

Witch in Disguise

by Elle Adams

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I hung up and met Bethan's questioning stare. "Guess they're busy."

"Paranormal criminals don't catch themselves," she said.

"I guess not," I said. "So... what do you have to do to get yourself locked up in their prison? I heard it's worse than the town jail, even."

"It's for serious career criminals," said Bethan. "Or people nobody else wants to deal with."

"But don't a lot of paranormals police their own?" I asked. "I mean, we just saw that the vampires took care of the guy who bit someone without permission. And the werewolves deal with their own criminals as well."

"Yes, true," Lizzie said. "The hunters deal with criminals who don't belong to any paranormal community. Anyone from people who expose their magic to normals to paranormal serial killers."

Maybe that's what my father had done. Used fairy magic in front of humans. But it wasn't like they couldn't erase memories. And if he'd been jailed my whole life... wait. Idiot, Blair. I should have asked Nathan when my father had been arrested. I'd been in too much shock at the time, but Nathan wasn't that much older than I was. He couldn't have been a security guard at the prison before I was born. And I'd only found out I was paranormal recently...

Which meant that up until not long ago, my father had been free, out there in the world, and had never got in touch.

I should have put that in the letter. I should have asked. I'd been too stunned that he wanted to get in touch at all to do some simple sums, but it sounded like he'd been free for most of my life. So why hadn't he wanted to contact me?

I had no idea how I got through the rest of the workday, but the hunters didn't call back and I finished the rest of my client list with time to spare. I walked home in a daze, ignoring a fresh wave of stares from passers-by. Including schoolchildren, who added pointing to the mix.

"Fairy!" a little boy said.

"Is that the fairy witch?" a young girl eagerly asked her mum.

Wonderful.

I kept my head down, unable to believe I'd somehow found a reason to feel even worse. If I wanted to know more about my dad's arrest, I'd need to speak to Nathan again, but I couldn't face that. I still had a magic lesson to get through.

I reached my house... and found the cherry on top of the cake of the crappiest day ever. Blythe, my former co-worker, waited on my doorstep.

"I need your help, Blair," she said.

2

My mouth fell open and sort of hung there for a bit. Blythe, the former Dritch & Co employee who hated me since the moment we'd met, wouldn't ask for my help if there was a vampire chewing her face off. More to the point, we hadn't spoken much since I'd got her fired for hexing Callie, not to mention trying to get me fired for being half fairy.

“Blythe, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“I...” Her brow furrowed. “I need your help, Blair. It’s urgent.”

“You hate me.” There was no other way to put it. Blythe and I might apparently be distantly related on my mother’s side of the family, not that she actually knew that, but she’d made my life hell when I’d first started working at Dritch & Co, and tried to sabotage my relationship with Nathan. If I ever expected her to show up on my doorstep, it was to gloat, not ask a favour.

“I don’t hate you,” she protested. “I need your help. Can I come in?”

A growling noise came from behind me. Sky wound around my ankles, positioned himself in front of me and hissed at Blythe. It was lucky for her that he remained in his normal cat-size, but that growl said it all.

Blythe stumbled back off the doorstep, fear flashing across her features. “I’m not here to hurt you!”

True. My lie-sensing powers were infallible, as far as I knew. She wasn’t here to hurt me... not in a physical sense anyway. But in an emotional sense? All bets were off.

“What is it, then?” I asked. “Are you really Blythe?”

“Yes, I am,” she said quickly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Uh, because you’re acting like a stranger.” Unfortunately—or fortunately—my lie-sensing powers told me that she did, indeed, believe she was actually Blythe. “All right, tell me what it is.” Maybe then she’d get out of the way of the door so I’d make it to my magic lesson on time.

“I’m... well. I’m under a curse,” she said. “I think. I can’t use my powers.”

I blinked. “What, your mind-reading abilities?”

She dipped her head, her eyes wide. “Yeah. Totally gone. I can’t hear a thing.”

Not a lie. But what in the world did she expect me to do about it? “Er, you know I’m not actually a detective, right? Also, and I reiterate, you hate me. You put my co-worker under a spell, you tried to sabotage my job, you nearly got the wrong person jailed for murder...”

Her forehead crumpled. “I suppose I did. I’m sorry.”

“Okay. You’re either an illusion or pranking me, and I have to get changed for my magic lesson. Please get out of the way.”

“Of course!” She gave me a smile worthy of Helen, ambassador for the magical academy, and stepped aside. Blythe had never smiled at me in her life. I was pretty sure her facial expressions had two settings: smirking and scowling. Maybe my lie-sensing powers were faulty. But the footprints she’d left in the mud were real. Illusions didn’t leave footprints, right?

Illusion or not, maybe she’d go away if I left her there. Checking the time, I gave up on the idea of changing and fed the cats before transferring my wand and keys into my smaller bag. Sky wove around my legs as I did so, unusually affectionate.

“Is it definitely her?” I asked him.

“Miaow.”

“Nod or shake your head. It’s her?”

To my intense surprise, he dipped his head a little. Hey, maybe the cat

and I were improving our communication channels after all.

“Is there such a thing as a personality transplant spell? Wait, why am I asking you that? You’re a cat.” I shook my head and walked to the door, letting myself out of the flat.

Blythe was still outside, waiting beside the doorstep. So much for that idea.

“Er, I have a magic lesson to get to,” I said. “Tell you what, come with me. You can ask Madame Grey or Rita to help you with your magic.”

Maybe they’d be able to tell me if she’d been replaced with a super-nice clone or was just pranking me, so I’d have at least one problem taken off my hands. Of course, my magic lessons were a task and a half on their own. I was still in basic classes despite having cast spells that ought to be beyond my level. Let’s just say I had a few issues with moderation. And focus. And not dropping my wand.

I kept one eye on Blythe as we walked in case she hexed me from behind, but she didn’t even seem to have her wand on her. When we reached the witches’ headquarters, however, it was to find the door to the main coven meeting room locked with a sign proclaiming yet another important meeting was in process. When I checked the classroom where my magic lessons usually took place, Rita had left a note on the desk apologising for not being there, but the covens had called yet another security meeting.

I shouldn’t be surprised. The local witch covens ran the town—headed by Madame Grey and the Meadowsweet Coven—so they were taking most of the backlash from the near-war between the vampires and werewolves.

“Bad luck,” said Blythe, but not in the snotty tone she’d normally have used. “I’ve never heard of anyone losing their magical powers out of

nowhere before. That's why I wanted your help."

"I'm possibly the person least qualified for this, Blythe, to be honest," I told her. "I wouldn't know how to block anyone's powers."

Except when I'd blocked people from reading my mind. But that was an accident and I didn't know how I'd done it. I definitely couldn't stop people from using their innate powers. Hadn't thought it was possible.

Each witch had one major talent they didn't need a wand to use. Sometimes it ran in the family, sometimes not, but generally you could expect people closely related to one another to have the same type of talent. I still didn't know if my ability to tell a person's paranormal type was a witch ability or a fairy one, nor my lie-sensing talent. I'd temporarily lost my ability to sense lies once when a siren had used her magic to befuddle me, and it hadn't been a pleasant experience, so I understood why Blythe was panicking, even if it made zero sense for her to be so nice to me. I might not like Blythe, but if she was in a talkative mood, it wouldn't hurt to get the story from her.

"Tell me when it happened. Were you using magic?" I asked.

"No, I just woke up like this—on Saturday," she said. "I tried asking people, but well... they wouldn't talk to me. That's why I picked you, Blair."

I frowned. "They wouldn't talk to you? Anyone?"

I had to admit, if she was as pleasant to everyone else as she was to me, it came as no surprise that she'd made a few enemies. But that meant if someone had cursed her, it might have been anyone in the town.

Assuming I believed her.

She sniffed, and to my total astonishment, tears glittered in her eyes. "I

can't hear their thoughts, not like I used to. I knew they hated me. I wanted to switch it off, sometimes, but I couldn't, and now I want it back."

"Oh," I said. Nope. Blair, don't even think about pitying her. She was probably putting on an act. A very convincing act, and who knew, maybe it was possible for someone's powers to be turned off. Considering how many people she'd probably alienated, maybe someone had decided to do everyone a favour. But turning off someone's magical powers didn't change their personality—did it?

"Er, have you been near the lake in the last two days?" I asked. "Or seen any... sirens?"

She shook her head. "No, not since before those awful murders in the forest."

Hmm. Sirens could walk on land, but I wouldn't have thought they'd come this far from the lake. Especially as it would mean going too close to the forest where the wizard's pet monster had attacked a bunch of elves. No... most of the people Blair had made enemies of were human, as far as I knew.

I checked the time. Alissa was working until seven, and we were supposed to be going out socialising to ease me back into hanging out with the other witches for the first time since I'd been revealed to be half fairy. The last thing I needed was Blythe tagging along for the ride. I just wanted her gone.

"What do you think I can possibly do to help?" I asked her.

"Just... come with me and talk to my family. They don't know who might have done this to me, either. My mum's furious."

"Your family?"

She nodded. “Yes. I moved back home after I lost my job.”

Oops. No, I definitely wouldn’t feel guilty for that. And I didn’t. Sympathy, though? I had way too much of that to spare.

Also... as Veronica had heavily implied once, Blythe’s family were distantly my family too, on my witch mother’s side. Maybe they’d even know why Tanith Wildflower had left town, met a fairy, and never came back. Or even how my dad had wound up in jail. Let’s face it, I was more likely to get a potential answer from Blythe’s family than from sitting at home feeling sorry for myself.

Whatever the reason, I found myself saying, “Okay, I will. I’ll come and talk to them.”

I deserve some seriously good karma for this.

Blythe remained in her weird mood during the walk. What was the word? Oh. Cheerful. I’d never seen her act like that in all the time I’d known her. It was possible she wasn’t as prickly when she was around her family, but logic told me that her weird personality issue must be connected with her missing mind-reading abilities. Unless someone had hexed her twice. Or I was walking alongside a realistic illusion. Or dreaming. Nope, that would require actually being able to sleep properly.

“Why is everyone looking at you?” Blythe asked as we walked.

“I’m a fairy,” I said. “You were one of the first people who worked it out.”

“I know, I remember.”

She hadn’t been hit by an amnesia spell, then. She’d just... changed.

People did change sometimes, but she'd been pretty set in her ways when I'd met her, and I'd thought she liked being mean to people. I knew better than to expect someone like her to change overnight. But maybe I was being too harsh. I was generally a fairly forgiving person, and holding grudges wasted too much energy for me to be bothered by it. Even with Blythe, we'd mostly stayed out of each other's way in the weeks after she'd been fired, and we'd never actively sought one another out.

“Mum, it's the fairy,” said a little boy, staring up at me with wide eyes.

“Why does she look like a witch?” asked a small girl who was presumably his sibling. “She's not one.”

She's not a witch.

A lead weight formed in my stomach. Kids said mean things thoughtlessly—I knew that from my stint as a nanny—but I wished I'd stayed in bed all evening instead. Leaving the house accompanied by my former mortal enemy was probably not the best way to re-induct myself into paranormal society as the resident witch-fairy freak, but I couldn't hide away forever.

Instead of ducking my head, I attempted to smile at the passing family. The little girl fell over her feet in an effort to get away.

Note to self: do not terrify small children.

I tried a smile on the next family with the same result. Maybe Blythe and I had swapped personalities. I gave up trying to smile and walked on, relieved when we left the crowds behind and Blythe finally stopped at a nice big house set apart from its neighbours by a high fence. While it wasn't quite as fancy as the vampire lords' houses I'd seen, it rivalled Madame Grey's house for size, and hers had four separate flats in it.

Of course Blythe would have money as well as looks, magical talent, and a terrible personality to boot. How had she ended up with everything while I'd wound up stranded in NormalsVille with no money or contact with my birth family? Especially with us being distantly related? Well, if there's anywhere I might get answers, it's here.

Blythe unlocked the gate, then meandered down a stone path to the front door. I hovered behind her as she let us into the hall, unsure what to do. I felt like this was the sort of house you took your shoes off in. The house Alissa and I rented from Madame Grey might be huge, but it was lived-in. Everything here was so... shiny.

“Rebecca!” called Blair. “I brought a visitor.”

“Go away,” said a female voice from a staircase off the hallway.

“That's nice.”

Silence followed from upstairs. “Sibling?” I guessed. “You have a sister?”

“Yes, she's my little sister. My mother remarried after divorcing my father, so I have two older siblings who left town, too. Mum must be in the garden.”

“Are you sure she'll want to speak to me?” I asked hesitantly. I had got Blythe fired, even if it'd been her own fault, and Blythe had also said that her mum was mad about her losing her powers.

“Sure,” said Blythe. “I'm sure the two of you will be able to think of an answer.”

I doubt it. New Blythe had entirely too much faith in me. Unless it was a side effect of the weird personality change, though—it didn't sound like Blythe had actually enjoyed reading everyone's thoughts as much as

I'd thought. As herself, she'd revelled in plucking out my innermost thoughts and using them to humiliate me. But I was glad that ability had skipped me by. While there were a few situations where it would have really helped to know what people were thinking—like when I was trying to figure out how to break it to Nathan that I was half fairy, for instance—I couldn't imagine having the ability switched on all the time. Even the vampires could control whether or not to read specific thoughts. Vincent had told me.

Thinking of Blythe with a family and her own problems kind of blew my mind, to be honest. Despite my trepidation, I followed her through the hallway and out into the back garden.

The garden was stunning, a maze of wildflowers tamed into rows amid sprawling oaks. A woman sitting on a deck chair turned to squint at us through dark glasses. She looked exactly like an older version of Blythe. It was always weird when that happened in families. They had the same pale features and dark hair, the same willowy build, and the same scowl—not that Blythe wore hers at the moment. They even had the same walk, as I noticed when she rose to her feet. Even Veronica and Bethan didn't look that much alike.

“What are you doing in my house?” she asked, eyeing me as though I was a slimy slug on the lawn.

“I invited her,” Blythe said quickly. “This is Blair.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You're Blair Wilkes.”

“Er. Yes. You must be Mrs... er.” I should have asked Blythe's surname.

“Mrs Dailey,” she supplied, looking at my half-outstretched hand as though I was offering her a dead pigeon. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, Blythe invited me, but you know what, this was a bad idea. I’ll leave.”

“Hold on,” said Blythe. “Mum, you know Blair’s a detective, right?”

“I’m not a detective!” I wished I could glamour myself invisible on the spot. “Blythe told me someone switched off her powers. Since, er, we have similar abilities, I wondered if you might know how it might have happened.”

“Similar?” she echoed. “I think not. We don’t do business with fairy filth.”

My mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?”

Her wand was suddenly in her hand. “Don’t you dare corrupt my family.”

“Mum!” said a breathless voice, and a tween girl ran outside, looking panicky. “Don’t shout at her. She’s Blythe’s friend.”

“Er, no... argh.” The words dried up in my mouth. “I mean, I came here to help Blythe. Did you know she’s having trouble with her magic?”

Rebecca frowned. “What’s the problem?”