

HEX IN THE CITY

CASE FILE ○

THE HEX FILES

KELLY GARCIA

DEDICATION

To all the women who've laughed, dreamed, tripped in their heels, kept going, and crushed it—this one's for you.

Author's Note:

Hex in the City is a novella that kicks off the Hex Files, Cozy Urban Fantasy Series. Each book in this series can be read on its own.

ALSO BY KELLY GARCIA

The Hex Files

Hex in the City

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GRANDMA TOLD ME SO

On my eighteenth birthday, Grandma Hexley cupped my cheeks, looked me deep in the eyes, and said, “Get a tattoo. It’ll make your parents just as mad. But mark my words, if you go through with this cockamamie plan, you will regret it.”

Did I listen? I was a teenager.

Twenty-some years later, I would’ve done nearly anything to change the fact that I’d turned my back on my powers.

My magic was still deep inside of me, I couldn’t rip it out without it killing me, and now, buried where it couldn’t break free, it acted like a cat on a caffeine high—twitchy, unpredictable, and always watching.

I paced up and down our halls hardwood floors, past nine pictures of Sydney—one for every year of my daughter’s life.

Each time I came within a foot of my husband Carl’s home office, a warning jolt shot deep into my marrow. Something was wrong. My magic knew it, and it pulsed danger, danger, danger.

Carl was up to something. What?

Thanks to my husband’s obscene success, we’d built a home that other moms drooled over. The hickory used to build the

floors had been reclaimed from beams in some barn in southern Illinois and transformed into wide planks. The frames around the custom interior doors matched the crown molding, and a square panel on the bottom of those doors blended with the wainscoting. It was luxurious, and I'd lived here so long, it should've felt like home. Instead, it felt . . . cold.

While Syd was in the bathroom, I jiggled the door handle on Carl's office. Locked. No surprise. My husband guarded his personal space closer than our neighbors, the Morrisons, guarded their liquor—and they had four teenage sons.

"Ready." Syd poked her head out of her bathroom with toothpaste smeared at the corner of her mouth. My twig-thin little girl had spent the entire second-grade year in a serious cow phase. Even though it was nearly summer, she'd broken out this year's favorite sweater—one decorated with a cutesy cow with horns and fringy bangs clipped to the side by a heart-shaped barrette. Given the weather and her growth spurts, she was wearing that sweater for the last time.

"You need to wash your face." I pointed at the smudge.

"Oh."

"T-minus ten and counting," I said.

"What does that even mean?"

"It means hurry, or you'll be late for school." I raised my hands and wiggled my fingers, imitating a giant tickle monster. She squealed and ducked back into the bathroom.

I waited until the water ran. Then I hurried back to Carl's office.

Magic sizzled at its source, inside my bones. On instinct, I reached for the door handle and focused my power. It surged like a giant wave, then slammed into a wall stronger than a mountain. Stuck. Still part of me, but bound inside, by my ridiculous choice.

I had two minutes to back out of the driveway, or we risked running into the commuter train on Main, aka the slowest train

in the western suburbs of Chicago. If we hit that train, Syd would be late for school.

I had to get going, but my magic throbbed at me, insisting that I or someone I loved was threatened. The nature of that threat was stashed inside Carl's office. I could break it down, but that might make my husband suspicious. I could smash it in and run. No. I had to wait and find a subtle way to figure out what my conniving shrew of a husband was up to.

For now, Syd was okay. I was okay. I shot a quick text to my best friend.

Me: Everything alright?

Gianna: Your third eye acting up?

Me: I don't have a third eye.

Gianna: Give me a break. I'm fine. Kids are fine. Dog's fine.

Me: You don't have a dog.

Gianna: And you don't have a third eye.

"You pocket-sized bundle of sass," I muttered and pocketed my phone.

"What did you say?" Syd asked.

"I said hurry up, or we're going to hit the train."

"Coming."

The mystery of what hid behind Carl's office door would have to wait until after I dropped my daughter at school.

I backed my Audi out of the driveway and headed past the enormous brick homes on sprawling, perfectly manicured lots in my neighborhood. On our way, I waved hi to our neighbor, then wondered if I should feel any guilt. As a rule, wives and husbands shouldn't snoop around in each other's private things. But my husband was a no-good, lying, weasel of a snake. So, I was going to make an exception.

Besides, my magic wouldn't let me ignore a threat even if I wanted to.

When I got back home, I set my Gucci bag on the kitchen

counter and went to our bathroom, where I caught my reflection in the mirror.

Okay, so maybe I wasn't *exactly* fresh out of law school anymore, but I was still holding my own. My blonde hair—currently wrangled into a high ponytail—had lost a little of its *Malibu Barbie* shine, but nothing a good deep conditioning couldn't fix. My skin? Still smooth, thanks to religious SPF application. And my wardrobe? Let's just say I didn't let my stay-at-home mom status affect my commitment to well-tailored blazers and the perfect pink lipstick.

Forty was the new thirty, and if anyone wanted to argue that, they could take it up with my retinol serum.

I searched for and found a chipped, black bobby pin, straightened it, and took it to Carl's office door. Like a little dog doing a happy dance, my magic spun in circles when I stuck the pin into the lock. I twirled it around. Nothing happened. I tried from a different angle. I shook the handle. I twisted the pin. Nada.

My powers sparked.

"Gold-plated jerk," I murmured. A strong jolt nearly landed me on my rear. "Not you. Carl."

I punched Gianna's number into my phone.

"I need help," I said.

"On my way," was my perfect best friend's response.

In a record-breaking five minutes, Gianna stormed in, all five feet of her, like a very determined yet incredibly tiny tornado.

She had that classic sitcom wife vibe—cute, sharp-witted, and more than capable of keeping a household in line. Imagine that Romano guy from that old TV show but much shorter, with way more boobage, and a lot less patience for nonsense.

She made a beeline for Carl's office, laser-focused on the lock like a detective in a crime procedural. "Very suspicious." She tapped her chin like she was solving the mystery of the century. "You'll never open this with a bobby pin. It's a five-lever lock."

I blinked. "What's that mean?"

The first time I saw Gianna pick a lock, I'd briefly entertained the idea that she had a secret past involving jewel heists and underground poker rings. The reality was about as scandalous as a PTA bake sale. Her dad was a locksmith.

"There's a huge difference between interior and exterior locks," she explained, bending down to squint at the keyhole. "Interior locks are just for privacy. You know, for when Mom and Dad are—"

She stopped short, made a truly horrifying gesture with her fist, and I winced.

I clapped my hands over my ears. "Nope. Nope. Don't finish that sentence."

She grinned. "Fine. Anyway. Exterior locks keep the riffraff from breaking and entering and stealing your stuff." Gianna straightened. "I can't think of a legitimate reason for a man to install a five-lever lock in his home office unless—" She gave me an apologetic look.

"Can you break into it?" I asked, cutting straight to the point.

"Oh, definitely." She crossed her arms over her ample chest and nodded like she had just accepted a new client. "With my brother's Lishi CY24."

"His what?"

"My brother took over Dad's business. I'll see him Wednesday. I'll borrow it then."

"Thanks."

I bit back a grunt. I had to wait two full days. I'd seen Carl accomplish horrible things in half that time.

After Gianna left, I went through the mail.

Our local food bank had sent a letter. We donated a generous sum every year, and I expected the usual thank-you note and a receipt. Instead, the letter kindly reminded us to send in the money we had pledged.

Huh.

Carl had promised to take care of that donation over a month ago.

Maybe the food bank made a mistake? I decided to check the bank account—something I normally let Carl handle, because he enjoyed gazing at his money the way some people adored fine art.

I booted up my laptop, typed in my username and password, and got—

INVALID USERNAME AND PASSWORD.

My pulse ticked upward. No big deal. I probably mistyped something. I checked the caps lock, reentered the information, and the screen flashed CREDENTIALS DO NOT MATCH. WARNING: AFTER THREE ATTEMPTS ACCOUNT WILL BE LOCKED.

Okay, not great.

My imagination started off on a fantasy about some faceless hacker lounging on a beach, compliments of Bella and Carl, but before my thoughts spiraled into a full-fledged financial crisis, my phone buzzed.

Carl: *Was that you trying to log into our bank account?*

My magic growled inside me like a territorial cat, all claws and warning signs. Between the magical warnings and the feeling, whenever Carl was home, I was sure I was tiptoeing through a minefield. One wrong step and—pow—chopped off at the knees.

I stared at the message.

An automatic alert must've warned Carl that someone tried to access our account. For me. Why would Carl get an alert just because I logged in? I must've triggered an alarm. Me. His wife.

My stomach lurched.

Carl usually handled our finances, but I logged into our accounts every few months, usually for a receipt of something. I'd never been worried about money because Carl was flush. I

always had cash and cards, and he never questioned me—until now.

A tornado swirled inside me with worst-case scenarios.

I itched to pick up the phone and ask what the heck was going on. I would've if Carl was still the man I'd married, but he'd changed. Something about losing his job the year he turned forty had transformed my once decent husband into a snake, and he hated being questioned.

Think, Bella. Think.

I could not engage in a power struggle with a man with a fragile ego. I needed a legit excuse to check the account. I could ask about the donation, but if he hadn't paid it, he would say so, and I'd have no reason to dig further.

So I did what any respectable, resourceful woman would do—I lied through my teeth.

Me: Yes, I returned a scarf to Nordstrom. Wanted to make sure they credited our account.

I chewed my lip, waiting for his response.

Carl: Just checked. They did.

Oh, you have got to be kidding me.

I tossed my phone onto the table. So much for keeping calm.

Me: Don't you think I need access to our account?

Carl: I switched to electronic statements only. Need to get you added.

I slammed my fist onto the table. Liar.

That was the most half-baked excuse I'd ever heard. If Carl were Pinocchio, his nose would hit the windshield on his drive home.

My magic flared inside me—hot, insistent, pulsing with one very clear message: DANGER. DANGER. DANGER.

There was something in that locked office—something bad.

Me: Thanks. Any requests for dinner?

Carl: Lots of work. I'll eat at the office.

With who? I wanted to ask, but I clenched my jaw and swallowed the question.

Instead, a much more terrifying thought took hold.

Locking me out of our accounts was step one in a divorce.

I did not want to continue living with Carl, far from it. He was the most successful divorce attorney in the state. He had literally built a career ruining other men's wives.

And if he divorced me?

He would destroy me for no other reason than he could.

BREAKING AND ENTERING ... ALMOST

For two nights, I barely slept. Which, given my stress level, wasn't exactly shocking. But by Wednesday, Gianna came through.

At 11 AM sharp, she marched into my house like a very determined, very short tornado. She carried a black case tucked under her arm and wore an expression that meant business.

"I've got it," she announced, brandishing her lock-picking toolkit like it was the latest must-have beauty product.

She cracked open the case, revealing six sleek, high-tech picks—definitely not the scrawny, paperclip-looking things you see in movies. These had tips shaped like tiny, generic keys, thick handles with engraved numbers, and even a center gauge, which made them look way too official for what we were about to do.

My magic twirled like a ballerina in a brand-new tutu, thrilled by the *idea* of a break-in—even if it was technically my house.

Gianna slid a slender tool into the lock and—
Vrrrroom.

A whirring sound rumbled through the house.

Gianna froze. "Uh... what was that?"

I pointed toward the sound. "That's the garage door."

Her eyes went huge. "He's home?!"

Cue immediate panic sprint to the kitchen.

We scrambled like two kids caught red-handed stealing cookies before they cooled, grabbing the first alibi we could find. I yanked the coffee pot off the burner, Gianna snagged two mugs, and we *threw* ourselves into chairs at the kitchen table just in time for Carl—a.k.a. enemy number one—to step inside.

"This is a surprise," I said, plastering on my best *'Oh, look at us, two normal, innocent coffee drinkers'* smile.

Carl's eyes narrowed, flicking between me and Gianna.

"Left some files here." He strolled toward his office.

We waited. And waited. And waited.

Thirty minutes later, he still hadn't emerged.

"I have to go," Gianna whispered.

I nodded, walking her out to her car.

"Can you come back tomorrow?"

She frowned. "I have to return the kit. My brother needs it."

"Ugh."

"But," she added, "I can borrow it again in a few days."

I sighed. "Fine. But it's weird, right? Carl never comes home early."

Gianna leaned in, voice hushed. "Super weird. Like, 'final girl in a horror movie' weird." She gave me a look. "Have you thought about going back to work?"

Oof, that question hit me like a bad perm—totally out of character for my usually loud, life-of-the-party bestie. Gianna might not have magic, but she definitely had a sixth sense for my looming crises.

"It's been forever since I practiced law," I muttered.

She shrugged. "Maybe it'd be good for you."

With that, she squeezed my hand, hopped in her van, and sped away.

I took a deep breath and let the fresh air fill my lungs. Did I want to go back inside? Not yet. Instead, I treated myself to a

nice, long walk. A little fresh air, a little perspective—always a good idea.

Honestly, a divorce would be the best thing that could happen. Love? That was a distant memory. I couldn't even manage like. The truth was, after he got fired, every choice he made chipped away at my respect for him until there was nothing left. Trust? Impossible. The only thing he had going for him was that he was a decent father, and that made things *tricky*.

I needed out of this marriage. But I had to do it in a way that kept Sydney safe and happy. And I would. Because if there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that I *always* found a way.

DINNER WITH THE DEVIL (NO
OFFENSE, PAUL)

Saturday night, Carl insisted I come with him to a downtown client dinner. Which meant two hours trapped in a car together.

The conversation? Nonexistent.

The silence? Deafening.

The only good thing about the evening was my dress—a black and white mini paired with four-inch stilettos. Carl liked my legs in heels, but I didn't care. About him I meant. I did care about taking care of myself, because a woman armed with good hair and a killer outfit isn't just dressed—she's *fortified*.

We pulled up to Sel et Poivre, an upscale French restaurant, just as a steel-gray Maserati screeched to a stop behind us.

Carl's entire face lit up. Like, blinding wattage. If Batman had needed a signal, Carl's teeth would've done the trick.

The driver? Thomas Holden. A filthy rich client with a net worth that made Carl's eyes turn into dollar signs.

"Tom," Carl greeted him, shaking his hand like they were old war buddies.

"Carl," Tom replied, with an equally smug grin. "Out in the company car, I see."

Carl chuckled knowingly.

I raised an eyebrow. A company Maserati?

Then Tom *winked* at me. “Still the best moment of my divorce—when the judge agreed my Maserati and private jet were business assets.”

Carl smirked, clearly proud of himself for pulling that off in court.

My stomach did an enthusiastic somersault, unfortunately, not the fun kind.

The details of the case had leaked into the press.

In law school, I’d read cases where attorneys had successfully argued that a truck or a van belonged to a business and shouldn’t be counted as a personal asset. I understood that. But a Maserati and an airplane? *Come on.*

I used to love law. Love it. But Carl’s version of the legal system?

Yikes.

Inside the restaurant, I ordered a cocktail because alcohol was going to be necessary.

When our drinks arrived, Tom raised his glass.

“To Carl,” he said, grinning ear to ear. “No one scrapes trophy wives off the arms of rich and powerful men like he does.”

I choked on my drink, but managed to keep it together—because, dang it, I needed the alcohol, the dignity, *and* the emotional support.

Carl glared at me.

I cleared my throat. “Sorry. Went down the wrong pipe.”

Nope. Just gagging internally.

Neither man showed a hint of remorse or compassion about Tom’s bankrupt wife, until Carl asked about Tom’s son, TJ.

Tom’s Adam’s apple bobbed with a swallow. “My ex wants to see the kid more often.”

“Screw her,” was Carl’s reply.

“Definitely.” Tom picked at his food. He set his fork down,

then lifted his wine glass and swirled the liquid round and round. As he watched it, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "She is TJ's mom."

Carl shoveled more food into his mouth while mumbling, "You know what they say about nice guys."

Tom shrugged apologetically. "He's my son. He wants to see more of his mom, too."

Carl swiped his teeth with his tongue and blotted his mouth with a napkin. "She can't afford your son's lifestyle."

"I'm not talking about splitting anything fifty-fifty." He waved that suggestion away. "But he can rough it to be with her once in a while."

Carl stopped eating long enough to look disappointed. "An extra week each year?"

"Reasonable," Tom said.

"Consider it done." Carl continued eating.

My appetite vanished, which was a good thing, because I had to keep my lips sealed shut to stop myself from gagging.

As the men gushed over their legal triumphs, my mind drifted back to Carl's office. The weird lock. The bank accounts I couldn't access. The way he'd changed over the years.

The first time I met Carl, we were idealistic law students, ready to fight for underdogs and dazzle juries with our fabulous closing arguments. But somewhere between *justice for all* and *joint checking accounts*, he rewrote the rules—and not in a good way.

Now? He helped millionaires hoard their money, and he laughed about it over crème brûlée.

I stared at the man I'd married. The man who'd blocked me from our accounts, locked me out of our home office, and was clearly up to something.

I had to stop thinking of Carl as my husband. He was now my opponent. That worked, because honestly, he'd never beaten me during a mock trial, and he wasn't going to beat me now.

I pushed my plate away after his client left. Carl ordered a third drink and dessert. Because of course, he did.

"I'm surprised Tom asked for custody of his son," I said, sipping my water like it was something stronger.

Carl's brow furrowed. "Why is that?"

"He obviously works long hours. Wouldn't it be easier to let his ex-wife care for his son some of the time?"

Carl laughed. Actually laughed. Like I'd told him the setup to a bad dad joke. "He'd never agree to that."

"Why?"

"Because she wants it."

I blinked. "I'm sorry. Is he some sort of cartoon villain?"

Carl just smirked.

Silly me. I thought the life of a little boy mattered.

"How did you manage to leave Tom's ex with so little?"

"I'll never tell." He wiggled his eyebrows like he'd just pulled off some genius heist.

But he'd ruined a woman's life. *How?* What had he actually done? Lied? Cheated? Stolen? All of the above?

Hiding assets was plausible—up to a point. Sure, Tom might have stashed money in a dozen offshore accounts or faked business losses, but let's be real: a personal jet and a Maserati weren't exactly *low-key*.

If Carl were a witch, I'd get it. A little sleight of hand, a flick of the wrist, *poof!*—millions gone. But my soon-to-be-ex-husband? Just your average, everyday mortal.

Well, not *entirely* average. He *did* have a superpower, and it made him a formidable lawyer. Carl had an absolute, unwavering, *rock-solid* lack of conscience.

. . .

Lying in bed awake while Carl snored, I felt the clock ticking inside me.

A war was coming. I could feel it.

And if I wanted to maximize my potential to win, I needed my magic back.

Grandma Hexley had been right. Too bad I hadn't seen it when my life fell apart the year I turned eighteen.

It started when Mom went to prison for one of the worst crimes a witch could commit—using magic to take away someone else's free will. *Big no-no*. I was already looked down on for my half-blood status, but after they locked her up, things went from bad to *cursed child levels of social exile*.

Dad abandoned us, they took away our house, and my younger sister, Lily? Vanished—ran off to who-knows-where, and honestly, I didn't blame her. Grandma was in a nursing home, so living with her wasn't an option. That left me, the town's newest pariah, scared out of my mind, broke, alone, and with no home and no way to support myself.

Enter Cassie Kovar—one of the ever-so-benevolent elders of our witching community who had a strong interest in keeping our world clean. She gave me a "choice" (big air quotes). Stay, and she and her friends would do everything in their power to make my life *more* miserable than it already was, or option B, I could take a sizeable sum (enough to pay for college, which was the only reason I even considered listening to her), if I agreed to have my powers bound, leave the witching world and never return.

A little magical hush money. Because nothing says *ethical* like paying off a teenage girl to erase a magical scandal.

My grandmother tried to stop me, but why? My family was gone. No one my age would have anything to do with me. Heck, almost no one in town besides my grandmother would talk to me. They definitely wouldn't hire me. I needed money and a place to live, so, I went with Cassie.

She took me to see Daphne, an old witch with the warmth of

last season's clearance rack—forgotten, picked over, and a little bitter about it. She handed me a tall glass of what looked, smelled, and tasted like iced tea, complete with a little slice of lemon on the rim. Cute touch.

She and Cassie gossiped about an upcoming garage sale while I downed the entire drink.

"All done?" Daphne took the glass from me and inspected the empty bottom.

"It's irreversible?" I asked.

"If we took your magic away, it would kill you," Daphne said, "but just try to undo it."

She and Cassie fell about the place laughing.

Great. So that was comforting.

Now, I needed to figure out if I could live through the *unbinding*.

IT'S IN THE BOOK... SOMEWHERE

Monday morning, after Syd had gone to school and Carl to work, I switched to research mode.

If any book I owned had the answer to breaking a binding spell, it was my grimoire.

I ventured into our basement storage area and moved Christmas and Halloween decorations off the top of my giant dust-covered trunk. Undoing the latch, I swung open the enormous wooden lid.

Right on top were my old sorority pictures, including one where I was rocking *the* perfect little pink dress, cinched at the waist, paired with sky-high heels that defied physics and a blowout so good it deserved its own award. I carefully slid them out of the way and pulled out the joke trophy I'd won at a law school fundraiser (*Most Likely to Make a Judge Laugh*), and my actual award for *Best in Contract Law*. At the bottom of the chest, I found my grimoire.

Cue the emotional gut punch.

Grimoires weren't just books—they were part family heirloom, part personalized self-help guide, and *all* magic. Every witch had one, filled with spells we practiced, recipes we

perfected (or, in my case, *attempted*), and little bits of wisdom we picked up along the way. But they didn't start out empty. Oh no. They came preloaded with spells and notes from the witches who loved us. When they passed, their own grimoires would disappear, but their magic, their knowledge, their *love*—it all lived on in ours.

Mine was packed with advice, spells, and tiny scribbled notes from my grandmother, my aunt, and, mostly... my mom.

I blew the dust off the cover and flipped to the first page. Instantly, my heart did that achy, nostalgic squeeze—like flipping through an old yearbook and realizing you barely remember algebra but *definitely* remember the people.

I was never exactly a *standout* witch, but if I'd at least *tried*, I could've added something to the book. A spell, a note, *anything*. Instead, I'd walked away—from my magic, from my heritage, from a part of myself I wasn't sure how to get back.

I flipped through the pages until I found the last entry.

Dear Bella,
I'm begging you. Please don't close off your magic.
Grandma Hexley

I puffed out my cheeks and let out a long, dramatic exhale.

If only time travel was an option. Hindsight was so annoying. Instead of just ignoring my magic, I'd basically shoved it in a box, slapped a Do Not Open sticker on it, and buried it six feet under.

Sure, the money for college got me out of a town that made it very clear I wasn't welcome, but there *had* to have been another way. I could've worked my way through school, pulled some all-nighters, survived on coffee and determination.

But no use crying over spilled potion. Now, I had to figure out how to fix this mess.

And, you know, *hopefully* not die in the process.

I kept flipping through until I landed on a section about binding magic.

The Ritual of Binding *was developed centuries ago, mostly as a punishment for witches who revealed their powers to nonmagical folk.*

That alone clued me into how ancient this book was. Nowadays, we called nonmagical people glams for glamourless, and no one anywhere used the word folks. It was so yesterday's fairytale.

The passage told the history of the spell, but it didn't have information on the actual spell.

Binding spells were created when glams were *terrified* of magic—most still are—but nowadays, no one believed there were actual witches. But in Salem, 1692? Being outed as a witch was a surefire way to earn an all-expenses-paid trip to the stake.

I wiped off the book and took it upstairs, curling up in my favorite overstuffed chair in the TV room.

Hours passed as I read, flipping through spell after spell.

And then... I found it.

The Binding Ritual can only be undone by the Unbinding Ritual. The Unbinding Ritual reclaims lost magic and restores a witch's natural abilities.

I exhaled slowly.

There were a couple of big obstacles, though. The unbinding ritual was a spell. To cast it, I needed magic. Thanks to my binding, I couldn't exactly snap my fingers and set the mood lighting.

But I could substitute something infused with magic from my past—something that meant something to me or someone I *loved*.

Unfortunately, I hadn't kept anything except the book in my hands.

I flipped to the back, where my childhood handwriting scrawled across the page—a simple protection charm. The first spell my mom ever taught me.

I traced my fingers over the words.

I wanted so badly to cast that spell again and keep Syd, Gianna, and Mia safe, and I would, as soon as I found an item from my past that held magic.

THE ONE WHERE I MEET THE HANDSOME STRANGER

As usual, Carl had to work late on Friday night—because of course he did. So, I arranged for Syd to have a fun sleep-over with Gianna and Mia, and I headed to the one place I swore I'd never return to.

The Enchanted District.

For glams, this place was basically a *black hole* on a map. They'd drive right past it, zone out, and five minutes later, have no memory of even seeing the exits. But witches like me? Oh, we knew exactly where it was. Hundreds of us had called this little pocket of the city home, including me, once upon a time.

Living here had its perks. A potions store with cauldrons that didn't crack mid-brew. A clinic where the doctors knew the difference between a common cold and a mild hex. And, of course, the Hung Jury—a bar-slash-pub with enough magic woven into its walls to make a glam *very* uncomfortable. The whole district was spelled to keep out the uninitiated, including the Academy, an ultra-exclusive school that only accepted students with *actual* magic.

I pulled into a free lot behind the main strip of shops,

slouched in my seat, and immediately wished I'd brought a baseball cap. The Hung Jury had been one of Mom's favorite haunts, which meant I'd spent *way* too much time there as a kid. But that was over twenty years ago. A lifetime.

No way anyone would recognize me now—especially not under a half-moon and a couple of dim streetlamps.

...Right?

I shuffled to the street and carefully made my way to the space between the tallest of red brick buildings. Squeezing through the gap, I found the stairs and made my way down toward the Hung Jury, the bar—or rather—the pub that Paul, a half-demon, ran.

My footsteps echoed on the damp stone steps. Magic seeped from every nook and cranny of the brick walls. It called to my own magic that was locked deep inside of me. My magic hummed and purred its response. *We are home. We are home. We are home.*

I paused on the last step. A wide path joined the basement-level strand of businesses that wound through the downtown area of the Enchanted District. These shops had been built below ground because we witches took great pains to keep them secret.

Across the dark path, a single yellow bulb illuminated the pub's front door. Dark shadows blocked my view of anything on my left, and the path to my right was even darker. No telling what hid in either direction.

Not all magical beings were the fluffy, sparkly unicorn sort. Paul didn't tolerate glams near his pub. I had no idea how he, his bodyguard thugs, or the drunken witches of this world would react to me. My mother's crimes had left my family disgraced. Even though Mom had passed away years ago, I still carried the stain of being the daughter of a criminal.

I squared my shoulders and went for the door.

Before I could even reach for the door, a wall of damp,

sweaty-gym-sock-scented *oomph* slammed into me. My lungs? Absolutely not prepared.

I wheezed, struggling to suck in air as a guy who looked like Humpty Dumpty's enormous stunt double pinned me against the wall. If he leaned in any harder, I was about to get an up-close and personal introduction to a crushed windpipe.

"I'm a witch," I rasped, attempting to sound both calm and *not currently suffocating*. "Ask Paul. He knows me."

The bouncer's forehead creased into one giant wrinkle that wrapped around his bald head like a sweaty headband. Then—because this night clearly wasn't weird enough—he *sniffed* me.

Like, actually sniffed.

He pressed his face closer to my shoulder and inhaled deeply, as if he was a connoisseur of *witch essence* and my personal scent was under review. My heart pounded. What if my magic was so buried he couldn't even detect it?

After one last dramatic sniff, he let out a grunt and stepped back. Apparently, my caged power passed the test.

I hunched over, sucking in a breath that felt *very* broken-rib-adjacent. Then I glanced down at my tank top—shiny, black, and now sporting a fresh tear. I tugged at the ruined edge. "Great. You better tell Paul you owe me a new shirt."

"Wait here," Humpty ordered, stomping into the bar.

Yeah, *sure*, I thought, immediately following him inside.

The Hung Jury had changed since I last swore I'd never return. Paul had leaned into the classic British pub vibe—dark paneled walls, a solid wooden bar, and the kind of lighting that screamed *we don't actually want you to see what's in your drink*. A few dim bulbs flickered in the corners, neon beer signs cast an eerie glow, and dartboards lit up with the only reliable light source in the room.

A few more Humpty clones stood watch, their eyes locked on me like I was a suspicious package left unattended at an airport.

I flagged down a passing waiter.

"Would you like to sit near the bar or the back of the pub?" he asked.

"The back," I said, because lurking in the shadows felt like the right move for a *probably-unwelcome* return.

With a flick of his hand, the floor in front of him stretched, shifting like someone had hit the *expand* button on reality. A wine barrel-turned-table materialized, complete with an empty barstool.

I had forgotten how cool magic could be.

He gestured to my new table. "What can I get you?"

"A rosé spritzer."

"Coming right up."

I sank onto the stool, ignoring the prickle of unease running down my spine. I might have sworn I'd never come back here, but clearly, my past and I had unfinished business.

The waiter brought me my drink, and I sipped it and quietly waited for Paul.

"Bella."

I turned. And there he was—Paul, standing beside me, looking as self-assured as ever. Time had been kind to him. He was still tall, lean, and carried himself with that easy confidence that said, *'Trust me. I'm charming.'*

Spoiler alert: He was *not* to be trusted.

His black hair had gone silver, but in that annoyingly distinguished way, like he'd stepped straight out of a high-end whiskey ad instead of, say, a lifetime of shady back-room deals.

He adjusted his ever-present bow tie, smirked, and I could practically hear the unspoken *'What took you so long?'* hanging in the air between us.

"You look just like your mom," Paul said, all smug and casual.

"Liar."

Mom had been a fun-sized, red-haired Irish beauty with

green eyes. I was... *not that*. Blonde, blue-eyed, and tall. Not exactly a copy-paste situation.

Paul signaled the bartender for a drink and slid onto the stool beside me like we were just two old friends catching up instead of whatever *this* was. "Didn't expect to see you back in the Enchanted District."

"Yeah, well, neither did I."

"Missing the old life?"

I scoffed. "Not even a little."

His gaze flicked toward a woman near the fireplace, where a sleek black cat curled around her shoulders. "You sure?"

I didn't answer. Because *ugh*.

Paul swirled his drink like he was enjoying this way too much. "How's the husband?"

I took a long, slow sip of my rosé spritzer. "What makes you think there's anything wrong with Carl?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Because you're here."

I let out a half-hearted laugh. "Oh, so I walk through the door once and that automatically means my life's a mess?"

Paul smirked. "Let's just say I know you." He took a sip, then leaned back against the bar. "Lucky for you, I can always use a good attorney—especially one who's also a witch."

I nearly choked on my drink. "I haven't practiced law or magic in *years*."

"Doesn't mean you've forgotten how."

I shook my head, amused despite myself. "I appreciate the offer, Paul, but I'll pass."

He lifted his glass in a lazy salute. "We'll see."

I rolled my eyes, but *honestly*, there was a tiny, traitorous smile tugging at my lips.

For the first time in years, something clicked—like slipping into a favorite pair of heels I hadn't worn in forever but still fit *just right*.

I took a deep breath. If anyone knew a way to free my magic,

it was Paul. But talking to a demon—even a half-demon—was like trying to talk your way out of a parking ticket. You had to be confident but careful. Charming but sharp. One misstep, and suddenly, you're paying triple the fine and getting towed.

I took my time, choosing my words carefully. "I'm considering getting back into magic."

His smile was slow and knowing, like a predator spotting a wounded deer. "Care to tell me why?"

"I have my reasons." And absolutely none of them involved letting a demon to poke around in my personal business.

Paul leaned in and—oh, *fantastic*—sniffed the side of my face.

"Interesting," he murmured before flopping back onto his stool like he'd just confirmed some grand theory.

I rolled my eyes. "Do I smell like desperation? Because that was not part of my perfume choice today."

His lips twitched like he wanted to laugh, but he wasn't about to give me the satisfaction.

Instead, he cocked his head. "How would your magic help fix Carl? Or... are you thinking about divorce?"

My lungs forgot how to work for a second.

"What makes you think that?" My voice came out weaker than I liked, and Paul, being Paul, picked up on it immediately. His whole demeanor shifted—lighter, almost pleased.

I cleared my throat. "Maybe I want to travel. See the world."

"You'd take a plane." Paul's brow furrowed, and honestly, I could probably draw a straight line from that crease to the horn buds he pretended didn't exist. "The only reason you'd walk in here asking for a favor is if something was pushing you. So tell me, how does magic help you fight Carl?"

I hesitated. Demons loved collecting people's secrets like they were rare baseball cards, just waiting for the right moment to trade them in for something terrible. And once you owed them? Game over. I had zero intention of signing a contract with Paul, honestly, I'd rather take my chances fighting a horde of angry

pixies with a pool noodle. But still, my business needed to stay my business.

Carefully, I leaned in. "Let's say—purely hypothetically—that someone's magic was bound. Completely, totally, not-even-a-spark bound."

"You mean like yours?" Paul watched me like a cat watching a canary that just happened to wander into its food bowl.

"Okay, let's make it personal. If I needed to cast a spell... is there a workaround?"

Paul's lips curled, slow and deliberate, like he was savoring this moment. "Oh, sweetheart," he drawled. "If your magic is bound, you don't work around it. You either break the binding... or you borrow from someone else."

"Like anyone?"

"No. Someone with the power to lend it." Paul flicked his eyebrows up, just once, but that was enough for my magic to send a full-body warning straight to my core.

Loud and clear. No deals with demons.

"Thanks, Paul. I'll keep that in mind."

"Anything else I can help with?" He tilted his head, all faux innocence, like we both didn't know exactly what game he was playing.

"Nope. I think I'll just sit here and enjoy my spritzer." I took a slow, deliberate sip, like I had all the time in the world.

Paul stood, giving me one last look—the kind that probably worked on people who didn't know better. Then he flagged down a waitress. "Get her a drink. On the house."

Great. A free drink instead of an actual solution. Not exactly what I ordered.

My mind spun. On one hand, I had no answers. On the other? I had no answers and a demon who now knew exactly how desperate I was.

Talk about a lose-lose situation.

I sucked in a deep, steady breath and adjusted my posture

—chin high, shoulders back. If I couldn't be in control, I could at least look like it.

"What do you want?" A new waitress—head shaved on one side, pink-streaked hair flopping over the other asked. "It's on Paul."

I ordered a shot of the most expensive tequila in the place with a second spritzer. My nerves needed it.

If Mom knew I'd even *considered* asking a demon for help, she'd claw her way out of the afterlife and personally drag me back with her.

Which, ironically, was only fair, because I wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for her and Dad.

Darn them. I loved them, but together, they were like soy sauce and ice cream—each excellent on their own, but never, ever toss them in the same bowl and stir.

The waitress dropped my shot on the table. I thanked her, and she moved from my table to a table with a guy with a scruffy beard, sideburns, and *excessively* hairy arms. Two days past a full moon—so, yeah. Probably a *lingering side effect*.

One of the worst fights my parents ever had occurred after Dad learned the truth about Mom's identity. She'd managed to keep it secret for thirteen years, up until I came into my powers. She explained to Dad what was going on, and then she sat me down at the kitchen table and promised I'd feel important things deep in my bones. My glam dad interrupted. He squeezed my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, "Bella, your mom loves you, but she's a crackhead."

World War III had erupted after that.

I raised my shot and said, "Salud."

The werewolf dude said something to the waitress. She laughed a flirty laugh, batted her eyelashes, and whispered in his ear. Fair enough. I'd heard plenty of rumors about certain carnal skills of werewolves, especially near a full moon.

One of Paul's bouncers grasped the waitress's shoulder with a

meaty hand. She winced and buckled in pain. The bouncer yanked her away. She lost her balance and tumbled onto my table, wiping out my shot and beer.

I may not have had my magic, but I'd had it up to my eyeballs with men bullying women.

"Hey," I yelled and shoved my way between the bouncer dude and the woman. "Pick on someone your own size."

"The boss said—"

"You," I said, nudging closer until the bouncer's large chest was no more than a few inches from my face. Then I poked my finger at him. "Made." *Poke*. "Her." *Poke*. "Spill." *Poke*. "My drink." *Poke. Poke.*

Paul interrupted the action. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Your employee's a bully," I said.

Humpty gestured to the waitress. "I am not. Esmerelda was flirting with a customer."

Blood drained from Esmerelda's face. She looked as scared as a rabbit hanging from a wolf's mouth.

For flirting? Who gets upset about a little banter?

"Puh-lease," I said. "This enormous guy slammed into her just as she handed me my drink, and now he's trying to get her in trouble because he—" I jabbed a finger in the bouncer dude's chest again "—owes me a shot."

Paul glanced at the guy, who mumbled something, then Esmerelda, whose whole body was trembling, and then me. I pressed my lips together in a tight, flat line and squinted at the big dude.

"Get back to work," Paul said to the bouncer. He turned to the waitress. "Esmerelda, refill her drinks."

"It's impossible to find good help." Paul scowled. Again, he vanished.

The bouncer skulked away. Esmerelda hurried to the bar and put in my order.

Just then, a man with dark hair streaked with just the right

amount of silver—and a neatly trimmed beard to match—sauntered up to my table like he had all the time in the world. *Effortlessly smooth.*

“Impressive,” he said, his voice rich and velvety, like he moonlighted as a jazz radio host. His eyes? Unreal. Not just blue, *but like* someone had taken the ocean at sunrise and bottled it up just for him. Add in a perfectly tailored pinstriped button-down, black dress pants that fit *way* too well, and a build straight out of a James Bond reboot, and, well—yeah. He had the whole *dangerously handsome* thing down to a science.

“May I?”

“Why not?” Drinking with a guy who looked like *that* was infinitely better than drinking alone.

He flagged down Esmerelda, then turned to me. “I’ll have—” He paused, giving my drink a once-over.

“Lobos Reposado.”

One eyebrow quirked up, impressed. “The good stuff.”

I shrugged. “Life’s too short for crappy tequila.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he looked at Esmerelda. “Bring me what she’s having. A beer too.”

She left to fill his order, and he scooted the stool Paul had vacated to less than an arm’s length away, close enough for me to feel the magic that bubbled off him.

“Haven’t seen you here before,” he said.

“I’m not into faux-British décor.”

He laughed. “Jack.”

“Bella.”

He gave a polite nice to meet you nod, and his gaze swept from my eyes to my lips and back to my eyes.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. Ridiculous—even if I had always liked the strong silent type. Men came into these places to find younger partners. I was probably younger than Jack by a handful of years, but forty-two was not the new twenty.

That didn’t bother me. Okay, maybe it bruised my ego some,

KELLY GARCIA

but I had more important things to think about. I had a husband at home—or someplace in the Chicagoland area—and he'd turned into a snake, but the point was I was still married, at least for now. I had no time for foolishness.

So what was I doing? Distracting myself from my troubles? Sure. I'd call it that.

SPELLBOUND AND SLIGHTLY TIPSY

E smerelda dropped drinks off for me and Jack. He raised his shot glass, and I followed his lead. When we knocked back the tequila, my elbow brushed his arm.

Magic called to magic. The instant our skin touched, a shiver of energy skated up my spine—electric, unmistakable. But it wasn't just magic. There was something layered beneath it, like a song played in reverse that I couldn't quite decipher.

Jack cocked his head, those blue eyes narrowing. "Hmm. Unusual."

Tit for tat. I'd sensed something off about him, just as he had sensed something in me.

I could've played it cool, but honestly? That ship sailed when my marriage went up in flames.

"I had my powers bound," I said, setting my shot glass down with a clink.

"By choice?" His eyebrows shot up.

I lifted my chin. "Yes."

Not technically a lie. More like... a heavily edited truth.

"Why?" he asked, then immediately winced. "Sorry. None of my business."

"It's fine. My dad was nonmagical."

Recognition flashed across his face. We both knew being mixed blood was like having permanent second-class citizenship in the magical world.

"Plus, my mom had a lot of... legal problems."

He let out a low chuckle. "Oh, I love a good legal problem."

I arched a brow. "She used a love spell on my dad."

Jack let out a laugh—full, rich, the kind that made my stomach flip. "Really?"

"I fail to see the humor," I deadpanned, even though I kind of wanted to smile.

"Parents." He shook his head. "Make the worst decisions, and we're stuck with the fallout."

"That's one way to put it," I muttered. "After the spell wore off, my dad filed charges against her. My sister ran away. And I got the honor of growing up as *that* girl, you know, the daughter of the witch who illegally enchanted a man into marriage."

"Brutal."

"Tell me about it." I swirled my beer. "So, I left. Got my magic bound, went to law school, and married a man who seemed normal. Joke's on me."

Jack took a slow sip of his beer. "Now?"

I exhaled. "Now... maybe I want back in."

"Because magic is fun," he guessed.

I shrugged. But the truth? I missed it. More than I had realized.

His gaze roamed my face, then my lips, sending a low hum of awareness through me. Was this actually happening?

Carl had checked out of our marriage a long time ago, but I still had the ring. Still had the papers waiting to be filed. I had no business enjoying this moment as much as I was.

Jack leaned closer, just enough that my forehead grazed his hair. And *bam*—my magic rumbled in response, sharp and deep.

That was... weird. Very weird.

I pulled back slightly. "You're not a typical witch."

"No, I'm exceptional." His grin was wicked. "And it's a burden."

I snorted. "Go on."

He shook his head.

I squinted at him. "No. Seriously."

"Can't."

I tilted my head. "You're spelled?"

He gave a barely there nod.

Jack peeled at the label on his beer bottle, his expression shifting—something heavy behind those eyes. Without thinking, I squeezed his hand. His magic shivered against mine, but the second our skin touched, I caught a flicker of something else—grief. Deep and aching.

I yanked my hand back, but the damage was done. Jack was hiding something. Something more than just a curse or a binding spell.

"So, your husband," he said, smoothly shifting the subject, "must've been special to land you."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Flatterer."

"My superpower."

I sighed. "Carl's an attorney. I used to be, too, but after Sydney—my daughter—I stayed home."

"Lucky husband. Lucky kid."

Not exactly lucky. I'd loved being an attorney, but after Syd was born and developed respiratory problems? Well, I loved my daughter more.

"Not sure Carl thinks he's lucky." I admitted before I could stop myself. "His career took a hit a few years ago. Since then, he's been . . . hard to live with."

Jack's eyes twinkled. "You leaving him?"

"He's changed." I stared down at my drink, the admission settling into my bones.

Jack raised his beer. "To your future."

I clinked my bottle against his, holding his gaze longer than I should have. My attention drifted to his lips—full, inviting, inches away.

Jack's fingers skimmed my cheek, and I sucked in a sharp breath. Oh. *Wow*. It had been *forever* since I'd felt something like this—something warm and electric.

Just one kiss. Something deep, slow, toe-curling—

His eyes dropped to my lips, and a warm tingly sensation spread from deep in my core. He leaned in slowly, giving me a chance to pull away. Instead, I inched closer.

His mouth met mine, soft at first, careful and cautious, but then I melted into him, and the air in the room shifted and swirled. His kiss deepened, and I had an epiphany about why people wrote terrible poetry about moments like this. He tasted like beer, and something dark and delicious that made my brain short-circuit and, yes, my toes curled.

When we broke apart, I was breathless, my lips throbbed, and he was wearing my lipstick. I brushed a smudge from the corner of his mouth.

He grabbed my hand, and—

A sharp electronic beep sliced through the moment like a poorly timed punchline.

Jack's shoulders sagged. He glanced down at his hip, where a small red light flashed.

I blinked. That beeper definitely hadn't been there earlier.

"Duty calls."

I arched a brow. "What are you, some kind of doctor?"

He smirked. "Not even close." He stood, but before leaving, he placed a hand on my shoulder, fingers warm against my skin. His lips grazed my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

And then he was gone.

HIGH STAKES AND LOW-
GRADE MEN

Saturday night, the Oakleaf School District held its annual fundraiser at a local hotel—Casino Night. The event where the town's wealthiest residents got to show off their deep pockets under the noble guise of charity. Carl *lived* for Casino Night. It was his dream scenario: schmoozing, showboating, and tossing money around.

Naturally, I invited Gianna. She'd been a widow for over a year now, and there was no way I was letting her stay home alone—or worse, be *here* alone. Plus, with her around, I had someone to keep me sane while Carl put on his *Perfect Husband* act.

After suffering through an overcooked chicken dinner slathered in enough salt to qualify as an ancient preservation method, Carl disappeared into the crowd to network. Which, lucky for us, meant we were free to actually enjoy the night.

We sidled up to the craps table, and just as Gianna reached for the dice, something twisted deep in my gut.

A zap of magic skittered through my bones, sharp and insistent, slicing through my nerves like a warning siren.

Something was wrong.

I scanned the crowd, fingers gripping the edge of the table.

White lights flickered overhead, casting shadows beneath the low-lit chandeliers. The music was too loud, the air thick with the smell of overpriced cologne and desperation. People cheered, laughter filled the room, but none of it dulled the growing sense of *wrong* curling in my stomach.

Carl. Where is he?

Gianna nudged me with an elbow. "You good?"

I blinked at her. "Yeah. Fine."

She handed me the dice. "Your turn."

I shook my head. "Be right back."

Gianna didn't hesitate—she tossed the dice to the next player and followed me out. "Okay, that was weird. Spill."

"I just—" I clenched my fists, the alarm in my gut building to a roar. I *knew* something was happening. And I *knew* it had to do with Carl.

I picked up my pace, heading toward the exit.

"Oh no, you don't." Gianna jogged to keep up, her enormous purse slapping against her hip. "You're not leaving me in the dark on this."

"How do you even move that fast in four-inch heels?" I asked.

"Shoulders up, boobs out, butt clenched."

I coughed out half a laugh. "That sounds—"

"My nana taught me."

That tracked.

As we neared the doors, my pulse pounded louder in my ears.

We stepped outside, the cool night air brushing against my overheated skin. I turned the corner toward the parking lot—and *stopped cold*.

Carl was leaning against our Land Rover under a streetlamp, swiping a strand of brunette hair from another woman's face.

My stomach dropped.

Before I could fully process what I was seeing, he bent down, kissed her, and lingered.

Gianna sucked in a breath. "What. The. Absolute—"

*The woman—I'd call her Bambi—*arched into him like they'd done this a *thousand* times. She threw her head back, her shiny brown bob catching the glow of the streetlight as Carl nuzzled her neck. Then he slipped two fingers into the waistband of her pants.

I went still, ice slipping into my veins, freezing me right down to my Jimmy Choos.

I *knew* he was cheating. But seeing it? *Here?* At a PTA charity event? Where the biggest scandal was usually who snuck a flask into the silent auction?

The fury that burned through me was white-hot, a searing kind of rage that made my fingertips tingle. I wanted to scream. To launch my clutch at his head. To march up there, smile sweetly, and then *accidentally* spill an entire tray of champagne on both of them—twice.

But I couldn't. *Not yet.*

Gianna, on the other hand? No such restraint. "I'm going to kick his ass."

I grabbed her arm before she could charge in like a designer-clad wrecking ball. "Not here. Not now."

Her nostrils flared. "Bella—"

"He's the best divorce attorney in the state," I whispered, my voice shaking even as I forced my spine straight. "My only shot is to take him by surprise. If I go in blind, he'll rip me apart in court."

Gianna clenched her jaw. "Fine. But when this is over? I call dibs on throwing the first drink in his face."

Honestly? Seemed fair.

Gianna pulled out her phone and snapped a few pictures, and I forced myself to turn away. I had *work* to do.

Carl whistled the whole way home.

I spent the entire car ride fantasizing about outmaneuvering him so flawlessly that he wouldn't even see it coming.

Instead of glaring, I forced a bright, *supportive-wife* smile and

planned.

A lot of people underestimated blondes. Carl still did even after being married to me for years. He assumed I wouldn't fight back. Big mistake. Huge.

The next morning, I made my way into the kitchen, hands steady as I chopped onions for our usual Sunday skillet. The knife moved in smooth, even slices, but my brain? Absolute chaos. Every thought was a strategy, a checklist, a very professional and *totally rational* plan labeled *How to Outmaneuver a Cheating Husband Without Setting Off Alarm Bells*.

Sydney breezed in first, bright-eyed, her ponytail slightly crooked from a night of sleepover fun, completely unaware that her mother was mentally drafting legal battle strategies before breakfast.

"Mom?" She wrinkled her nose. "Are you cutting onions again? You're crying."

I swiped at my eyes with the back of my wrist. "Strong ones today."

She wrapped her arms around me, and I hugged her back, holding on just a little longer than usual.

One job. *Protect Sydney. Keep everything normal. Handle this like a woman who never loses a case.*

A minute later, Carl strolled in, grabbed a cup of coffee, and sank into a chair like a man who had absolutely *no* idea his world was about to crumble.

I inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, and reminded myself that orange jumpsuits *clashed* with my skin tone.

"Bella," Carl said, a little too loud, a little too casual.

I blinked. "What?"

He nodded toward the stove. "You're burning breakfast."

I glanced down. Smoke curled from the skillet. *Great. Perfect. Just the cherry on top of my morning.* I turned off the burner and scraped the charred pieces into the trash. Focus, Bella.

Carl stood, clapping his hands together like he'd just *solved* breakfast. "Come on. Let's go out. My treat."

I swallowed back every biting remark that wanted to claw its way out and instead, channeled my inner *poise under pressure*. "Actually, I was thinking we should talk about summer camp."

Sydney gasped. "YES."

Carl frowned. "I thought you didn't want her going until she was older."

I smiled, all sunshine and persuasion. "I changed my mind. She *really* wants to go." I squeezed her shoulder. "And Mia needs a friend."

Carl's eyes narrowed. "Can she still register?"

"Already done." I lied so smoothly I almost believed it myself.

The camp started in a few weeks. It was exclusive, impossible to get into last minute. But Gianna had connections, and if I had to *charm, bribe, or grovel* my way in, I would. Sydney *needed* to be away this summer. Safe. Untouchable.

Carl sighed. "Alright. If you think it's best."

I beamed. *Check, sweetheart. Your move.*

He reached for my hand, but the second his fingers brushed mine, something inside me *screamed*.

It wasn't just my instincts—it was my magic. A warning. Loud. Urgent.

Carl was cheating—that much, I *knew*. But this? This was *something else*.

He'd done more than wreck our marriage. And if I didn't figure out exactly *what*, I was about to learn the hard way.

THE ART OF WAR

My magic screamed every time I walked past Carl's office, which, honestly, felt a tad dramatic. But who was I to argue with fabulous instincts? I absolutely had to get inside.

Of course, that was easier said than done. Carl nearly caught Gianna and me the last time we tried breaking and entering—such a rookie move. This time, I needed to channel my inner legal genius and think smarter.

Wednesday was my golden ticket—Carl would be stuck in court all day, unable to ruin my investigative vibes. Perfect snooping conditions.

Waiting from Saturday to Wednesday felt like sitting through a mani-pedi with chipped polish—unbearably slow, borderline painful, and deeply tragic. Every passing minute was another agonizing reminder of what I couldn't yet do.

I needed a distraction. Preferably one that wouldn't end with my mugshot in tomorrow's tabloids.

I set my laptop on the marble-topped kitchen table, threw open the curtains to soak up that spring sunshine, and forced myself into work mode. If this were anyone else's divorce, I'd already have a dazzling plan in motion.

Step one? Get the facts, obviously.

Too many women made the mistake of assuming divorces could be friendly brunch chats, then got blindsided when their exes turned into courtroom vipers. No way would I fall into that trap. Carl would absolutely claw to keep every last penny from me, so I needed receipts, timelines, records—anything to put me ahead. And a solid squad, including an attorney. Sure, I was a lawyer, but representing yourself was like doing your own highlights—a terrible idea.

Tiny hiccup—I was locked out of our bank accounts.

Solution? Easy. A forensic accountant would crack this open faster than my credit limit during a Nordstrom sale.

I grabbed my phone, strutted onto the front porch, and dialed the best number in my contacts.

“Bella? Wow. It’s been forever,” Edie Driscoll answered.

“Ten years,” I confirmed, twirling a strand of hair.

She hesitated. “This isn’t about brunch, is it?”

“I wish.” I sighed dramatically, eyeing a bright red cardinal.

“It’s Carl-related. Super confidential.”

“Of course,” she said, shifting instantly to business.

“He locked me out of our bank accounts,” I admitted.

Sharp inhale. “Oh, Bella. That’s...bad.”

“Oh, just wait. It gets worse.” I gave her the highlights like I was pitching the juiciest gossip. “And now, I need you.”

Silence stretched so long I checked my phone. “Edie?”

“I’ve faced Carl three times in court,” she finally said, sounding less like my forensic knight-in-shining-armor and more like a terrified intern. “Every single time, the judge barely glanced at my reports.”

“Maybe they read them in their chambers?” I asked hopefully.

“If I were you,” Edie whispered urgently, “I’d grab every dollar you can and run.”

Yeah, right. Not an option—not with Syd.

I thanked her and hung up. The people I needed help from—

especially the attorneys—all knew Carl. Which meant every call was a gamble. If I reached the wrong person, word could get back to him, and I'd rather swallow nails than let him know what I was up to.

But I didn't have a choice. I needed support.

I quickly dialed another forensic accountant. *No luck.*

Then another. *Nothing.*

And another. *Zip. Nada. The sound of my patience evaporating into the void.*

Fine. Time for Plan B.

Private investigators? Nope.

Attorneys? Half hung up; the other half pretended to listen.

Apparently, nobody in Chicago was brave enough to go against Carl.

Except...maybe an old friend?

I scrolled through my contacts, found David McGinnis, and hit call.

The second his secretary patched me through, his voice filled the line, dripping Irish charm and trouble.

"Bella. Don't tell me you've finally decided to ditch Carl for me?"

I stayed silent.

"Oh, crap." His tone changed immediately. "Uh... Bella?"

I pictured him nervously reaching for antacids, freckles creasing in worry.

"I need help," I said softly.

Silence. Then, a reluctant sigh. "Okay. I'll patch you through to my secretary. She'll set something up." A beat. "And Bella?"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone about this."

"Totally confidential," I assured.

Ten minutes later, I had a meeting booked with David right after dropping Sydney at camp.

Countdown officially underway.

Thank goodness Syd wouldn't witness our life imploding.

Wednesday morning arrived with Gianna pounding at my front door.

When I opened it, she barreled past me, carrying a white bakery box and enough energy to power the entire block. For someone just barely five feet tall, she sure knew how to take up space. "I've been knocking forever."

"Two minutes."

"Same thing." She made a beeline for the kitchen, setting the box down like it contained sacred relics. She yanked open the cabinet, pulled down coffee cups, and filled them before I could protest.

"Plates," she demanded, nodding toward the cabinets.

I pointed down the hall. "Carl's office?"

She huffed. "After pastries."

I sighed, but my stomach grumbled its approval. I took a seat and grabbed an almond Danish. Gianna grinned, triumphant. "Knew you wouldn't say no to these."

"Bribery with baked goods. Ruthless."

She opened the box, revealing an assortment of pastries. "Did you know Kiersten's real name isn't even Kiersten? She picked it so people would think the bakery's Danish, even though she makes French pastries." She took a bite of her berry Danish and shook her head. "The deception is delicious."

I picked at my almond Danish. "You didn't just come over to give me the latest bakery conspiracy, did you?"

Her expression softened. "You look like one of those dogs. The ones with the big, sad eyes."

I scowled. "Gee, thanks."

"Come on, let's go." She stood, brushing off crumbs. "Time to break and enter."

I followed her down the hall, my stomach twisting. The closer

we got to Carl's office, the more my instincts screamed at me. I touched the doorframe, and a shudder ran through my bones.

Whatever was waiting for me inside wasn't just bad—it was catastrophic.

Gianna pulled out her lockpicking tools, a syringe-like device with a key instead of a needle. She fiddled with it, her lips pursed in concentration.

While she worked, I chewed on my nail. "Do you know that Carl tells his clients amicable divorces are a fairy tale? He says it's a feeding frenzy—eat or be eaten."

Gianna snorted. "That's cheerful."

I leaned against the wall. "I asked him once if he changed his approach when kids were involved. You know what he said?"

She arched an eyebrow. "I'm afraid to ask."

"He said the good thing about kids is that they're young. They have time to get over crap."

Gianna's head snapped up. "Ouch. And you're just thinking about leaving him now?"

"I should've done it years ago," I admitted.

The lock clicked. The door swung open.

My entire body tensed.

"Maybe you should stay out here," I murmured.

Gianna rolled her eyes. "You kidding? Someone has to stop you from lighting the place on fire."

She wasn't wrong.

I stepped inside first, my pulse hammering. The office was pristine, the air thick with the faint scent of leather and expensive cologne. His desk was as neat as ever, not a single thing out of place.

His favorite mug sat there—black with white lettering that read *Opposing Counsel Tears*. It used to make me laugh. Now, I wanted to hurl it at the wall.

Gianna headed for the file cabinet while I went for the desk drawers. The first one held neatly arranged case files—work,

nothing personal. I moved to the center drawer, the one that usually held personal items. It was locked.

I smirked. Guilty people always lock their secrets away.

I checked under his desk blotter and found a sticky note with an all-too-familiar set of numbers. Sloppy, Carl. I entered the combination and pulled the drawer open.

My pulse skidded to a halt.

A strip of condoms. A coaster from some fancy bar. A Frequent Player Rewards card from the Crown Casino and Racetrack.

Gianna peered over my shoulder. "I bet you and Carl don't use condoms."

I deadpanned, "Remind me to get tested."

Underneath the condoms sat a stack of stapled-together sheets. High-stakes poker game schedules. Some highlighted.

Back in college, Carl and I used to play poker for fun. He always said it sharpened his ability to tell when people were lying. I hadn't thought about it in years.

Apparently, he had.

I took pictures of everything. Then I flipped to the next sheet and froze.

A strip of photo booth pictures.

Carl. And her.

They wore oversized plastic glasses, feather boas, ridiculous hats. Laughing. Tangled together. Like they were living their best, most *basic* lives.

My stomach twisted—not with jealousy, but with *rage-induced indigestion*. Because, of *course* Carl would go for the cliché.

And *her*? Ugh.

Petite. Brunette. A good ten years younger than me—maybe more. No baby weight, no crow's feet. But also? No *real-life experience*. So naïve, the poor girl probably thought *he* was a prize.

Gianna, who knew me well enough to cut this off before I started ranting, nudged me. "Bella. Don't."

I blinked. "Don't *what*?"

She gave me a pointed look.

I scoffed. "Oh, *please*. I'm not *comparing* myself. I just—" I waved vaguely at the ridiculousness before me. "I mean, *come on*."

And yet, even *knowing* that, I still wanted to grab Carl's custom Italian suits and throw them out the door.

I imagined his face when he saw his wool, cashmere, and linen in the mud. *Deeply* satisfying.

With a huff, I moved to the last drawer, yanked it open, and pulled out a file labeled *Bank Statements*.

I flipped through the pages, skimming—then stopped cold.

My vision tunneled.

It wasn't just bank statements. It was *my* credit card statement.

And it had *thousands* of dollars in charges.

At the *Crown Casino*.

I hadn't used that card in *years*. I barely even remembered I *had* that card.

Gianna peered over my shoulder. "That's... not good."

"He's committing *fraud*," I whispered, my pulse hammering. "He's racking up *debt* in my name."

Now *that* was something to get mad about.

My pulse pounded as I flipped through the charges. Casino bar tabs. Poker buy-ins. All of it under my name.

I snapped pictures of everything. If Carl thought he could get away with this, he was about to have the shock of his life.

Then Gianna picked up a brochure from the desk. Her face darkened. "You're going to want to see this."

I took it, my breath catching.

A boarding school. Out of state.

My entire body went ice cold.

"He's going to take my daughter."

"You don't know that," Gianna said. "Maybe he hands these out to clients."

I clenched my jaw. “No. My gut’s been screaming at me for days. This is it. This is what it’s been warning me about.”

The garage door rumbled open.

Panic shot through me.

“We have to go,” I hissed.

Gianna pointed at the crumpled brochure in my fist.

I shoved it into my pocket and grabbed her arm, pulling her out of the office. We slipped down the hall, my heart hammering, and ducked out the back door just as Carl walked inside.

I sucked in a breath, gripping the brochure like a lifeline.

If he thought he was going to take my daughter, he had another thing coming.

GAME ON

Gianna and I sat at the kitchen table, coffee in hand, trying to look *normal* when Carl walked in from the garage.

"You're home early," I said, my voice shooting up an octave like I was a cartoon character caught with a stolen cookie.

Gianna raised an eyebrow. '*Reel it in,*' that look said.

Carl studied me as he walked past. I plastered on a smile. "Gianna just told me the funniest story." I placed a hand on my chest, pretending to laugh, mostly to keep myself from passing out.

Gianna, who could lie her way out of a hostage situation, didn't even blink. "I'm not repeating it in mixed company," she said with a wink. Absolute legend.

Carl barely reacted. "Forgot a file."

He strode down the hall, every step slow and deliberate—like he *wanted* me to sweat. My fingers slid over the boarding school flyer in my pocket. My pulse thumped in my ears.

"Calm down," Gianna whispered. She pointed to her forehead. I wiped at the sweat beading there. We sat there, coffee untouched, counting seconds.

One minute. Two. Three.

A doorknob clicked. Carl's office.

When he finally returned, he eyed us. "What are you two up to?"

"Planning camp details," I said, the words coming out just a little too fast.

Gianna, thank *heaven*, didn't miss a beat. "I'm driving Syd and Mia to camp Sunday after school gets out."

Carl nodded, apparently satisfied. "Thanks."

Gianna kept going like she did this for a living. "Since Bella's going to miss Syd so much, we're making a weekend out of it. Girls' night in Chicago. Shopping, pizza, the whole deal. Syd and Mia are *so* excited."

"That's a great idea," Carl said.

I clamped my mouth shut. The only thing I wanted to say involved *very* colorful language and maybe a hex or two for premature hair loss.

The second his car pulled out of the driveway, I sucked in air like I'd been drowning. "He knows we're up to something."

Gianna frowned. "How?"

"He's due in court."

"Yeah?"

"He came home because he needed a file."

"So?"

"Did you see him carrying a file when he left?"

Gianna's face fell.

"Exactly. He either forgot what he forgot, or he just wanted to see if we were sweating."

Gianna gestured toward Carl's office. "You want to go back in?"

I shook my head. Something else was at play, and until I knew what, I couldn't risk it.

After Gianna left, I pulled out my grimoire and took it into the living room with a cup of coffee. Mom used to ask hers for advice. Maybe I could get *something* useful.

I ran my palm over the worn leather cover, letting my fingers drift down the gold-edged pages. “What am I missing?”

A crackle of magic tried to connect, sparks flickering between my fingertips, but the energy fizzled out, popping like static electricity before going completely dead.

Disappointment pressed heavy in my chest. I forced out a breath.

I needed my magic.

Correction: I *desperately* wanted my magic. Because, let’s be honest, nothing would be more satisfying than turning Carl’s luxury car into a pumpkin right about now.

This whole nightmare was going to hit a breaking point soon. It was going to get messy. But at least Syd would be out of the state when Carl and I finally went head-to-head.

Syd, Mia, Gianna, and I would spend the weekend downtown. Monday, I’d meet with David, and *he* would help see me through. Hopefully.

David and I needed to go over everything I had that could catch Carl in a lie in court. If we nailed him on even one, the judge would be on my side. And once that happened, getting custody of Syd would be as easy as getting a pedicure—I could just sit back and enjoy.

That thought almost made me *hope* Carl tried to set me up. I had alibis—a PTA meeting here, a girls’ night out there. I even had a day planner to prove it. Any judge would see I wasn’t the one sneaking into the casino night after night.

Sneaking into Carl’s office might’ve given me insight. But I needed more.

If I could get my hands on account balances, investment records—anything that showed where our money *really* was, that would be ideal. I’d already tried logging into our bank accounts again. No luck.

I thought about using the log-ins I’d found on Carl’s desk, but that was risky. If he got a two-step verification alert, he’d know

exactly what I was up to. And knowing Carl, he'd move the money—or worse, *disappear* with it.

That would be fine. As long as he didn't take Syd. I ran my fingers along the boarding school flyer in my pocket. I needed more evidence.

And then it hit me. Banks don't send alerts for *in-person* visits. No security codes. No suspicious login warnings. Just a friendly teller who had known me since I opened my first checking account.

Game on.

I dressed for battle—well, *bank* battle. Office-casual. Pleated gabardine pants, a sleek short-sleeved turtleneck, and just the right amount of makeup to say, *trust me, I'm a responsible adult*.

Then I strutted into the icebox that was my local bank lobby, resisting the urge to shiver. Why were banks always freezing? Was it to remind people of their dwindling savings?

I made a beeline for Rich Smith, my favorite baby-faced teller who always had that *eager to please* energy. With my best *damsel in distress* smile, I told him I needed mortgage statements.

Rich, being the absolute sweetheart that he was, pulled up Carl's accounts and handed over a nice, juicy stack of financial documents. Guilt poked at me, but survival was louder.

Back in my car, I flipped through the statements, scanning for the *oh no he didn't* moment.

And there it was.

Carl had drained most of our savings. I had no idea where he hid it, but it was gone.

Later that night, I was chopping veggies, trying *not* to picture Carl's face on the onions, when I felt it.

A throat cleared. I turned. Carl was leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, smirking like the cat who didn't just eat the canary, but *shoved it off a cliff for fun*.

"Spoke to the bank today," he said, voice dripping with satisfaction.

My stomach plummeted.

He knew.

Carl pushed off the doorway, sauntering out like he'd just won.

I barely made it into a chair before my legs gave out. The world tilted, and my pulse pounded in my ears. Rich. Carl had gotten him fired. I had the evidence. I could fight Carl in court.

But he wasn't going to make this easy. He'd already made someone else pay the price for our war.

CHICAGO WEEKEND

I didn't sleep *at all* Friday night. Carl knew what was going on. I knew it. The second Syd was out of the house, the gloves were coming off.

Saturday morning, Carl took her for donuts. A goodbye father-daughter breakfast. If I had to say one nice thing about Carl—which, honestly, was a struggle—he was a good dad.

The second they pulled out of the driveway, I finished fluffing the pillows, grabbed my phone, and hovered over Gianna's number. Maybe I should cancel our girls' weekend. I couldn't just *leave* while Carl was still here, lurking like a villain in a bad soap opera, plotting my demise.

Or maybe he wouldn't bother. Maybe he and Bambi would enjoy a long, romantic weekend, basking in their mutual awfulness.

I punched my pillow. *Hard*.

This was my last weekend with Syd for the summer. I *would not* let Carl take it from me.

Before I could spiral any further, Syd bounced into my room, cutting through my mental courtroom drama with all the force of a wrecking ball wrapped in sparkles.

“Dad had me bring you an apple fritter.” She wrapped her arms around my waist from behind. “He said they’re your favorite.”

“They *are* my favorite.” I inspected the pastry like a forensic analyst checking for *poison*.

Syd squeezed me tighter.

I spun around and held onto her like she was the only thing keeping me standing.

My eyes burned, but I blinked fast. No time for tears.

The year before Syd was born, Carl and I spent lazy Sunday mornings at this little bakery near Greenberg, Altman, and Barnelli—the firm where we both worked fresh out of law school. I was supposed to go back after maternity leave. I was supposed to have it all—a career, a family, the *dream*.

Then six months after Syd was born, she caught a virus and developed something called reactive airway disease, which was basically baby asthma on *nightmare* mode.

Sitting in the ICU, watching my tiny daughter struggle to breathe, I had never been so scared in my entire life. The doctors stocked me up with meds, including an EpiPen in case Syd turned blue, a machine for breathing treatments, and sent us home with a warning that if she caught another virus too soon, we’d be right back in that hospital.

Daycare was out of the question. We hired a nanny, who came to work with the start of a cold. She passed that cold to Syd, and Syd ended up in an ambulance stat to the hospital, because she’d gone limp from lack of oxygen.

I quit work. For a full year, I rarely left the house. Carl brought home groceries or I had them delivered. No mommy and me classes, no swim lessons. Everything revolved around keeping Syd safe. Even after that year, if she caught the slightest sniffle, I hovered. Until she could learn to use an inhaler, I had to help her use it. One bad episode, and her life could’ve been over.

And every Saturday morning, without fail, Carl brought me an apple fritter and a large coffee.

Now? I had a cheating, lying snake for a husband. *So much* for smart decisions.

"Dad told me to tell you he had to go into the office," Syd said, pulling back. "He said he'd see you tomorrow after you get back."

I squeezed her one more time, but she wiggled free, tugging at her collar. The long pink-and-purple fur cow on her yellow T-shirt tilted its head, the word *Moo* printed underneath.

"You and your cows," I said, smirking.

"Mia told me there's one in Chinatown with *moo* written in Chinese." She leveled me with the most serious look a nine-year-old could manage. "Mom, I *have* to have it. I have thirteen dollars from walking Mrs. Crandall's dog and five left from my birthday."

I pretended to think it over. "Hmm. You *might* be able to afford it. But we must factor in the all-important *parental tax*."

She gasped. "That's a thing?"

"Oh, absolutely. I collect payments in hugs and a promise not to grow up too fast."

She rolled her eyes but giggled anyway.

I ruffled her hair. "Come on. Let's braid this so it stays out of your eyes."

As I worked, my phone sat untouched. I wouldn't cancel our weekend in Chicago. I wouldn't let Carl ruin this time with Syd.

Gianna, Mia, Syd, and I went everywhere—Chinatown, the Field Museum, the Shedd Aquarium, and Navy Pier, where I bought the girls a comically oversized bag of caramel-and-cheese popcorn for the long drive ahead.

Our hotel wasn't fancy—just a regular Holiday Inn with two queen beds, a TV, and a little bistro table by the window. But for one last night, everything felt normal.

On Sunday night, Syd and Mia took over my room, sprawled

on the beds, watching movies. Gianna and I retreated to her room, sharing a bottle of wine.

"You don't seem worried," Gianna said, stretching out on the bed.

I thought about that for a second. "I am worried. But I have a solid plan."

She lifted her glass. "To a solid plan."

We toasted. I sipped. She sipped. I may have gulped.

"He was different when we got married," I said, swirling my wine. "He was kind. Thoughtful."

Gianna scoffed. "So what happened?"

I sighed. "When he lost his position at Greenberg, Altman, and Barnelli, he changed. We set up the firm, and financially, we were fine, but he was obsessed with proving them wrong. Every case became a competition. He had to win at all costs."

Gianna shook her head. "Men and their fragile egos." She pointed her glass at me. "As soon as I get back, I'm taking the test for my paralegal certificate, and then I will help you drop him faster than a teenager drops an iPhone."

I laughed. "Sounds like a plan."

At midnight, Mia returned to join her mom. I slipped into my room and found Syd already asleep in the bed closest to the window. A sliver of city light filtered through the curtains, illuminating her peaceful face.

I crawled into bed and watched her chest rise and fall, committing every moment to memory.

I didn't want to feel the ache that would settle in my heart the moment she left. But she'd be safe, happy, and—most importantly—out of the war zone our home would become in a day or two.

Monday morning, we ate breakfast at the hotel. Then I packed Syd's things into Gianna's minivan, said goodbye to my friends and my daughter, and headed home to battle.

As I turned into our subdivision—four blocks of semi-custom, red and pale brick houses—my magic sent out wave after

wave of horrible warning sensations. This wasn't a little tingle or a subtle nudge. No, this was a blaring beep, beep, beep of a fire alarm that wouldn't turn off.

I pulled into the driveway, my heart hammering in my throat, nerves frayed to the point of snapping.

I punched the garage remote. Nothing.

I tried again, edging the car closer to the receiver. Still nothing.

A chill rippled down my spine. I got out and walked up to the keypad, punching in the code. The door didn't budge. I tried again. Nothing.

My pulse pounded in my ears. Stay calm. There had to be a reasonable explanation. Maybe the battery was dead, or the opener needed repair. No reason to jump to conclusions.

Except that my magic was still screaming.

I went to the front door, slid my key into the lock, and twisted.

Nothing.

I jiggled the key. The lock wouldn't budge. I tugged the door, pushed, pulled. Nothing. My heart banged against my ribs.

That son of a snake had changed the locks.

Fine. Two could play that game.

I yanked out my phone and started scrolling for Gianna's brother's number—he'd pick a lock faster than I could pick a nail color. Before I could dial, a large shadow fell across my back.

I whirled around, keys clenched in my fist, ready to go full self-defense mode.

A man with a round belly and a cheap gray-blue polo stood there. "Are you Mrs. Bella Tibbs?"

"It's Hexley-Tibbs."

He thrust an envelope into my hands. "You've been served." Then he turned and bolted for a scuffed-up white sedan parked on the street.

I stood frozen, the papers shaking in my grip. No. Nope. Absolutely not.

I dropped into the porch chair and tore open the envelope. My breath caught as I scanned the words.

Petition for Dissolution of Marriage.

Carl wanted *everything*. Every last cent. The house. The cars. The business assets.

At this rate, even *my name* wasn't safe. Wouldn't be surprised if he tried to trademark *Bella Hexley™* just out of spite.

My phone rang—Carl.

I swallowed, my mouth dry as I hit answer. "You need to open the front door."

"I can't do that," he said.

A volcano erupted inside me—part magic, part sheer, unfiltered rage. "You can't stop me from going into my own home," I spat. "I'll call a locksmith. The police. I'll break a window if I have to."

"Go ahead." His voice dripped with smugness. "Not sure how I'll explain to Sydney why you spent the night in jail, but I'll figure something out."

A chill slithered through me. "What are you talking about? I have every right to be inside my house."

"But you don't," he said smoothly. "The risk is too great."

I gripped the phone tighter. "What risk?"

"It's not something you want to do, but the compulsions you struggle with are powerful."

My already fast pulse went into hyperdrive. "Are you on drugs? You're not making any sense."

"There's a halfway house. The address is inside the package you just received. They expect you to check in tonight."

"What makes you think I'd go to some halfway house?"

"I know this moment is tough. The first step is the hardest, right? Acceptance."

And then, the snake hung up.

Acceptance?

The frustration in my chest erupted in a scream. I slammed my fist against the glass pane of the door. It shook, and for a brief second, I saw the headline flash in my mind—

LOCAL WOMAN ATTEMPTS TO BREAK INTO OWN HOME, FAILS SPECTACULARLY.

I needed to calm down. I wasn't about to go full scorched earth. I'd outthink him, outmaneuver him, and, if necessary, hit him where it really hurt—his ego.

LOCKED OUT OF MY LIFE

An emergency order of protection hid behind the petition for the dissolution of marriage.

“What the...” My thoughts jumbled together. I needed to calm down and think. Judges didn’t issue emergency orders unless the threat of violence was extreme. I’d seen them granted in cases where husbands had literally wielded frying pans as weapons. But me? What was Carl afraid of—my PTA membership? My power-walking skills?

The order forced me to stay away from Syd, Carl, and my own home. If I violated it, the police had every right to haul me to jail.

I needed a lawyer. Fast.

Thankfully, I had a meeting with David. After that, I had a plan: check into a hotel, take a hot bath, and let him start dismantling whatever fantasy Carl had sold the judge.

Simple. Logical. Foolproof.

At the gas station on Main, I pulled up to the only empty pump, slid my credit card in, and answered all the prompts like a responsible adult.

Red letters flashed. *Transaction canceled.*

I frowned. Okay, weird. Maybe the machine was just being difficult.

I tried again. *Transaction canceled.*

Fine. I pulled up to another pump. Swiped a different card.

Transaction canceled.

I took a steadying breath, grabbed my debit card, and tried that.

Transaction canceled.

Oh, *come on.*

I drove across the street to the mostly self-service branch of our bank. It was Sunday, but the drive-up ATM was still open. I slid my card in, tapped my PIN, and waited.

The screen flashed. *Card and ID not recognized.*

My breakfast did an unpleasant flip.

I forced myself to stay calm. Panicking was not an option. Luckily, I'd withdrawn cash before our weekend downtown, just in case.

Back at the gas station, I paid in cash, keeping my expression neutral like this wasn't an absolute *nightmare*. While the gas glugged into my tank, I did a quick purse inventory—\$242 and a baggie full of quarters for tolls or vending machines or whatever emergency required exact change.

Plan B. After meeting with David, I'd swing by *Harvest Bank*, the tiny, independent bank my grandmother had used to set up my savings account. That little nest egg was meant for a rainy day, and *this* was a full-blown hurricane.

Then, I'd call Gianna.

She'd downsized to a two-bedroom townhome after her husband passed, and money had been tight for her. The place was small, but with the girls away at camp for the next seven weeks, maybe she wouldn't mind me crashing there. I could pay rent, help out where I could.

I'd call her after the bank.

One battle at a time.

By the time I got to David's office—a red brick colonial that somehow managed to be both *cozy* and *intimidating*—I had gone through all five stages of financial grief and landed on *rage*.

Inside, the reception area had a blue-gray low-pile carpet, a few chairs lining the wall, and a massive, bubbling fish tank.

Hilda, David's receptionist, greeted me with a cheery smile and a cup of coffee, which I accepted because it was free, and right now, free was my financial bracket.

I took a sip and stared into the tank, watching the fish swim in circles as I imagined Carl's head dunked straight in.

"Bella."

David stood in the doorway, sleeves rolled up over his broad forearms, looking like a man who expected this to be a legal disaster. He motioned me inside.

His office was nice but practical, with a sleek leather chair across from his cherrywood desk. Behind him, family photos filled the shelves—two curly-haired boys, a gorgeous wife with his same round build, all of them beaming like they'd never made a single regretful life choice.

I couldn't help but wonder what my life would have looked like if I'd made different life choices—law school and kept my magic.

Instead, I'd been upset and left my world behind. And ended up with Carl.

I pulled out the petition for dissolution of marriage and the emergency order of protection.

David gave them a quick read and then huffed out a breath. "I called Carl's attorney. Told him I was *considering* representing you." He tapped his fingers on the desk. "I tried to get information. He wouldn't give me much. Now I understand why he was so evasive. This is harsh."

Considering. That was a start. Plus, he'd already tried. Good signs.

"He did tell me a few things." David sighed, tapping a pen on a

memo pad. "According to Carl, you're financially responsible for... well, quite a bit of debt."

I scoffed. "That's ridiculous."

"Not according to him."

I sat up straighter. "David, in the past year, I've bought clothes, food, but no big purchases."

Except there was a credit card statement in my name with a huge amount of gambling debt.

"I think he's worried about you trying to siphon off money."

"Carl is setting me up. He locked me out of our bank accounts, cut off my credit cards—I can't even buy gas."

David tilted his head. "Well, you *did* gain access to your bank accounts."

His voice had a definite *I don't know how much trouble you're in, but it's probably a lot* tone.

I waved a hand. "Because they were *our* accounts, David. I needed to know if he was hiding money before he could screw me over."

David exhaled slowly. "And I *do* know Carl. That's why I agreed to meet with you." He took off his glasses, folded them, and set them on his desk. "But I gotta tell you, Bella—Carl is a formidable opponent."

"You and I both know that this is a no-fault divorce state, which means, in theory, anything I've done isn't important."

"And yet." David hesitated. "Carl has a... *history* of making things work in his favor."

A rush of heat climbed up my neck.

"I mean have you paid attention to any of the outcomes for Carl's divorces?"

Yes, I had, and the outcomes were all unbelievable. Carl didn't have magic, but maybe he did have help. "Do you think he could be bribing someone?"

"You're not the first person to suggest that." David rubbed his

temples. "If you can prove that, great. If not, you'll need to tell the judge why you went to get those bank records."

"I *know*."

He drummed his pen on the pad of paper. "You should know, Carl is asking for *a lot*."

"He wants our house, all our money, the business."

"And he wants you to pay him \$100,000 a year."

I nearly choked. "A *hundred*—"

"Look, Bella, I don't know everything Carl's planning to argue, but if you want to fight this, you're going to need *hard* evidence. And that means hiring a private investigator."

"I don't suppose you can find one who will work on credit?"

Dave shook his head. "Especially not going up against Carl. You'll need a retainer." David hesitated. "Do you have parents who can lend you cash? A rich aunt?"

I pulled my shoulders back. "I do have *some* money."

David frowned. "You just said—"

"I said Carl locked me out of our joint accounts. But before we got married, my grandmother left me a small sum. I haven't touched it. It's in my name only." I stood. "I was planning to go by the bank after this."

We discussed retainers. Fees. This would *wipe me out, but I had enough to get out and that was most important*.

Thank goodness Gianna's couch was comfy, because it was looking more and more like my future home.

David led me to a smaller office with a laptop and phone, giving me space to log into my savings account.

I'd never set up electronic access before, so I spent half an hour answering security questions, verifying my identity, and finally—*finally*—getting in.

The second my account balance popped up, all the air left my lungs.

\$150.

That was it.

I scrolled through the transactions, my vision blurring. Bits of money had been siphoned out *daily*—straight to the Crown Casino account and Local Liquor. According to my bank records, I had been *boozing it up and gambling away my savings*.

A knock at the door.

“I need to wrap up,” David said.

My face burned. I was broke. I looked *guilty as hell. And the only attorney in the state who would agree to represent me would be me.*

WAR PLANS

Furious, I drove to my favorite thinking place, a forgotten corner of a nearby forest preserve. I parked far from the gate and stomped up the dirt path toward a small creek. I scooped up a handful of rocks and hurled them into the water.

It didn't even make a dent in the anger I felt. I marched down the path, stopping every few feet to pitch a stick against a tree or pelt some bush with a rock. Eventually, I ended up back at my car, sitting on the tailgate, legs swinging.

The air smelled fresh, full of grass and wildflowers. A car passed in the distance, but mostly, the wind rustled through the trees, and for a moment, I let it settle me.

I would come out of this okay. More than okay. I was going to beat Carl at his own game.

But how? How had he set up such an elaborate scheme? How had he conceived it? How long had it taken him to pull it off? If he had magical power, I would've sensed it, but Carl was just a nonmagical, snake of a man. Did he bribe some one? Several some ones?

Maybe I was looking at this all wrong. I had a court case in

two days. I couldn't figure out everything, and maybe I didn't need to. I only needed to find some evidence that shot a hole in Carl's case. Reasonable doubt, so to speak.

No one pulled off something this extensive without making a mistake. There had to be a loose thread I could tug and watch the whole thing unravel.

I pulled out my phone and texted Gianna.

Me: Do you have a minute to talk?

Ten seconds later, my phone rang.

"What's up?" she asked.

As I explained, she cursed under her breath. "Is everything okay with Syd? Nothing's changed, right?"

"She's having the time of her life. Turns out she's got a thing for kayaking," Gianna reassured me. "If anything changes, you'll be the first to know."

I exhaled. Knowing my daughter was okay was always item number one on any to-do list. Time to skip down to item number two. "I need a place to stay."

Gianna gave me the code to her garage. "You can have it for a week."

"A week?"

"Cash has been tight. I rented it out to a family visiting the area through VRBO for the next month."

"That works." I'd have a roof over my head through my court date on Wednesday. I had no choice but to clean up my situation then. Otherwise, I would be homeless.

I drove to Gianna's townhouse, slipped off my shoes on the entry tile to avoid marking her white carpet, and crossed into the kitchen. Step one: coffee. Step two? Figuring out my next move.

Where to start?

I wish I had my magic back. If I did, then one good potion, and I could compel Carl to tell the truth. Then I'd turn him into a toad and squash him flat.

KELLY GARCIA

Just kidding.

There were no spells to turn men into toads. Shame. If anyone deserved it, it was Carl Tibbs, future pond-dweller.

THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

By Tuesday night, I still had *nothing*, and I won't lie, I was starting to worry.

For the first time, I actually considered checking into the halfway house Carl had so *graciously* set up for me. Food. Shelter. A roof over my head. And giving up *everything*? Absolutely not.

Carl *knew* I'd get a job, go to therapy, and sooner or later, a counselor would realize I didn't have a gambling problem. From there, I'd get my law license back, hire a PI, and within six months—maybe a year—I'd have Syd and my money.

Carl would never let that happen.

I didn't know *how* he'd stop me, but I wasn't about to underestimate him again. He would push, manipulate, and *destroy* until I disappeared. No matter what I did next, *following his plan was not an option*.

So, what else was there? Beg a church for help? Become a sex worker? I groaned and dropped my head into my hands. *Think, Bella. Think.*

I needed hard evidence. If I had money, I'd hire a private investigator. Where would a PI start? Easy. They'd *follow the money*.

According to my latest credit card statements, I'd spent thousands of dollars at the Crown Casino.

Yet, I had *never* been inside the Crown Casino.

Proving that should be easy, like eating a perfect slice of chocolate cream pie—better than cake, by the way, especially with a sprinkle of peppermint.

A private investigator would show my photo to every employee in the casino. And *not a single one* would recognize me. Because I'd never been there. How would that play in court?

Not well. Employees quit. People retire. Just because no one *remembered* me didn't mean I hadn't been inside. Security cameras. That was the key.

Casinos were packed with money, booze, and terrible decision-making. Security had to be *airtight*.

All I needed was *one* day's footage from a time I was supposedly inside. It would prove *beyond any doubt* that the person spending that money wasn't me.

But I'd need a subpoena to get the footage.

I could ask the judge. Carl would object. The judge would grant a continuation. By the time the motion went through, the casino would have purged its old footage. I had to try, but I couldn't count on getting security tapes.

Carl or Bambi *had* to have been inside the Crown Casino—probably *every single day*. Employees would remember them. Poker seemed to be their game. And if they'd been in the same spot *day after day*, the dealers would *definitely* recognize them. Probably knew them by name.

I didn't need a full security investigation. I needed *one* poker dealer who would testify that Carl or Bambi were there *every day*. That was enough to put doubt in a judge's mind.

A private investigator would handle this sort of thing. But with \$150 in my bank account and a little over \$200 in my purse, I *was* the private investigator.

Tonight, I had to go to the Crown Casino, find someone who remembered Carl or Bambi, and get their name for a deposition.

I grabbed my keys, punched the Crown Casino address into my GPS, and headed straight for the scene of the crime.

The Crown Casino sat just outside Chicago, surrounded by fields and trees like it was pretending to be some glamorous getaway instead of what it actually was—a glorified truck stop with slot machines.

I parked in the massive lot and took a moment to reconsider *all* my life choices.

Could I really picture Carl, in his Italian suit and Rolex, walking into *this* place every day?

Bambi? Sure. But Carl?

Even if he *had* been here, I could tell the judge Wednesday morning, under oath, that I had never set foot inside the Crown Casino, and I wouldn't be lying. The second I stepped inside, that changed.

Carl had known I went to the bank and spoke with Rich. He'd come home early after I was in his office. How?

I wasn't dumb—I had checked my phone for tracking apps. Nothing. My car had similar security settings, and again, I had never enabled tracking.

None of it made sense, but I couldn't lie to a judge.

Ideally, I'd sit back, wait for Carl and Bambi, snap a few pictures of them playing poker, and leave. Showing them here, just once, would be a strong case especially if they used my credit card and I never sat down at the table.

I sat back and watched the parking lot.

Thirty minutes later, I slapped my dashboard when Carl and Bambi had pulled in.

I took a deep breath, grabbed my sunglasses, and shoved a baseball cap onto my head. Long hair? Tucked inside.

I waited a full twenty minutes, giving them ample time to settle into a game. Then I followed them in. Phone in hand,

camera app open. All I needed was *one* shot of Carl at a gaming table. Just one.

The second I stepped inside, my magic *hummed*. Something in here would help me. I *felt* it. What? Where?

Had to be Carl and Bambi.

The entrance led to a massive room packed with slot machines and a bar in the center. Beyond that, two gaming rooms held the tables. I circled the casino twice, scanning every slot, every table, every crowd.

Nothing. Carl and Bambi had *definitely* walked in, and they hadn't come back out. Weird.

A waitress passed me, slowing just slightly. She'd passed me a couple of times already, and I needed to stop standing around looking suspicious.

I ordered a drink, bought a ten-dollar casino card, and sat down at a slot machine with a giant panda on the front. I slid my card in, placed a 25-cent bet, and pulled the lever.

Cherry. Pot of gold. Duck. No win. Another quarter. *Ding ding ding!* One dollar. Which I promptly lost in four more spins.

Exactly why I hated casinos. It was like lighting money on fire but without the warmth.

The older woman next to me didn't seem to mind. She had short gray hair, a sweater embroidered with tiny flowers, and the general vibe of someone who should be baking cookies for her grandkids. Instead, she was wedged between two machines, yanking levers like she was conducting an orchestra.

One machine. Then the other. Then back again.

Maybe she was rich. Maybe she was blowing birthday money. I *hoped* she wasn't one of those people who couldn't stop.

Either way, I *still* couldn't picture Carl here day after day. He had a business. A family. A mistress. Where did he find the *time* for this?

And yet, there were receipts. And I had *seen* him come in. So where had he gone?

"Can I get you another drink?" The waitress, Maggie, asked. She was tall and thin with curly black hair and glowing brown skin.

"Rosé spritzer, and—" I pulled out my phone, opening a photo of Carl. "—have you seen this man before?"

She instantly recoiled. Oops. Casino etiquette faux pas.

I softened my voice. "My husband. Just trying to figure out if we have a problem."

She sighed and leaned in, giving the photo a long look. Her eyes widened slightly.

"You know, he does—"

"What's going on?" A bald, boulder-sized man in a too-tight Crown Casino polo stepped between us.

I glanced at his nametag. *Jared*.

"I was just asking if she'd seen this man." I showed him the photo.

His arms crossed over his chest, nostrils flaring. "We don't answer questions."

"Oh, it's fine, Jared," Maggie said quickly. "I was just telling her a lot of people come in here. I can't be expected to remember all of them."

Frustration clawed inside me. She *had* recognized Carl. And if Jared left the floor for even *five minutes*, I bet she'd admit it.

I sighed, pulled out a twenty, and handed it to her. "Thanks," I said. "Forget the wine. I'm good."

I took one last lap around the casino, swapping the multi-color, dingy carpet from the slots area for the slightly different multicolor, dingy carpet around the poker tables.

Jared followed. Ugh. I moved from the poker room to the craps tables, but he stayed glued to me like a bad spray tan. Fine. I ducked into the bathroom and waited. Ten full minutes. Long enough to check my lipstick, refresh my hair, and mentally prepare for whatever nonsense came next.

When I stepped out, Jared had his back to me, his linebacker-

sized frame blocking Maggie against the wall. His arm was stretched out, pinning her in place. And unless my mascara was messing with my vision, Maggie was shaking.

Oh, no. Absolutely not. I was officially done with men who thought intimidation was a personality trait—especially when the woman in question was trying to help me.

Jared snarled something I couldn't make out and lifted his hand—

I marched between them, heels clicking with authority.

"You. Big. Bully."

Jared gaped. Maggie did, too.

"How dare you try to hit a woman?" I planted a fist on my hip and leveled him with my absolute best don't mess with me glare. "I cannot think of anything more pathetic for a guy your size."

"I didn't—"

"Oh, do not even try that." I held up a finger, effectively shushing him. "I saw your hand go up." Tapping my jaw, I pretended to consider my options. "You know what? I think I'm gonna call the cops. And sue. Obviously." I leaned toward Maggie and stage-whispered, "I'll represent you. No charge."

"You're an attorney?" Jared scoffed.

"Sweetie, I could quote *Roe v. Wade*, explain the Commerce Clause, and still have time to critique your tie. But let's get straight to it. How much do you make a year?"

He opened his mouth, but I didn't wait for an answer.

"Doesn't matter. We'll find out. And then I will take every single penny you have ever earned. Understood?"

Jared's hands shot up like I'd just threatened to set his entire wardrobe on fire. "I swear I didn't hit her."

I turned to Maggie. "Is that true?"

She nodded quickly.

I jabbed a perfectly manicured finger into Jared's chest. "Better keep it that way. Or all of your money? Hers and mine. Got it?"

“Got it.” Jared backed away so fast I thought he might trip over his own feet. A shame, really. That would’ve been hilarious.

Maggie grinned. “That was fun.”

“Yeah, the big ones usually aren’t that smart.” I gave her a knowing look. “Do me a favor? Steer clear of him.”

“I will.” She scurried off to work.

I stood there for a second, letting my pulse settle. And then reality hit me like a blackjack dealer on a hot streak. I had less than eight hours before Carl unleashed whatever disaster he had planned.

No photo. No witness. No plan.

I turned on my heel and walked out empty-handed. Fabulous.

RESISTING THE URGE TO SLAP MY EX

I dressed in black casual pants, a fitted white tee, and a black blazer—something I wore all the time. It wasn't exactly a *power suit*, but since I didn't have access to my actual closet, it was a step up from the *Sweet Home Chicago* sweatshirt I bought at Navy Pier.

By the time I walked into the courtroom and took my seat, my magic was practically *screaming* at me. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. That steady drone was a warning that there was something else I hadn't seen yet, and I gritted my teeth. Just when I thought there were no more unwelcome surprises left, the universe was like, '*Hold my beer.*'

Carl had outdone himself this time. He was *thriving* in his villain era. He strolled in with that awkward, giraffe-on-ice gait of his—long legs, lanky frame, head bobbing with every step. Somehow, despite his ridiculous movements, he *dripped* confidence and condescension. And let's face it, it was the alpha male power move.

On top of his demeanor, with the *perfectly* tailored charcoal-gray suit, the baby-blue shirt, the striped designer tie, he looked every inch the polished, successful attorney. And then, like the

absolute snake that he was, he turned on the charm. Schmoozing the guard at the door, asking to see pictures of his grandkids. Nodding at the bailiff like they were old friends.

I clenched my fists. This man was *not* kind. He was *not* friendly. But he was *good* at making people believe he was.

Sooner or later, I planned to show the world the real Carl.

Judge Morales entered, a no-nonsense woman with tan skin, sharp eyes, and the general vibe of someone who had *zero* tolerance for BS. I liked her immediately.

More importantly, she didn't *look* like someone Carl could charm his way around.

"Good morning, Your Honor." Carl flashed a *perfect* smile.

I curled my fingers into a fist. If I had access to *any* money, I would *gladly* accept a \$10,000 fine to punch him square in the face. Maybe a kick, too.

The image of Syd flashed in my mind, and something guttural erupted from my throat. I coughed into my hand, pretending it didn't happen.

Carl, the absolute *worst*, continued his performance by *bringing me a glass of water*.

He set it down beside me, glanced at my desk—completely empty since I couldn't afford legal counsel—and *patted* me on the back like we were old pals.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to shake off the full body *ick* of his touch.

Then, in the ultimate act of smugness, he reached into his expensive leather briefcase and handed me a *pen and notepad*. I wanted to throw them at his *stupid, smirking* face.

The judge's hard gaze landed on Carl, and she *sneered*. Good. She wasn't buying his act.

"Mr. Tibbs," the judge said, flipping through some papers. "I've spent some time going over your requests this morning, and they're quite extreme."

"Agreed, Your Honor." Carl nodded and picked up a file. "May I share my records?"

Magic *bubbled and popped* under my skin. No. No, no, no. He *could not* have something else. Yet, here it was, that incessant warning. My palms turned slick.

Carl opened the folder.

"About a year ago, Bella finally agreed to seek help," he said, handing a document to the judge. Then he turned to me, lowered his voice, and whispered, "I'm sorry."

After the judge skimmed the page, Carl walked it over and placed it in front of me.

Records of my registration with *Gamblers Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous*.

"Your honor. This is a—"

"Mrs. Hexley-Tibbs." The judge pounded her gavel. "You will get your turn."

"Yes, Your Honor," I said through clenched teeth. "I apologize, but it's hard to stay quiet while I'm getting *hosed* by my snake of a near ex-husband."

The judge's eyebrow *twitched*.

"That reminds me. Could you please call me Ms. Hexley?"

She nodded and turned to Carl.

Carl *chuckled*. "As I was saying, these are records from when Bella attempted to face her addictions." He gestured to the folder. "I also have statements from the counselors who ran the meetings she attended."

My mouth *dropped open*. I had *never* signed up for any of these organizations. I had *never* met these so-called counselors. How could they possibly claim I had *participated*? And it dawned on me. With enough money and power, *anything* was possible.

Carl sighed dramatically. "Unfortunately, after that first meeting—" Carl squeezed his eyes shut, *pained*, as if this was just *so hard* for him to endure.

Total snake in a suit.

"Your Honor, without telling me, Bella took out a credit card." Carl opened another folder like he was hosting a PowerPoint on *Why My Wife Is the Worst*.

I had to hand it to him—he was *good* at this.

"On that card alone, she placed more than half a million in bets."

"Half a mil—" I choked on air.

The judge pounded her gavel. "I said you will have your turn."

I sucked in a breath, forcing myself to sit still.

"Forgive me, Your Honor," I said, voice tight, "but casinos *don't* allow gambling on a credit card."

"That's why there's an ATM in the back of every room," Carl said smoothly. "You *know* this, Bella. You've used *all of them* inside the Crown Casino multiple times."

"I've never even *been* inside the Crown Casino," I shot back.

He sighed. Like he *pitied* me. Then he pulled out an 8x10 photo and slid it across the table.

A picture of *me* standing next to a poker table. Then another —me, in my baseball cap and sunglasses, at a slot machine.

The room *tilted*. This was *impossible*. The odds of someone recognizing me and snapping these photos were *astronomical*—unless they were looking out for me. Someone like Jared.

Carl kept going, stacking lie on top of lie like a sociopathic Jenga master.

"Poker, racetracks, football, basketball," he listed, shaking his head like I *personally* disappointed him. "She bets on *anything* she can. I make an *excellent* living, Your Honor, yet she spends it faster than I bring it in."

He turned back to his folder. "And the longer this has gone on, the more I've become concerned about her *alcohol consumption*."

"My *what*?" I mean, sure, I liked a good rosé spritzer every now and then, but what girl doesn't?

The judge slammed the gavel again. "Ms. Hexley. One more outburst, and I will ask you to leave the room."

I bit my tongue.

Carl offered a *deeply* fake look of sympathy. “Her temper flares when she hasn’t had enough to drink. Or when she’s had too much.”

My magic raged so hot inside of me, I felt a minute away from combusting. He handed the judge another sheet.

“She bought *six bottles* of Grey Goose?” The judge arched a brow.

“That was a *particularly* rough week,” Carl said, voice dripping with fake concern. “Usually, it’s only two or three.”

“She’s the sole caregiver for your daughter?”

Carl sighed. “It *breaks my heart*, but it has to change.”

Everything in my vision *flashed red*. My jaw clenched so tight I felt a *tooth crack*. *No one messed with my daughter.*

The judge flinched. Then she turned back to Carl’s *master plan*. “You’ve asked for all remaining assets,” she said. “That’s... a lot of money.”

“She’s already *spent* most of it.” Carl spread his hands like he was just *so reasonable*. “I could argue she isn’t entitled to anything. But it brings me *no joy* to leave her penniless.”

I resisted the urge to gag.

He pressed a hand to his chest like he was *sacrificing* something. “I believe addiction is a disease. And for our daughter’s sake, it cannot go unaddressed. That’s why I’ve arranged for Bella to stay in a *halfway house*. It’s a structured environment that specializes in gambling addiction recovery. Residents aren’t allowed more than a small weekly stipend—enough for a book, a movie, a Starbucks run.”

Hook. Line. Sinker. If the judge were a fish, Carl would be *grilling* her for dinner.

Finally, she turned to me.

“Ms. Hexley, do you have any evidence to refute your husband?”

I swallowed. *How* could I have evidence? I had no idea what Carl was going to say until two days ago.

My magic *raged*. Think, Bella. *Think*.

And then, a light bulb.

"Your Honor, I *did* go into the Crown Casino. *Yesterday*. Because I suspected my husband of concocting an *elaborate* scheme to keep me penniless."

Carl gasped, pressing his hand to his chest like he was a fainting Victorian woman. "That's *impossible!* No one could *fake* all this!"

The judge shot him a look. "Mr. Tibbs, let your wife speak."

I nodded. "Your Honor, Carl Tibbs is a *highly* accomplished divorce attorney. He has a *record* of winning cases that seem *impossible*. He *knew* exactly what it would take to make sure I had no access to our assets. And I *can* prove he was having an affair. Or I *could* if I had the resources."

I took a deep breath. "Carl took out a credit card in my name. *He* racked up debt at the Crown Casino. He emptied a *personal* bank account that was *mine* before marriage. He *cut me off* from our joint accounts, canceled *our* credit cards, and locked me out of our *home*."

"It's for her *own good*." Carl shook his head, *pained*. "I *can't* give her access to funds that would enable her to feed her addictions."

I held his gaze. "I have *no* evidence because I had *no idea* what Carl was planning until now. Agreeing to his terms is the same thing as assigning me guilt before I've had a fair trial."

The judge pressed her lips together. "Fair point."

"She *lied* about the casino. I've demonstrated that."

I squared my shoulders. "May I offer a compromise?"

The judge nodded. "I'm listening."

"Carl could pay the PI and attorney I need *directly*. That way, I wouldn't have access to the funds."

The judge tapped her pen against her desk. "Interesting."

I braced myself for Carl's argument.

Instead, he smiled. "Everyone deserves the right to due process."

That was a win. A small one. But *finally*, something had broken my way.

"We're agreed then," the judge said. "Carl will send... how much?"

"I think five thousand to an attorney and PI is a fair starting point," I said.

She banged her gavel. "It's settled. We will meet back here in one week." Then she turned to me, her voice softening. "The court can't force you, but I strongly encourage you to check into the halfway house."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

"Yes. *Thank you.*" Carl snapped his briefcase shut.

As we stood, he leaned in and whispered, "Of course, you'll need to prove there's no *conflict of interest*."

And *just like that*, I pulled back my arm and slapped him.

The slap might have been an accident. Probably. Maybe. Okay, fine. It was absolutely an accident.

Sort of. Good thing the judge didn't see it.

I knew I had to keep my cool. He's baiting you. Don't let him win. Play it smart.

I had tried. Really, I had. But Carl kept twisting reality—gaslighting me, setting me up, making me out to be some kind of reckless gambler on the verge of ruin. And now? Now my magic was practically screaming at me.

Carl had really levelled up in the deception department. I thought I knew the limits of human treachery. This went beyond, and I was going to lose my daughter if I didn't up my game, too.

Which meant...

I needed my magic back, plain and simple. And if I wanted to stand a chance of winning this war, I had to let it out.

A LITTLE FAVOR (THAT I'D
PROBABLY REGRET)

Desperate times, desperate measures, and all that. Which is how I found myself walking into *The Hung Jury*, a pub where I could, hopefully, get an enchanted amulet *and* a rosé spritzer. Or maybe something stronger. Than the amulet. *Not* the spritzer.

The place smelled like old wood, whiskey, and bad decisions.

Paul sat in his usual booth, looking every inch the charming, *totally untrustworthy* half-demon that he was—this time in a purple polka-dot bowtie. I slid into the seat across from him.

He smirked. “You’re back.”

I leaned in. “I need something magical.”

His eyes glinted. “And I’d like you to come to work for me. I could use an attorney.”

I sighed. Time to lay my cards on the table. “Paul, *you and I both* know I’m not your best option for an attorney. I’m out of practice.”

“You were always sharp.”

“I have a *child*.”

“I’ll set you up in a *nice* house.”

"And I've never *tried* a case in magical court."

"There's a first time for everyone."

I groaned. "Paul, *please*. Just this once. No long contract, no strings—except the one favor I'd owe you."

I must've caught him on a *particularly* good day because he didn't flat-out tell me no. Instead, he steepled his fingers, considering.

I went for the Hail Mary. "Do it for my mom."

Paul's smirk twitched.

I knew that look. He *had* cared about her. In fact, if Mom *hadn't* spelled Dad into a marriage, the guy sitting across from me might've been my *father*.

Paul exhaled through his nose, then, with a flick of his wrist, a dagger appeared in his palm.

The hilt was silver, old, filigree curling over the handle. The blade gleamed, sharp as ever. But what really got me was the energy pulsing off it. Unmistakable. Familiar.

I swallowed. "Where did you get this?"

Paul, being Paul, leaned back, smirking like he *enjoyed* keeping me in the dark. "Oh, you know," he said, swirling his drink. "Things have a way of finding their way home."

Not the answer I wanted. But the moment my fingers wrapped around the hilt, I *knew*. It had belonged to my mother. I'd seen it before. Something inside me twisted. I shoved the feeling down, cleared my throat. "This will work?"

Paul's lips curled. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm *sure* it will."

I took the blade and left. I needed someone I trusted to help—not Paul—and a circle of salt in the moonlight. I stood, tucking the dagger into my bag. "I'll remember."

I drove straight to Gianna's townhouse, ready to collapse on her couch, dig through her snacks, and figure out how to save my life. What I *wasn't* ready for? Gianna herself, standing in the doorway, arms crossed, eyebrow arched.

I blinked. "Wait—you're *here*?"

"Nice to see you too."

I practically tackled her in a hug. "I thought you were going to help your parents with the camp."

"I *decided to come back*." She pulled back, giving me a once-over. "I was worried about you."

Warmth spread through my chest. "That's... incredibly sweet and also *deeply unnecessary*."

She snorted. "Right. Because everything is totally fine."

Okay. Fair. Still, I was grateful. And that gratitude lasted all of five seconds before I remembered what I had to do.

I hesitated. Because this wasn't just asking for help. This was telling her *everything*. Gianna didn't know I was a witch. She didn't know about magic, about what I'd buried, about the world I had walked away from. And now I had to say it out loud. Not just tell her that magic was real, but to let her know I'd hid such a big part of me for so long.

I took a breath, gripped the back of a kitchen chair, and forced the words out. "Gianna, there's something I never told you."

She tilted her head. "Okay...?"

"I'm a witch."

Silence.

A beat too long. My stomach clenched. I braced myself for confusion, for disbelief, for the inevitable '*Bella, have you been drinking?*'

Instead, Gianna's entire face lit up. "Oh. My. God."

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

She threw her hands in the air. "Bella! You've been my best friend for years, and you never told me you had actual magic? Do you know how much fun we could have had screwing with my obnoxious neighbor? The one who won't stop ogling my chest? My *very married* neighbor?"

I'd seen him. He kind of did have it coming. "You're... not freaked out?"

"Freaked out?" She laughed. "I'm personally offended. We could've been making his life miserable this entire time."

Okay. This was way better than I expected. And with that, the rest of it came easier. I told her everything—Carl, the magic binding, how to unbind my magic, the danger of unsealing it now. And that, naturally, led to me pacing her kitchen like a woman possessed.

"You want to do what?" she asked, arms crossing again, this time really leaning into the judgmental best friend look.

"I have to unbind my magic." I braced my hands on the counter. "It's the only way."

Gianna blew out a long breath, shaking her head. "Bella, I get it. Carl is a scum-sucking bottom feeder. But this is going to be painful."

I hadn't forgotten that part. Binding my magic had felt like cutting off a limb. Slicing myself with a dagger? That was going to *hurt*. A lot. Still, I met her gaze steadily. "I don't have another choice."

Gianna sighed, rubbed her temples, and then—because she was the best friend a witch could ask for—she reached for her phone.

"Where do we want to do this thing?"

By midnight, I was standing in the middle of a clearing deep in the woods, barefoot, wrapped in an old cloak Gianna had dug out of storage.

A full moon hung overhead, casting a cold silver glow over the trees. The air smelled like damp earth and wild magic.

Gianna stood at the edge of a clearing, arms wrapped around herself. "This is your last chance to back out."

Backing out meant losing everything. "Let's do this."

The Ritual of Unbinding was old magic, the kind that pulsed

in your bones and made the air vibrate. It required three things: an object of power—something that held a connection to my magic before it was bound, a circle of salt—to contain the energy and keep it from burning the entire forest down, and blood—because no ritual was complete without it.

After we formed the circle with pink sea salt—which is so much better than regular old table salt—I handed her the dagger, hands steady despite the weight of what she was about to do. Then, I knelt inside the circle and stretched my arms out.

With a flash of excitement, which honestly was one thing I loved about her, Gianna pressed the blade to my forearm and sliced.

The wind picked up, swirling around me. The salt and iron circle glowed, pulsing with raw energy.

“In darkness, I hid,” I whispered, voice strong, words coming from somewhere deep inside me. “In silence, I remained. Bound by choice, bound by fear. But fear will not hold me. Not anymore.”

The ground trembled. The moonlight bent, twisting unnaturally. My magic, locked away for so long, fought to be free.

“I call upon the power that is mine by birthright,” I continued, heart pounding. “Unshackle me. Restore me.”

The wind howled. The night cracked open.

And then—it happened.

A shockwave of pure magic burst from my chest, pushing me backward and knocking the air out of my chest. My vision whited out. My skin burned, but not from heat—from power. Unfiltered, untamed, mine.

And then—Silence. I gasped, pulling in my first breath as an unbound witch.

The night had settled, the wind had stilled, and yet... everything felt different. My skin tingled with magic, my senses sharper than they had been in over two decades. The weight I

KELLY GARCIA

had carried for years—the dull, aching void where my power should have been—was gone. I was whole again.

Gianna's voice was soft. "You did it."

I looked down at my hands. A faint, golden glow pulsed beneath my skin, and then I met Gianna's gaze. "Carl has no idea what's coming for him."

A LITTLE MAGIC, A LOT OF CHAOS

For the first time in years, I felt powerful. Magic hummed under my skin, crackling like fresh highlights under a blow dryer—full of potential, slightly unpredictable, and totally electrifying. Sure, I was rusty, but magic was like riding a bike. A bike that could, unfortunately, set things on fire if I wasn't careful.

Still, after what Carl pulled in court, I had zero time for second-guessing. I needed proof—something concrete to shut down his lies once and for all. And that meant going back to the Crown Casino.

Simple plan: get in, use a teensy bit of magic to find undeniable evidence that Carl was the gambler, not me, and get out.

Totally foolproof. In theory.

Gianna insisted on coming, even though I swore this was a one-woman job. She parked in the lot and cut the engine, turning to give me the look.

"Tell me again why I can't come in with you?"

"Because I need you ready to floor it when I come sprinting out like I just maxed out Carl's credit card at a designer sample sale," I said.

She groaned. "This is the worst girls' night ever."

"Yeah, well, the alternative was sitting at home, contemplating how Carl is actively trying to ruin my life."

She considered, then nodded. "Fine. But if you're not back in twenty minutes, I'm coming in with a fire extinguisher and the dagger."

"Appreciate it." I patted her hand and slid out of the car.

I squared my shoulders and strutted through the front doors.

The rhythmic ding-ding-ding of slot machines filled the air, mixing with the soft shuffle of poker chips and murmured conversations. I kept my head down, moving through the crowd. Okay, Bella. Time to be subtle.

I slipped into a quiet hallway leading to the casino's security office. No need for a dramatic break-in—just a gentle, magical nudge to unlock the door, slip a few security files onto a conveniently placed USB, and exit like the professional I used to be.

Deep breath. Focus. I reached for my magic, coaxing it forward. A flicker of energy zipped up my arm. See? Totally under control.

I lifted a hand, aimed at the door, and whispered the simplest spell I could remember. Just a little nudge. A tiny spark danced across my fingertips and—

BOOM.

The entire casino exploded into chaos. Slot machines flashed like a Vegas rave gone horribly wrong.

Bells and sirens blared. The roulette wheel spun wildly, knocking over chips and sending dice flying. And the jackpot machines? Oh, those traitors started spitting out coins like a busted ATM.

I stared. Oh. Crap. That was not supposed to happen.

Shouts rang out. People rushed to scoop up the raining money while casino security swarmed like angry wasps. And there, pushing through the madness, looking like an enraged bull, was Jared.

I ran.

I zigzagged between chairs, dodged an elderly woman wielding a cocktail like a weapon, and—oh, fantastic—Jared was fast. I aimed a quick magical trip him up spell, but nope. Instead of slowing him down, my heels slipped, and I tumbled.

Not me, him, I mentally scolded my magic.

Jared swiped for me over a woman in four-inch stilettos. Her drink sloshed down his shirt, and I scrambled under a blackjack table, popped out on the other side, and took off again.

Jared, shoving through the crowd like a linebacker, was right on my heels.

I bolted past the bar, nearly toppling a tray of overpriced cocktails. Someone grabbed my sleeve—maybe a casino employee, maybe a concerned citizen—but I wrenched free.

Or at least, I tried to. The grip tightened.

Busted.

Jared marched me outside and—seriously?—literally threw me across the walkway. “Don’t come back,” he growled. “You’re not welcome.”

Fair. I kinda deserved that.

My magic, however, found this hilarious. That’s what I got for turning my back on it all these years. It was pissed, and it was making sure I knew it.

I groaned, shuffling away, my dignity officially in ruins. This was it. I had royally screwed up. No proof, no plan, and no chance of winning my case.

Jack had warned me. Be careful, he’d said. I’d brushed it off, but something stuck with me. The way he’d said it, it was like he’d wanted to say more but something held him back.

Then—

“Psst.”

I looked up. Maggie, the waitress I had defended before, stood there, clutching a thick envelope. She shoved it into my hands. “I have an idea what’s going on, and I think this might help.”

I thanked her, stuffed the envelope in my pocket, and ran to Gianna's van.

In the passenger seat, with Gianna speeding down the expressway like we were in a high-stakes rom-com chase scene, I ripped the envelope open.

Inside? Credit card receipts. Transactions linked to the casino. One from the exact night I had been there. All with Carl's signature.

Not perfect. But maybe—just maybe—it was enough to prove reasonable doubt.

CUSTODY BATTLE, ROUND TWO

One week later, I sashayed into the courthouse, clutching my envelope like it was *the* golden ticket to my freedom.

My pulse pounded like a drum solo, and my magic—still *temperamental*—buzzed under my skin.

It needed to behave while we were in court. I had *one* shot to turn this case around. And I was *not* about to waste it.

Sliding into my seat at the long table, I pointedly ignored Carl's smug little smirk from across the aisle. He looked confident and serene, which meant he *still* thought he had me beat. Bless his delusional little heart.

The judge entered, her expression giving *nothing* away.

I straightened my spine, gripped the edge of the table, and got ready to *win*.

"Ms. Hexley," she said, folding her hands over her notes. "I trust you've brought something compelling today."

I stood, smoothing my blazer. "Yes, Your Honor." I placed the envelope on the table and slid it toward the bailiff. "These are credit card receipts from the night I went into the Crown Casino. Carl's credit card. He was there with his mistress. See.

Cosmopolitans and beer. Now, I think we can all agree that no one orders a cosmo and a beer at the same time, unless they're going to give one drink to someone else. And really, when was the last time any man ever ordered a pink drink?"

Carl stiffened. "I order cosmos all the time."

"Really?" I placed my hands on my hips. "Please tell the court what you like about it. The sweet splash of seven-up or the fruity taste of cherry juice."

"Cherry juice," he said. "I love anything with cherries."

"There, your honor. A cosmo doesn't have cherry juice in it."

The judge's brow wrinkled at Carl. "Didn't you tell the court you weren't in the casino when the photos of Bella were taken?"

Carl stammered.

"Mr. Tibbs. Should I call for a transcript?"

"Your honor. That evidence is circumstantial at best," he said smoothly, but there was a hint of tightness in his jaw now. "It doesn't prove that Bella *wasn't* gambling. It only proves that I was also at the casino."

"And that you lied," I said.

"Not if she . . . stole my credit card."

"Judge, under the circumstances, would it be alright if we asked Mr. Tibbs to produce his wallet?"

Carl's face turned red. Match point.

"Please hand over your wallet," she said.

Carl, a bead of sweat, sliding down his forehead, did as told.

The judge thumbed through the contents, pulled out a credit card and compared the number on it to the numbers on the receipts. When she finished, she fixed Carl with a stare that could have curdled milk. "Mr. Tibbs, this court is not fond of deception."

"Your Honor. He never did send money for the attorney or the private investigator."

"Is that true?" She tilted her head.

Carl adjusted his tie and sat back, his smile returning—forced,

now. "I only wanted to make sure there were no conflicts of interest."

The judge exhaled through her nose, not buying it for a second. She turned to me.

"Ms. Hexley, given the inconsistencies in Mr. Tibbs' claims, I find that his case against you is not as strong as he led this court to believe."

I held my breath.

"While I'm still concerned about potential alcohol abuse and gambling issues, I see no reason not to award you primary custody of your daughter—on a temporary basis."

YES.

Carl's expression darkened, but for once, he kept his mouth shut.

But then—

"However," the judge continued, "to prove to the court that you can be a reliable, responsible parent, you must provide proof of a stable residence and employment within the next thirty days. If you fail to do so, custody will be reviewed."

"What about spousal or child support?"

"Your Honor, you've seen my assets," Carl said.

And I realized then that I would not be awarded much and whatever the amount, Carl would never pay it.

FIVE MINUTES LATER

I stepped outside the courtroom, trying to let the victory sink in. I had Syd. For now.

Gianna threw her arms around me. "You did it!"

"Yeah." I exhaled. "I did." I glanced over my shoulder. Carl was still smirking. And that? Was not a good sign.

"Bella," Gianna whispered, her grip tightening on my arm. "What did he do?"

As I explained, the full weight of reality crashed in on me.

KELLY GARCIA

Carl had drained all our savings. I had no job and no money, and if that didn't change soon, I'd lose custody of Syd.

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU CARL, CALL A HALF-DEMON

For two weeks, I hustled.

I called every law firm I had ever worked with. My resume was solid—more than solid—but apparently, so was Carl's reach.

"Sorry, we just filled that position."

"Your credentials are fantastic, but we're looking for someone with more recent experience."

"You're married to Carl Tibbs? Yeah... that's going to be a problem."

I even tried a few spells to improve my luck, but... well. Let's just say the exploding toaster was a learning experience. (Mostly I learned that after being locked away for two decades, my magic held a grudge.)

That left me with one singular, terrible, wretched option. Paul. Half-demon. Bar owner. Manipulator. And, unfortunately, the only person willing to give me a paying job.

. . .

The Hung Jury still smelled like whiskey, poor judgement, and the kind of decisions that required both.

I took a steadying breath and stepped inside, projecting confidence. Competence. The absolute air of a woman *not* about to sign away her soul in a moment of desperation.

"I need to see Paul."

The bartender, a sleek, black-haired woman with a smirk, barely blinked. "Back room."

Of course, he was expecting me. He probably knew I'd end up right back here all along. And if I wasn't careful, I'd leave with a contract that came with fine print, an eternal clause, and the absolute worst cancellation policy.

I walked past the usual barflies, through a side door, and into what Paul called his "office." It was decorated like a *luxury villain lair*—dim lighting, black leather furniture, and a heavy mahogany table.

And there he was, lounging like he owned the place.

Which, he did, so, yeah.

Paul looked *delighted*. "I was wondering how long it would take you to come crawling."

I gritted my teeth. "I'm not crawling. I'm *negotiating*."

Paul smirked. "Semantics." He gestured toward a chair. "Sit."

I sat. Because I was here to make a deal, not to let him see how close I was to flipping the table and storming out.

Paul steepled his fingers, studying me like a cat watching a trapped mouse. "So, what brings you to my *humble* establishment?"

"You *know* why I'm here." I crossed my arms. "I need money. If you still need an attorney, I'm here to accept a job."

"The position has been filled." His smirk deepened. "Tell you what though, we can work out a loan."

"Why?" My pulse pounded.

He shrugged. "I like investing in smart women . . . it pays dividends."

"I'll only sign with clear terms," I said.

"Understood." And he also understood how to manipulate situations to his advantage, but what choice did I have?

I inhaled slowly. "How much?"

"How much do you need?"

"Enough to start up my own firm and pay for housing for me and Syd for at least six months."

"That can be arranged."

"Okay," I said, my insides trembling. "But no demon-binding. No shady contracts. No selling my soul."

Paul tapped his chin, pretending to consider. "No soul-selling?"

"No soul-selling."

"No deals signed in blood?"

"Absolutely not."

He sighed dramatically. "You take the fun out of everything."

With a flick of his fingers, a contract appeared on the table, thick parchment glowing under the low light. Because of *course* Paul wouldn't use normal paper.

I picked it up and read *every single word*.

And, to my surprise, it wasn't awful.

The sum? More than enough for us to get by. The legalese? Not *overtly* sinister. The terms? Fair.

And, despite my gut *screaming* that entering into any kind of a deal with a half-demon was a terrible idea, nothing in the contract required me to sell my soul, swear eternal fealty, or sacrifice my firstborn.

Paul leaned forward, watching me closely. "Do we have a deal or not, Ms. Hexley?"

I picked up the *very* expensive-looking pen. For Syd. For stability. For my future. I signed.

“Deal,” I said and signed.

PACKING UP THE PAST

Paul snapped his fingers, and like a well-rehearsed magic trick, one of his towering, bald, and alarmingly not-pretty goons appeared at the bar. He placed a credit card and a checkbook in front of me.

"You'll find your cash has already been deposited," Paul said smoothly.

I eyed the card with suspicion. "What's the catch?"

"No catch," he said. "Start your firm, find a place for you and Syd, and try not to buy out Neiman Marcus. And absolutely no gambling."

"Ha. Ha." I scowled. "Anything else?"

"I expect my first payment in one month." His lips curled.

It was weird. Too easy. But my magic wasn't screaming at me, and if I had walked into a trap, I figured it would be having a full meltdown.

I shoved the checkbook and credit card into my purse.

"Where you headed?"

"Home."

Paul's eyes narrowed. "Bella—"

"I know, I know." I stood up, rolling my shoulders. "Relax. I just need clothes for court."

And my grimoire.

Standing, I turned toward the door.

Paul sighed. "Unless you want to get into trouble, stay away from Carl."

I froze and looked over my shoulder. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

His answering smirk said it all. Paul was on Paul's side.

I pushed through the door, only to be ambushed by blinding sunlight—and a wall of solid man. Except, it wasn't a wall. It was him. He steadied me, surprisingly gentle for a man with rough hands.

"Whoa," Jack said in that voice that made my stomach flip.

He felt like trouble that was disguised with electric-blue eyes, two-day stubble, and an unreadable expression that probably saw more than it should.

"Came for a drink?" he said, in a low voice.

"I had some business." I tried to sound casual, even though he could probably hear my heart doing backflips. Not like my heart was backflipping.

He tilted his head and studied me. I felt he could actually see the choices I'd made, and he wasn't thrilled with them. "Careful," he whispered.

I held his gaze for a beat longer than I should have. "Always."

I turned to go, but felt the ghost of his concern clinging to me. And that's when it hit me: I didn't want to be careful around Jack. I wanted him to see me. And that was every bit as dangerous as any deal with Paul.

An hour later, I pulled up to my house and sat in the car, gripping the steering wheel like it was the last lifeline to my sanity. Technically, legally, per a real-life judge with a gavel and everything, I had every right to be here.

Did that mean Carl had done the bare minimum and left the

doors unlocked like a reasonable human being? Ha. That would require Carl to possess a soul.

I tried the front door. Locked. I jiggled the handle. Still locked. I rang the doorbell and waited, hands on my hips, tapping my foot like an *extremely* impatient UPS driver.

My magic *hummed* at my fingertips, practically begging me to set something on fire. (Metaphorically speaking. *Probably.*) But considering the last few times I'd tried to use magic, things had exploded, maybe burning down our house wasn't the *best* move.

I took a deep breath. No magic. Not here. Not now. It was too unreliable. I could *already* hear Gianna's voice in my head. *Be smart, Bella. No blowing up buildings.* Fine.

Instead, I knocked—*loudly* and *obnoxiously*—just in case Carl was home, lurking behind a curtain like the world's smuggest villain.

Nothing.

Suspicious. *Highly* suspicious.

I huffed out a breath and marched around the side of the house, checking every possible entrance. The back door? Locked. The laundry room door? Locked. The sliding glass doors? Triple locked.

I could either call the judge and tattle on Carl for ignoring the court order, which could take weeks, or channel my inner burglar and handle this myself.

One of those options was mature, responsible, and adult-like. The other was much more satisfying.

I went with a mix. I would break in and get our clothes and things we needed right away and then go to the judge for bigger things.

I jogged back to my car and popped the trunk, rifling through my emergency stash. No crowbars or lockpicking kits (because I was *mostly* a law-abiding citizen), but I did have a metal nail file, a hairpin, and a deep-seated sense of injustice.

I was just about to attempt the *Bella Hexley Special* (which was

definitely not a real lockpicking method but felt like it should be) when a shadow blocked my path.

I jumped back, my heart doing an Olympic-level sprint. Was it Carl? A nosy neighbor? The ghost of my last good decision?

The motion sensor light clicked on, and I groaned.

"Gianna," I hissed. "What are you doing here?"

She crossed her arms. "Oh, I don't know. Just checking in on my best friend, who I knew would absolutely try to break into her own house instead of calling the judge."

I sighed. "It's not breaking in if it's legally my house."

Gianna gave me a look. "Mmmhmm. You keep telling yourself that."

I scowled. "That's not even an insult."

She smirked, then pulled something from her pocket and waved it in front of me.

I blinked. "Is that... the Lishi CY24?"

"What are best friends for?" she said, grinning.

Less than a minute later, the lock clicked open.

I gaped. "Are you *kidding* me?"

She grinned, shoving the kit back into her pocket. "Sweet-heart, I can get into anything."

The living room was exactly as I left it—minus the fact that some of my things had been removed. No books, no blankets, not even my favorite ugly throw pillow.

Gianna nudged me. "You okay?"

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and forced a smile. "I just need to grab my stuff and get out of here before my blood pressure qualifies me for a medical study."

We moved fast—like, speed-packing-for-a-free-vacation fast. Suitcases filled up with clothes, books, some of Syd's favorite toys, and every single photo album. Priorities. Then I made a beeline for the basement, because my grimoire wasn't something I was leaving behind for Carl to auction off like a vintage golf club set.

Me? I had my friend, our daughters, and a shot at a fresh start.

I paused just long enough to toss a moldy wedge of Gorgonzola cheese into Carl's office closet.

Petty? Maybe.

Satisfying? Extremely.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

I spent the next couple of days scouring nearby towns for office space—somewhere close enough that I could work, and Syd could stay at her school. But everywhere I went, I ran into brochures, billboards, even coffee shop bulletin boards reminding me that staying local meant staying in direct competition with Carl or one of the associates in his firm.

Then one morning, without planning, I found myself cruising down the expressway at seventy miles per hour, heading straight for the city.

I found the house before I even realized I was looking for it. A stunning Victorian tucked into the heart of the Enchanted District. It had a wraparound porch, intricate gingerbread trim, and a turret that could've been stolen from a Gothic romance. It was just far enough from the suburbs to feel like a fresh start, but close enough that I didn't feel like I'd be uprooting everything.

The For Sale sign was faded, the lawn overgrown—but the house itself radiated grandeur. Two full stories of promise.

I stepped out of my car, and right on cue, a familiar minivan pulled in behind me. Gianna hopped out, grinning. "It's gorgeous.

Look at the size of this thing. There's gotta be a room for me, one for you, one for Syd, and one for Mia."

I blinked. "What?"

"The house," she said, nodding at the structure behind me.

"How did you even get here?"

"I drove."

Okay, but not the point. Most glams—nonmagicals—couldn't find the Enchanted District, let alone navigate inside it. Kept secret by several generous protection spells, the Enchanted District lets us witches live out in the open and remain in Chicago. Cauldrons, wand repair, flying lessons? Check. Michelin-starred restaurants, bookstores, and lakeside views? Also check.

But for glams, the magic made it nearly impossible to locate. They should get turned around, drive in circles, and wind up at a Starbucks five miles away wondering where the last twenty minutes went.

So Gianna showing up?

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Following you."

"But you don't belong here."

She raised a brow. "Rude."

"I mean—this place is for witches."

She spread her arms wide. "And apparently also me."

Before I could argue, a white sedan pulled up and parked at the curb. A woman stepped out—long red curls pinned back, gray slacks, pink button-down, and a bright smile.

"Can I help you?" she asked and pointed to her name on the For Sale sign. "I'm Allison Russell. Realtor." She beamed and extended her hand.

I shook it. Gianna jumped in to shake too.

"Would you like to see the inside?"

"Yes," Gianna blurted.

"Sure," I said, half a beat behind her.

Allison unlocked the front door. "Take your time. I'll be on the porch."

"Thanks," I said, and we stepped inside.

The foyer smelled like eco-friendly cleaner, polished wood, and old money. The ceilings had to be fifteen feet high, maybe twenty. A sweeping staircase curved up the wall, and a chandelier the size of a Smart Car dangled from above.

The kitchen was cozy white and mint green, with a retro fridge and stove that screamed 1950s chic. It was... idyllic.

"Are you getting the vibe I'm getting?" Gianna whispered.

"Totally." We headed upstairs.

The master suite was somehow exactly my style, like someone had decorated and furnished it for me, right down to the blue-and-cream palette. Two smaller bedrooms shared a Jack-and-Jill bath—perfect for the girls. At the far end of the hall, Gianna lay dramatically across a white four-poster in a sun-soaked room in apricots and cream.

"I love this place," she sighed. "I feel like I'm home. Don't you?"

"Yeah." It felt meant to be.

Downstairs, we wandered into the parlor—elegant but a little stiff with its jewel-toned couch and velvet drapes. But the bookshelves? Floor-to-ceiling, filled with leather-bound law books.

Gianna picked one up. "*Criminal Law and Magical Procedures*?" Then another. "*The Law of Lawyering as It Applies to Witches and Warlocks*. This library is wicked," she said. "Literally."

I grinned. I loved old books, and some of these books had to be ancient. Male witches hadn't been called warlocks for a good thirty years. I took the book from her and slipped it back into place.

A male's voice echoed through the room. "Utterly embarrassing."

We froze.

A translucent man in a three-piece suit materialized near the

fireplace, arms crossed, expression unimpressed. He had a handlebar mustache and a pocket watch, making him look very cartoon-villain chic.

"You two are grown women, not schoolgirls," he said.

Gianna grabbed my arm. "What is that?"

"Who. *I'm not a what.*" The ghost sighed. "Reginald P. Thistle-down, Esq., at your service. Or I would be if you'd help me find my cat. Have either of you seen Polly?"

We shook our heads.

"Then be useful and keep an eye out." With that, he vanished.

Seconds later, shimmering light sparkled above the bookshelf, coalescing into a translucent kitty with a Cheshire cat smile.

We stumbled back into the sunlight, blinking.

"It's something, isn't it?" Allison asked. "Legally, I have to disclose the reason it's... lingered on the market."

Here it came.

"It's haunted," she said.

"You mean by Reginald P. Thistledown, Esq." I pointed back inside.

"And his cat," Gianna added.

"Ah. You've met." Her face fell, as if she thought that would end any deal. Listlessly, she handed us brochures. "If you and your... wife"—ahem—"are interested, my number's in the bottom corner."

Gianna laced her fingers through mine. "Thanks. We'll think about it, won't we, dear?"

"Uh-huh. Thanks."

We left our cars in the driveway and strolled the neighborhood. We weren't seriously house hunting, but the place was perfect, so there was no reason not to have a look around. We passed a small wooden open-air structure with a huge sign that read *Coven Hill Farmer's Market*

Coven Hill. Things were starting to make sense.

We continued to a stretch of adorable downtown blocks: a bookstore, a craft shop, a couple of cafés.

"This place is adorable," Gianna said.

"I agree."

We popped into the Breezy Bean for lattes. At a small bistro table, she flipped through the brochure.

"How'd you even find this place?"

"I just... drove."

"It's fate," she said. "It's perfect."

"It's expensive," I said.

"We can split it, wife."

I laughed.

"I'm serious. I mean not about the wife part, obviously. But let's buy it. I could sell my townhouse. We could share expenses and child care. Why not? Our girls already act like sisters."

"Thanks Gianna, but I can't drag you into my mess."

"What mess?"

"If Carl finds out you're working with me, he'll make your life a living nightmare."

"I live for nightmares," she said.

"I don't know."

"Well, I do," she said. "You and I have weathered everything together. My bad perm, your unfortunate incident with false eyelashes."

"The stakes are higher here."

"Like when you went to the hospital. Who was there?"

"You," I said.

"Exactly, and when my husband died, who helped me keep it together?"

"Your parents. And like, a dozen siblings."

"I only have four. It feels like twelve." She smiled. "How many hours did you spend at my house when I needed you? You washed dishes, cared for Mia, made our meals, and I could barely get out of bed." She swiped a tear from her cheek. "You've had my

back since day one. And you're my best friend. I don't know how we'll make it work, but I'm with you, babe."

I sighed, something warm and aching settling in my chest. "You might hate me when this is over."

"Probably. But I'll get over it."

She stood to grab muffins—chocolate-chocolate chip for her, lemon poppy seed for me—and I skimmed the brochure.

If the house had been in the Enchanted District proper, a middle-aged Golden Girls-type of arrangement would never have worked. I was a witch. I had access to the Enchanted District. Gianna wasn't and didn't.

But the house was in Coven Hill, a cozy little city within a city. Actually more like a small town in the middle of a big suburb—but that's harder to explain on a map.

The area had been partitioned off as part of a pilot program called "the magical migration." As progress moved on, witches married glams, they started families, and needed to find housing in a place more inclusive than the typical Chicago suburb. Coven Hill was on the outskirts of the Enchanted District, and it enjoyed eased restriction. Importantly, magical law was practiced in the courts in the area. Witches were lawyers, and so were the judges, who were also trained to recognize juries who had been spelled or evidence that had been hexed.

Carl couldn't work in magical court.

But I could. It was perfect.

Gianna slid our muffins onto the table. "Well?"

"I think we should explore the area," I said. "You know. Get a feel for it before we make a decision."

"Suit yourself, but at the end of the day, I'm going to vote in favor of that home and Reggie the ghost."

THE VERDICT

A month later, I stood before the judge, this time with a job, a house, and—dare I say it—a fighting chance.

I smoothed down my blazer and gave Carl my best *I-know-you're-full-of-it* smile. He, of course, looked impeccable in his custom suit, smirking like he'd already won.

"Ms. Hexley," Judge M began, her no-nonsense gaze locked on me. "You were ordered to prove that you have stable employment and living arrangements suitable for your daughter. Have you done so?"

I cleared my throat, sliding a neatly printed document forward. "Your Honor, I have opened my own law firm."

"What?" Carl scoffed.

"Here your honor." I distributed photos of Hexley and Romano, Legal Associates.

"You and Gianna." Carl laughed.

I gave him a syrupy-sweet smile. "I'm a University of Chicago graduate, and she's a certified paralegal."

The judge glanced at it. "And your home?"

Another paper slid forward. "A fully furnished, five-bedroom Victorian."

Carl wasn't smirking anymore. "She must be living with someone else. She can't manage all that on her own!"

"As stipulated by the court," I said, flashing the expression I practiced to wear when I argued before the Supreme Court, "I'm providing stability for my child while ensuring we have someplace safe to stay and running my own business."

The judge nodded. Carl paled. The tide was shifting.

Carl scrambled to object. "Your Honor, this is absurd—"

Judge Morales held up a hand. "Mr. Tibbs, the court is satisfied with Ms. Hexley's employment and residence." She turned to me. "However, your ex-husband is entitled to visitation."

I barely resisted an eye roll. "Of course, Your Honor."

The judge tapped her pen. "Mr. Tibbs, given the concerning evidence regarding financial misrepresentation, I am ruling for visitation twice a week. Until further review."

Carl's face went red. His lawyer looked like he needed a drink.

I grinned. Finally. A win.

Judge Morales glanced between us. "I expect civility. Mr. Tibbs, do not attempt to interfere with Ms. Hexley's employment or financial recovery. And Ms. Hexley—" she sighed, "—try not to set anything on fire."

I cleared my throat. "Of course, Your Honor."

The gavel came down. Case closed.

Carl stormed out. I let myself breathe. I'd won. I had my daughter back.

I gathered my things, heart still pounding, and stepped outside—and saw a white truck idling at a stop sign. Jack. He caught my gaze through his window, nodded, and turned away from the courthouse.

It wasn't even a conversation, but it felt like he was watching. Possibly even waiting, and that thought made my skin hum, and my magic to zip around deep inside.

When we picked up the girls from camp and brought them to their new home, they bubbled over with excitement.

"This place is huge," Mia said.

Syd's eyes widened, and she scanned the ceiling. "Is it really haunted?"

Reginald P. Thistledown, Esq. materialized at the doorway, adjusting his ghostly cufflinks. "I find the term 'haunted' to be rather offensive. I prefer 'residentially tethered.'"

"Awesome." Sydney squeaked.

"We live in a haunted house." Mia jumped and squealed.

"Residentially tethered," Reginald repeated.

"This is the best place ever," Mia said.

"Let's go see if we can find more." Sydney and Mia's footsteps thundered through the house as they ran upstairs.

"Girls." Reginald glided after them. "If you are going to reside here, you must follow proper decorum."

"Proper what?" Syd asked.

"Decorum."

"Can I pick my own room?" Mia said.

"Absolutely not," Reginald said.

"Go for it," I said.

Syd and Mia squealed as they ran down the halls.

"Girls. Girls," Reginald cried following them. "No running in the halls."

They slammed a door.

"And no slamming the doors." A few seconds later, he returned to us, seemingly winded, which was a pretty cool effect for someone who didn't breathe.

"Madam, you must teach the girls to listen."

"They're excited," I said. "Give them a few minutes, and they will."

"Fine, but then you must explain. There will be no throwing books, no improper use of the sitting parlor, and absolutely no speaking to me before I've read the morning paper."

Gianna blinked. "You read the morning paper?"

Reginald sniffed. "My dear girl, I was one of the finest legal

minds of my generation, and I still find it important to stay current.”

“So noted. No talking to the ghost before his morning paper.”

“Please,” he said, “you can call me Reginald. The girls should refer to me as Mr. Thistledown.”

The End

EPILOGUE - THE DEMON CALLS

I was half asleep in my bed, a fire smoldering in the marble fireplace, when my phone rang.

I groaned, fumbling for it. "Hello?"

Paul's voice oozed amusement. "Well, well. Congratulations."

I flopped onto my back, pressing a pillow over my face. "Do you ever sleep?"

"Not when your payment is past due."

I bolted up to a sitting position and blinked. "Already?"

"Oh, darling. As of eight-twenty this morning."

"Uhm, well, I'll have that for you soon." I scooted up, propping myself against the headboard, already bracing for something ridiculous.

Paul chuckled. "I'll meet you at work. Say 9:00?"

The line clicked, then there was nothing but silence.

"Paul." I sucked in a breath.

Somewhere in the house, Reginald snorted. "So predictable. You make a deal with a demon, and you'll come to regret it."

I already did.

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