

Witch in Disguise

c 2

“Nothing,” said Mrs Dailey sharply. “Rebecca, go back to your room. Blythe, please escort Miss Wilkes away from our house.”

Rebecca ran back inside the house without looking back, while Blythe hovered awkwardly on the side.

“But—” This was ridiculous. “Look at your daughter. She’s acting weirdly. Do you think she might be under a spell?”

Mrs Dailey gave me a blistering glare. “If you dared to cast another spell on my daughter, you had better undo it, Blair Wilkes.”

I swallowed. “I swear, I didn’t do anything to her. We haven’t even seen each other in ages.”

“You cost my daughter her job. I won’t let you take her magic away from her either.”

“It wasn’t her!” Blythe exclaimed, visibly alarmed. “I brought her here because I thought she could help me. I woke up without my magic and I know Blair has similar powers, so I thought she might know how to fix me.”

“Enough. I’m calling someone who will take care of this little problem.”

Ack. She was going to call the coven. “They’re in a meeting!” I said. “Wait, shouldn’t you be with them?”

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not a part of the magical council, and I certainly don't need to waste my time with them."

I backed towards the door into the house. "But aren't you in a coven? Like my mother was?" Shut up, Blair.

"Certainly not," she said. "Your mother exiled herself from the family coven when she went chasing after fairies. And I have no intention of joining another coven again."

"I don't understand—" I broke off as she gripped her wand, and a few warning sparks shot out the end. "Okay. Sorry I couldn't help. Bye."

I pretty much sprinted back into the house and through the hallway, Blythe following more slowly. So now I knew why Blythe had hated me so much at first—not to mention how she'd known I was a fairy. Her mother had known Tanith Wildflower, and it did not sound like they'd liked one another much.

"Are you okay?" asked Blythe.

"Yeah," I said, thoroughly unnerved. "Really, I'm fine. I can get home alone."

Whatever was going on in Blythe's family was none of my business—even if you discounted the fact that her mother hated me, Blythe herself was acting like a stranger, and I had absolutely no clue whatsoever as to what might have messed with her mind-reading powers.

"Sorry about that," said Blythe. "I don't understand why she doesn't like you."

“You didn’t like me up until whatever happened between the last time we saw one another and this evening,” I said to her. “What did my mother do?”

Blythe shook her head. “I don’t know. She left before I was born—your mother did. She left town. And my mum told me that she was trouble. I believed her because... I don’t know. I believe everything she says.”

Truth, said my lie-sensing power.

Hmm. Despite her weird behaviour, the opportunity to learn any clues about my past was more than welcome.

“Tell you what,’ I relented. “If you wake up the same tomorrow, come and see me after work. We’ll talk to the coven and get the spell taken off you.”

“It wasn’t a spell,” she insisted. “I would know if it was. I just woke up like this.”

“And was anyone else in the house? Might your mother or sister have done it?”

“Mum wouldn’t,” she insisted. “She’s going to be seriously mad at me if I can’t get my powers back.”

Truth. “And your sister?”

“She doesn’t have any magic yet,” Blythe said. “Or a wand. She’s a late developer, I guess. Mum has enough trouble dealing with her without adding my problems on top of it. Now she’s mad at both of us.”

Wow. Rebecca didn’t have magic? In a magical town, that must be a

serious struggle even without your own family looking down on you for it. Wait, why was I feeling even sorrier for Blythe and her family after this? Her mother had kicked me out of the house for trying to help. I was clearly in an over-sensitive state after the emotional rollercoaster of the last few weeks. I should get out while I had the chance. I certainly wouldn't be going near Blythe's house again.

Tomorrow, one way or another, I'd get this case off my hands and go back to happily ignoring Blythe from afar. Blythe had always been better at holding a grudge than I was, and with any luck, she'd be back to normal soon.

3

I reached the house to find a young woman outside, moving a bunch of boxes into the hall. Tall and curvy with strawberry blond hair, she shifted another box aside and turned to face me. "Hey! Sorry about the mess."

Oh, new upstairs neighbour. Our last one had moved out after she'd been hit by a knockout spell meant for Alissa and me. We didn't speak to the others much—all of us worked at different hours and the flats were self-contained. Even Alissa's and my section of the garden was private, for our own use.

"Hey," I said, casting my mind around in an attempt to remember what Alissa had said her name was. "You're Nina, right?"

"Yes." Her gaze followed Blythe's retreating form, the hint of a scowl masking her otherwise pretty face. "You're Blair?"

"Yeah. Let me help you with those." I held the door open to make it easier for her to shift the stack of boxes into the hall, and then helped

her carry them up the stairs to the flat above ours.

“Thank you,” she said. “You live downstairs?”

“Yeah, I live with Alissa. Madame Grey’s granddaughter. You’ve probably met.”

“A couple of times.” A brief silence followed in which she gave me the look I’d seen entirely too many times over the last week or two. My heart sank. All right. Ask if I’m a fairy. I know you want to. “Uh, I know it’s not my business,” she said. “But are you friends with Blythe?”

I blinked. Not the question I’d expected. “No, definitely not. I was helping her with something today, but we’re not friends.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Good.”

I frowned. “Any reason?”

“Sorry, that was rude. It’s just that we’re not friends. She was awful to me when we were at school.”

“Oh. Sounds like her, yeah.” I decided not to mention the curse. With any luck, it’d be gone tomorrow, and her weird personality glitch along with it.

Nina shifted some of the boxes over the threshold into the flat. “She was particularly nasty to anyone who didn’t develop their magical gifts until later on. I was thirteen when mine showed up, so she bullied me for two years straight.”

“That’s awful. Sorry.” My brief shred of sympathy for Blythe evaporated. “She was horrible to me when I moved here, too. She used

that mind-reading power of hers to get all my secrets and then spread them around. Did she do that all the time?”

“She did until my ability kicked in,” she said. “Turns out I can neutralise others’ powers. So, er, if your magical skill stops working for a bit, don’t panic. It’s not permanent.”

Neutralising talents? Hang on...

“Oh, that’s cool,” I said. “I’ve never met anyone who can do that before.”

She smiled. “It’s not the most convenient power, I admit. Mum and I ended up leaving our original coven because of it to start a new one. Madame Grey helped us a lot.”

“I didn’t know you could switch covens,” I said honestly. Every time I thought I’d got the hang of being paranormal, a new surprise came along. But Nina seemed nice enough.

“It’s not common, but we kept clashing with our former coven’s leader. It was inevitable. Anyway, I’ve a lot of unpacking to do. Nice to meet you, Blair.”

“You too.” I headed back downstairs. Blythe a bully... no surprise. Did Nina know she’d lost her powers? Perhaps. But as our conversation had made clear: it was none of my business.

I let myself into the flat and found Alissa sitting on the sofa, with Roald curled around her arm.

“Hey,” she said. “I managed to escape work early. Got bitten by a patient and had to check into my own place of employment.”

“Are you okay?” I sank onto the empty spot on the sofa. “Not a vampire, was it?”

“Nope. An elf,” she said, grimacing. “It wasn’t a venomous bite, at least... you weren’t at a magic lesson, though, were you? I thought my grandmother was presiding over another coven meeting.”

“Yeah, she invited everyone, including Rita, so my lesson was cancelled.” I reached for a cookie from the box on the coffee table.

“I did wonder,” she said. “They’re run off their feet because of the security issue. Last I heard, they were debating over whether or not we need to bring outsiders in.”

“Oh, we had to deal with some of that at work,” I said, having entirely forgotten my new dilemma in the wake of my encounter with Blythe’s family. “Someone hired us to contact the hunters, so I might have to deal with them tomorrow.”

Her eyes went wide. “The—hunters? Wow. They must be serious.”

I bit my lip. “I guess they want to make sure this place is as secure as possible. I got the impression it was someone from the covens who asked us to get in touch, but the boss didn’t say who hired us.”

Was it Nathan? Surely not. I’d thought he’d moved to Fairy Falls to get away from the hunters, but it was possible I’d read the situation all wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time. I mean, I’d assumed he didn’t know I was a fairy when he’d really known all along.

“Yeah.” She yawned. “I don’t know, ask your boss. Where’ve you been all evening if you didn’t have a lesson, anyway?”

“Blythe,” I said, “has had a personality transplant.”

“She what?” said Alissa blankly.

“She was being weirdly nice to me and came here asking for help. Then I got to meet her mother, and found out why she had such a grudge against me when we met. Seems she and my mum really didn’t get along.”

Alissa sat up, accidentally dislodging Roald in the process. “Blair, slow down. You met Blythe’s mother?”

I bit into the cookie. “That’s the weirdest part of this?”

“Yes, it is. I thought she left town.”

“Apparently she came back.” I explained Blythe’s disappearing powers and perplexing family situation.

When I’d finished, Alissa said, “Wow. I assume the missing powers and her weird personality switch are linked. Maybe someone tried to get rid of her magic and got rid of her nastiness at the same time.”

“Or the other way around?” I shook my head. “Through what, a curse or a hex? Or a spell? I don’t even know where to start, but she thinks that I’m a detective and that I can help her. Also, she wasn’t lying. Not a word.”

Nor her especially nasty mother.

Alissa leaned back against the cushions, stroking Roald. “Yeah, that’s bizarre. I’d dump her off on the coven.”

“I would have done if they’d been available.” I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t know that accidentally catching a couple of murderers would mean even my enemies would try to hire me to solve their problems. At this rate, I’ll get a job offer from Steve the Gargoyle by the end of the week. And I have a job.”

“And magic lessons,” she put in. “Unless you’re desperate for a distraction, but seriously, getting involved with Blythe in any capacity is bad news. How do you know she’s not putting on an act—right, the lies. But you know, it’s not flawless. Your power.”

“I know.” I said. “I have to admit, it’d be kind of nice if that change was permanent. She wasn’t even mad that I got her fired and caused her to have to move in with her mother again.”

“Okay, that definitely doesn’t sound like Blythe. From what Bethan told me, she was glad when her mother packed up and left. And she was furious to lose her position at Dritch & Co.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” I said. “But who could have hexed her? Pretty much everyone hates her. Does she even have any friends at all?”

“I think she does,” said Alissa, pursing her lips. “Bethan told me. But I guess we don’t run in the same circles. I don’t know. You didn’t tell her you’d help her?”

“I said I’d take her to Madame Grey tomorrow.” I gave a helpless shrug. “She’s all weird in that state. Like a lost puppy. Anyway, her family... something isn’t quite right about them. Her mum’s like an older and eviler version of her—well, the person we used to know, before she pulled a Jekyll and Hyde. She threatened to call the coven on

me. I'm sure Madame Grey wouldn't have backed her up, but she still seemed a little unhinged."

"You're telling me," said Alissa. "Yeah, I wouldn't go near her family if you paid me. I'm kinda confused on why you went over to begin with."

"I had a weird moment," I said, taking another cookie. "It's been a long day, and she was just—there. If the witches hadn't been in a coven meeting, I could have shoved her at one of them and let them handle it. I didn't know it was possible to switch off someone's powers." Except the new neighbour's ability, but she'd said it wasn't permanent.

"It's possible, but like you said... anyone might have done it. And if it's a curse, the caster—"

"Needs to reverse it," I finished, as Sky butted into my leg. "Sky didn't bite her, he just hissed at her. I took it to mean she wasn't plotting against me, at least."

The real question: what had come first, the personality change or the missing powers? Did it matter, anyway? Blythe and I would never be friends, and I wouldn't get any more involved in this than I had to. The best idea for now was to lie low and thoroughly avoid dangerous situations.

Sky butted my hand again. I leaned over to pet him and spotted a piece of paper tucked into his collar.

My heart jumped in my chest. With shaking hands, I removed the paper from his collar and unfolded it. The last few notes I'd received had been written in the same handwriting, which I assumed belonged to my dad—including the note warning me about Peter the wizard's plan to use me in his ritual. How he'd known about that, I'd never

found out. But this note—the writing was different. It also wasn't written in English, but in some symbols I couldn't read.

I held the note out. "Er... Alissa. Any clue what this is?"

She took the piece of paper from me. "Huh? Blair, this is written in Elvish."

"Elvish... as in, elves?"

"Yeah." Her brow furrowed. "That's weird. Are you sure Sky meant that for you?"

"Is he roping me into solving the elves' problems, too? No, thanks. The last one I met wasn't particularly nice to me."

It'd been weeks ago, when I'd accidentally trespassed near their part of the forest. Apparently, the local elves had worked with Mr Falconer, the former wand-maker, who'd taken wandwood from their trees in order to make his custom wands. According to Rita, they were tricksters, and you didn't want to get on their bad side. Common opinion said they hated witches. Fairies, though? Well, they could have sent me the most grievously insulting letter ever and I couldn't understand a word of it. If this was a prank, it'd backfired spectacularly.

"The last one I met bit me," Alissa said. "I'd say get a translator, but I don't know any Elvish."

"Likewise." I gave the letter another scan and passed it back to Alissa. None of the symbols was even remotely similar to English. "Is this Blythe's new thing? Trick me into certain death by elves?"

"Elves aren't usually inclined to hurt humans," said Alissa. "They just

prank us. Not that I'd want to go into their forest at any rate, especially after that monster killed three of them. And Blythe definitely wouldn't either, if she's got any sense."

"I thought they hated the witches," I said. "Why would they send me a note?"

"Because... they know you're a fairy?"

"Didn't they already know?"

She shook her head. "Haven't a clue. Just speculating. You exposed your fairy magic for the whole town to see, and to be honest, nobody would have guessed you were a fairy beforehand without using a detection spell."

Or my paranormal sensing ability. "Yeah, well. I was glamourised. I still am. This isn't my real face."

She put the paper on the coffee table. "You didn't look that different. Look... Blair, I don't want you thinking I see you differently now. I don't, not at all. And the people who really matter won't either."

"There's so much staring," I admitted. "Little kids run scared from me. Everyone looks at me as though I'm a circus freak, and I'm still wearing my glamour. I want to go out and pretend things are the same, but they aren't."

"They will be," Alissa said confidently. "Give everyone time to wrap their heads around it, and I promise, things will be back to normal. Besides. Don't forget you were the newbie not long ago. You're still a novelty for that reason alone. Not everyone cares that you're a fairy."

“The people who matter don’t,” I said, mirroring her earlier line, and a lump grew in my throat. My boss and co-workers didn’t. Madame Grey and Rita had known from the start. None of them had treated me any differently. But—Nathan had mattered, too. And... he’d said he didn’t care I was a fairy, not as much as he cared that I’d lied to him. But I hadn’t heard from him since. Nothing, not a message or call. Admittedly, the main reason we’d been seeing so much of one another to begin with was because he’d been appointed as my bodyguard during the mad wizard’s quest to kill paranormals for his own gain, but still. Maybe he was waiting for me to get in touch. But I’d already apologised for not telling him the truth, and he was the one who’d left me with a bombshell and a half to deal with. Namely, that he’d imprisoned my father.

Sky moved in front of the note on the coffee table and looked expectantly at me, as though he thought I had a translator lying around somewhere. Or an English-to-Elvish dictionary.

“Can you read it?” Elves and fairy cats didn’t seem like they had a lot in common, but what did I know? “Who even gave you the note?”

“Miaow.”

“You know I can’t understand a word you say, right?”