomnia you complain about every now and then.”

Grandma Lotta looked over the tonics eagerly. She held one up to the light, peering at the color with an intense gaze. When she lowered it, a bright smile spread across her face. “You’re getting better and better with each day, Daisy. If only your mother was here to see it as much as I can.”

Daisy pressed her lips together thoughtfully.

Perhaps many things would be different if her mother was still around.

There’d be another force to turn to, someone who could guide the way during rough patches she found herself in.

Even though her grandmother was right there in Willowbrook, Daisy felt far too guilty to burden the aging woman with something as silly as a potion.

“Back in my day,” Grandma Lotta was in the middle of saying as they moved towards the patio, “work like that got you a seat on the Council.”

“I-I don’t think it was work like that ,” Daisy murmured sheepishly.

Tessa shook her head, already halfway through her pie. “Don’t listen to her, Grandma Lotta,” she said. “Daisy is far too humble sometimes.”

“Oh, believe me, I know!” Grandma Lotta settled in her rocking chair with a broad smile spreading across her face.

“When the Council first approached me about taking a seat alongside them, I could

hardly believe I'd produced a lick of good work that warranted such a prestigious position.

Sure, the store was doing good, but I had a growing family on my hands.

What work was good enough when I had more than enough mouths to feed? "

Grandma Lotta leaned back in her seat as she reminisced, her eyes staring at the countless flowers that grew in the garden. "I turned them down for a while, but the Elders just kept coming."

"What a problem to have!" Tessa teased.

"Finally, they stopped to ask why I kept turning them down," Grandma Lotta continued.

"Don't you know the kind of power you can have?" they said.

'Don't you understand the opportunities you're turning down?

"She shook her head. "Those Elders thought I was the best spell-maker in all of Willowbrook, perhaps on this entire side of the country. Perhaps I was, perhaps I wasn't. "

Daisy huffed. "We all know that you were, Grandma."

She waved her hand through the air absentmindedly.

"The work I did in my youth is beside the point," she said.

"They wanted me right then and there, when I was already engaged in the biggest

project a witch could ever be blessed with.” Grandma Lotta leaned forward, her eyes holding onto Daisy in particular. “Family.”

Daisy thought of Gary for a moment, but quickly brushed it aside.

“So, when they came back another time, they said ‘Come with us, Lotta. Give power another shot, Lotta. Aren’t you afraid, Lotta, of each day being the same as it once was, the same boring routine over and over again?’”

Grandma Lotta’s face brightened. “I told them, ‘Tomorrow is a new day, and there isn’t a single thing more powerful than raising my family.’”

Daisy watched her grandmother wistfully, the familiar phrase echoing in the back of her mind. She was so lost in her thoughts she hadn’t even noticed the tear already slipping down her cheek.

“My dear Daisy,” Grandma Lotta breathed. “What’s got you so wound up?”

Daisy could hardly keep up the act with her grandmother watching her in that way. The walls she had prepared to hold up during the visit quickly crumbled to the floor around her feet.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

“I have been plagued, Grandma,” Daisy began, “by a spell I can’t seem to figure out.

I, the one who is supposed to be an expert at crafting spells and brews and tonics, can’t figure out the one that happens to rest on my shoulders.

” She shook her head with a defeated expression.

“How does that make me a brilliant witch?”

Grandma Lotta’s eyes narrowed. “Tell me about this spell.”

“It arrived at Fields’ Herbals in the form of a potion,” Daisy explained. “I was hardly paying enough attention and dropped it all over me. The next thing I knew, every time I dared to say ‘I wish’, whatever I said next would come true. Every single thing, Grandma. ”

Grandma Lotta glanced around as she fidgeted in her seat. “L-Like what?”

“Like Rebecca Mitchell, the -”

“The girl who ruined your Prom dress?”

Daisy pointed at her. “That’s exactly right!

I wished for her to have her fancy Chanel suit ruined and it happened -” she snapped her fingers “- just like that! And people just kept getting hurt. I did some good things too, but we all know that doing good doesn’t outweigh the bad.

Needless to say, this has been hanging over my shoulders for about a week now, and I don't know how much more I can take.

One minute I'm fretting over what the Witch Council will think, and the next Tess and I are trying to track down the culprit. ”

“To no avail, by the way,” Tessa quickly added, the cherry pie remnants smeared across her lips.

Daisy breathed a sigh. Somehow, expelling everything that burdened her made her feel free from the stress, for the time being.

She was sure it would return the moment they left, but talking about it to a powerful witch like her grandmother was reassuring, in a way.

As she turned to meet her grandmother's gaze, eager to hear what an expert like herself had to say, Daisy frowned.

“Grandma,” Daisy asked, reaching to place her hand over her knee, “you look entirely lost. What's wrong?”

Grandma Lotta's face grew flushed, her hands nervously messing with the hem of her shirt. “Well, I -” She paused to clear her throat. “How embarrassing this all is, Daisy. Just...how embarrassing!”

“I-I don't understand. What's embarrassing?”

The older witch hesitated for a moment as she gathered her thoughts.

“It is terribly tiresome to see someone as bright and talented as you, Daisy, not be dealt the hand of cards they deserve,” Grandma Lotta began in a very cryptic fashion.

“While I believe the things we are forced to face are meant to forge us into stronger people, I couldn’t help but think that...

well, that you, Daisy, were burdened far more than what was necessary. ”

“That’s kind, grandmother, but -”

Grandma Lotta raised her hand. “It seems, however, that I might not be the very capable witch I once was.”

Daisy blinked. “What are you trying to say?”

“ I crafted that potion, Daisy, in an effort to see you be given the things you want, the things I wholeheartedly believe you deserve,” Grandma Lotta finally said.

“Not that my intention was to have everything you wished for to come true, but you...” She waved her hand in the air, the embarrassment still prominent in her face. “You get the point.”

“ Grandma ,” Daisy whispered, her eyes wide. “I-If that really was you, why couldn’t Tess and I see that it was you who made the spell? We did a revelation ceremony, but -”

Fully embarrassed with herself, Grandma Lotta rose from her seat, still wildly waving her hands in the air, as if it would expel the conversation. “A silly old habit from my youth!” she exclaimed.

Daisy held her breath as she turned towards Tessa, who seemed to be wearing the same expression as her.

For a moment, they only stared, all the trouble they went through for the past week

flowing between them.

But then, the longer they stared, the more their exteriors began to crack, and the easier it was to let the laughter flow through them.

Daisy's laughs melted into gasps of relief, every bit of fear she once had no longer daring to touch her.

She rose, following her grandmother back inside the building.

"After all this time," she kept repeating, shaking her head. "After all this time."

"Hopefully this tells you to visit your elderly grandmother sooner!" Grandma Lotta teased as she looked through her books.

"What're you looking for?"

"Well," Grandma Lotta turned, one fraying book opened, "I thought you didn't want the spell on you anymore, but if you're so keen on laughing at your grandma, than I might as well -"

"Go ahead, grandma," Daisy interjected, the genuine smile finding her face in an instant.

Her grandmother smiled. "It's funny. For all the trouble the spell caused, a simple incantation is all the fix it needs. That's how I create all my spells, especially now that my spells sometimes... go haywire."

"That's all?" Daisy asked, her mouth dropping open.

Most spells required an antidote... a potion that undid what the original potion

caused. Only a very skilled witch could weave into the spell such an easy fix. As good as Daisy was with potions, her grandmother was still far superior, even in her old age.

“Well, show us how it’s done!” Tessa said excitedly.

Grandma Lotta stepped forward, taking a deep breath.

Her power crackled through the air before she’d even spoken her first word.

“Oh, great Mother Hecate,” she began in a low voice, “deliver your power onto me, deliver your compassion onto me, and -” the air grew heavy within the room for a moment “- reverse what you have already given!”

Daisy wasn’t sure what she expected to feel.

There was a light feathering of pins and needles up and down her arms before it turned to her legs, as if the magic was being pricked out of her, sliver by sliver.

Eventually, the feeling subsided, the air returning to its gentle flow throughout the room.

Birds landed on the patio outside, curiously peering into the room.

Daisy let her eyes close. The swirling that once rested in her stomach, the odd unease that had lived within her since the potion arrived at Fields’ Herbals , finally seeped out of her skin.

Daisy took in a deep breath, and she couldn’t have felt more at ease.

“All better?” Tessa asked.

Daisy grinned. “All better, though...” She paused, her mind traveling back towards Ethan and whatever their relationship meant now that the spell was gone. Her spirits deflated for a moment. “I wonder what this will mean for Ethan and I.”

Grandma Lotta snapped her book shut. “You two went on a date, didn’t you?”

Daisy nodded. “But he could’ve been affected by the spell.”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, how can you possibly know?”

Grandma Lotta shrugged. “Perhaps I just know.”

Daisy watched her grandmother waddle back towards the patio, shooing away the birds and returning to her half-eaten slice of cherry pie.

Tessa followed after her, immediately engaging in conversation about her upcoming empath tests.

Daisy watched them from within the little room, her heart feeling light but burdened still with the unknown.

She couldn’t believe it. All this time, all this stress, and the potion had been a gift from her grandmother.

She laughed, shaking her head.

Only in Willowbrook.

Daisy

Night fell quietly onto Willowbrook's main street.

Most of the stores were already dim inside, their respective owners heading home for the evening.

Daisy lingered in Fields' Herbals that day, eager to catch up on the brews she had forgotten about and to give the shop a good deep clean.

Despite the spell being lifted off Daisy's shoulders, business continued to thrive at the store.

Apparently, the burst of sales that had come from the spell managed to gather willing customers, ones who weren't affected by the spell whatsoever.

Daisy eagerly took the business wherever it came, determined to keep it flowing as much as it once had.

Not only were they able to afford hiring Susy and Anne part time, but the financial burden that once drove Daisy and Tessa into a pit of despair no longer crept over the horizon.

Everything, as surprising as it was, seemed to be taking a turn towards the better.

Daisy finished running a rag along the counter and restocking the aisles for an (expected) busy day tomorrow.

There was only one thing still lingering on the counter. Daisy ran her hand over the tin box, her fingers following the carved grooves and lines. A small card was on top of the lid, the handwriting familiar and bringing a tingle to her spine.

To Daisy, a chocolate for every day we are apart.

Thinking of you always, Ethan.

Reaching into her back pocket, Daisy pulled out her aged flip phone, searching through her contacts till she landed on Ethan's number.

The small, rectangular screen pulled up a few texts they had shared earlier in the day, when she had first seen the chocolate box being delivered to the shop's door.

Daisy: Funny that there are a few chocolates missing from my tin. Were you hungry while you dropped it off?

Ethan: Well, we've only been apart for a few days, haven't we? I couldn't let the brilliant line I wrote not be up to par. Thus: I ate some chocolates. Which happened to satiate my hunger all the same.

Daisy: The brilliant mind of a lawyer!

Ethan: How about I take you out tomorrow night, and I'll show you just how brilliant I am?

Daisy: I suppose I'll have to take you up on that.

Putting the phone away, Daisy couldn't wipe the smile off of her face.

The words lingered in the back of her mind constantly, no matter what she happened to be doing.

If anyone walked by the store, they'd look in to see her sweeping the floors with the smile of a madman on her face.

But Daisy couldn't help it. She was happy, and she couldn't remember the last time it had felt so fulfilling to be effortlessly happy.

After everything the spell put her through, Ethan never happened to be affected by it.

The things he felt for her came from his heart alone, which meant that everything that followed was as genuine as Daisy felt it to be.

Their kiss had not been touched by magic.

His insistence on having a second date, and sending her expensive chocolates, was more than enough proof that Daisy had managed to snatch him up on her own.

Now, of course, there was the second date to worry about.

There'd be another dress to find, more makeup to use, hair products that she hadn't touched in years being poured into her scalp.

Despite the nerves and anxiety the dating brought her, Daisy greedily accepted it, proud of herself to finally be at a spot where all of it felt more than right.

She felt ready.

After finishing up her deep clean of the storefront, Daisy began to gather her things into a trash bag. It rumbled and swayed as she dragged it behind her out of Fields' Herbals, almost slicing open and spilling across the sidewalk before she hoisted it over her shoulder.

Wobbling out in front of the shop, Daisy pulled open the trash can and threw the bag

over her shoulder. It landed in the dumpster with a resounding thud. As she pulled the lid back over the dumpster, a chill rolled up her spine.

Down by the courtyard, where Anne had the adoption event for the local animal center, stood a tall water feature.

It was in the middle of the courtyard, which also happened to be positioned in the direct middle of Willowbrook.

The fountain was full of coins at the bottom, a custom Daisy participated in for many years as a child.

The belief was that the water could answer someone's deepest wish if an offering was tossed over their shoulder and into the fountain.

Each time she peered into it, the bottom glowed with an array of shimmering colors.

But now, as she looked over at the fountain, there was a mysterious figure standing beside it.

The figure was shrouded by darkness, their clothes almost blending into the shadows around them.

Daisy was surprised to notice them in the first place, but perhaps it was only from the chilling sensation that was beginning to swallow her up.

The longer she stared, the more that eerie feeling deepened, as if someone was watching her.

Pushing the trash can to the end of the sidewalk, Daisy quickly locked the shop door behind her before heading down the sidewalk.

For the first few steps she took, the figure remained as still as a statue.

Daisy quickened her pace, a sudden intense need to see who they were foraging itself deep within her chest. Perhaps it was her happiness that fueled her forward, an urgency to make sure that nothing else could affect the joy she had pushing her to the water fountain.

As if the figure could sense her presence, the moment she got close enough to shout something, they took off.

They whipped around the water fountain, the figure's hands lingering over the water before slipping back within their sleeves.

Within an instant, they were gone into the approaching nighttime.

Daisy crept towards the water fountain still. All the hairs were standing up on her arms, and the goosebumps increased the closer she came to the quiet fountain.

While she expected the fountain to glow and glimmer with the speckled coins hidden within the waves, Daisy was surprised to not even see a hint of the fountain floor.

The water was thick with a deep spell, taking on a greenish glow as it swayed around the pool.

Every once in a while, the color seemed to hum, vibrating between green and black.

The color was so pungent and thick that she couldn't see any of the coins below.

Daisy let her hand hover over the water, feeling the magnetic push and pull of the throbbing magic beneath her skin.

It was unlike anything she had ever encountered before.

Leaning forward, Daisy caught a whiff of the magic, and it twisted her stomach around unpleasantly.

It wasn't an outrightly rotten smell, but it had an unusual sweetness to it, one that reeked entirely of downright trouble.

Daisy raised her head, looking over her surroundings but not seeing anyone out of the ordinary any longer. Questions raced through the back of her mind.

What sort of danger lies on the horizon for Willowbrook?