



Mare Fortune bounded down the stairs of the family home in her ragged blue running shorts just as the wind caught the front door and blew it open, sending coppery dust swirling in. She batted the dust away and looked out, but instead of Mrs Elder's beat-up front porch across the street, she saw golden sunshine beaming down on a red tiled roof and a fat laughing baby toddling in a dusty road while a tough dark-haired guy chased after it, laughing, too. She sucked in her breath and thought, *Crash*, and reached out into the sunlight for him, but he vanished, him and the baby and the red tiled roof and the sunshine, and it was just boring old Duckpond Street under cloudy skies in Salem's Fork, West Virginia, with Mrs Elder's peeling porch across the way, no coppery dust at all.

'Oh,' Mare said, feeling bereft and then feeling stupid for feeling bereft. *He left you, he's gone, it's been five years, you're over it.* She turned to close the heavy door, just as her oldest sister Dee took down their mother's jewelry chest from the mantel in the living room and, beyond her, their middle sister Lizzie bent over her metallurgy book at the battered dining room table, everything normal, nothing to worry about.

'Big storm coming in.' Mare yanked down on her tank top, shoving Crash and the whole vision thing out of her mind. 'Big old Beltane storm.' Her tiger-striped cat, Pywackt, padded down the narrow stairs with dignity, and she made kissing sounds at him, which he ignored. 'Lightning on the mountain just for us, Py, baby.'

‘Didn’t we throw those away?’ Dee said, cradling the brass-bound jewelry box in her slender arms as she frowned at Mare’s tattered shorts.

‘You tried,’ Mare said.

Dee nodded, looking distracted. ‘Come on,’ she said and turned toward the dining room, her gray wool suit perfectly fitted to her tiny waist. Mare stuck her tongue out at Dee’s auburn chignon and followed her into the dining room where ethereal Lizzie sat hunched over her book in her purple silk kimono, her blond curls tangled and blue eyes wide, dripping muffin butter onto her notebook as she ate.

Dee put the jewelry box on the table and said, ‘Mind the butter, Lizzie,’ and Lizzie turned another page, oblivious to Dee, the butter, and the wind whistling outside the open garden windows.

Mare plopped herself down at the table and looked at the muffins. ‘They’re all apple bran, Lizzie. That’s boring. I like blueberry and lemon poppy seed and—’

Lizzie moved her hand over the muffin basket, still not looking up from her book, and tendrils of violet smoke trailed from her fingertips and across the apple bran.

‘Thank you.’ Mare craned her neck to look into the basket and then went for a newly transformed blue-berry, but Dee moved the basket out of her reach.

‘First we vote.’ Dee straightened the jewelry box.

Lizzie looked up from her book. ‘Now?’

Crap, Mare thought, and looked longingly at the muffins. Lizzie had baked them so they were bound to be munchable.

‘Yes, now.’ Dee sat down at the head of the table. ‘If Mare’s going to college, she has to register now. Which means we have to decide if we move so she can go to a school we can afford. And which piece of Mother’s jewelry we sell to finance it. And I have to be at the bank in an hour, so we have to do it now.’

‘*Not now.*’ Mare stared at the blueberry muffin just out of her reach – *come here, damn it* – so that a couple of dust

motes lazily in the air sparked blue. 'Not now, not ever.' She lifted her chin, feeling the weight of the muffin in her mind, and it rose slowly until it hovered at eye level.

'Mare,' Dee said. '*Not in front of the window.*'

Mare grinned and crooked her finger, and the muffin floated toward her, sparking blue once or twice, like a misfiring muffler.

'Oh, dear.' Lizzie waved her hands a little, as if to warn Mare off, tendrils of violet smoking from her fingertips, and her butter knife turned into a rabbit.

Py sat up and took an interest.

'Easy there, Lizzie,' Mare said, staring cross-eyed at her muffin, now floating in front of her nose. 'You know Py and bunnies.'

Dee flushed. 'Put down the muffin, please, Mare. You know how important this vote is.'

'It's important to you,' Mare said, concentrating on keeping her muffin afloat. 'It's not important to me. As mistress of all I survey, I feel that college is, how can I put this? *Unnecessary.*' She scowled at Dee – why were they having this conversation again? She was twenty-three, if she didn't want to go to college, she wasn't going to go – and her annoyance broke her concentration and the muffin dropped and broke, and Mare said, '*Damn.*' She focused on another one, lemon poppyseed this time, making it rise from the muffin basket while Lizzie's butter-knife rabbit began to forage for crumbs on her notebook page.

At the end of the table, Py began to forage for the rabbit.

'You are not mistress of all you survey,' Dee said, exasperated, 'you're—'

'Queen of the Universe,' Mare said.

'—assistant manager of a Value Video!!'

Mare pulled the muffin toward her with her eyes. 'That's temporary. It's only a matter of time until I'm queen of the company.'

'I don't think Value Video!! has queens,' Dee said.

'I know, they have presidents. But when I get to the top, that's gonna change.'

'Well, to become queen of Value Video!! you have to go to college,' Dee opened the jewelry box. 'It was always Mother's dream that we'd all go, and it's your turn. It's past time for your turn. So we vote.'

'I don't want to,' Mare said. 'Lizzie doesn't want to vote, either, do you, Lizzie?'

Lizzie looked up. 'What?'

'It's time to vote,' Dee said gently.

'All right,' Lizzie said, her focus drifting again.

'*Lizzie!*' Mare shrieked, betrayed.

Lizzie jerked back, startled, and Mare saw her fright and said, 'Lizzie, it's okay, *it's okay*,' but it was too late. Lizzie was waving her hands, fingers trembling, as she warded off Mare's anger, purple tendrils of apology wafting over the table.

'Oh, hell' Mare said as lavender smoke rose around them.

Lizzie let the purple cloud engulf her. It was so quiet in there. Two more bunnies had popped up, depleting the knife count on the table and drawing Py closer. She blinked rapidly as the cloud grew thicker; it felt as if coppery dust had gotten into her eyes. For a moment she'd drifted away from her contentious sisters and their tiny living room in Salem's Fork, and she was floating, distant, in a castle in Spain, lying on her back, and someone was leaning over her, and it was . . .

'Lizzie, honey, take a breath,' Dee said, as the smoke cleared.

'I'm sorry,' Lizzie said to Mare, pulling herself together. 'I wasn't paying attention.'

'It's okay.' Mare floated a muffin over to her, dispersing more smoke with blue sparks. 'Dee's trying to get us to vote and I don't want to because I don't want to move again.'

Lizzie picked the muffin out of the air and sighed the rest of the purple away. Violet smoke, drifting around a castle in Spain, moody and romantic. *Stop it.* 'I'm not sure I want to, either.'

'We're *voting*,' Dee said sharply.

She startled the bunny and made it quiver, and Lizzie picked it up and petted it, trying not to quiver herself. They were fighting again. She hated the days when they voted. Three more bunnies had popped up on the table during the argument, and Lizzie wondered whether she could take them and sneak back into her room while Mare and Dee glared at each other.

'Then I vote we don't vote,' Mare said. 'It's my future, and I'll take care of it when it gets here.'

'And just how is refusing to plan for your future going to protect you from Xan the next time she finds us?' Dee said, goaded.

'What makes you think we need protection from her?' Mare said. 'She's our aunt. And she hasn't come after us in years. I'm not even sure she's the demon you make her out to be.' Dee began to protest and Mare overrode her. 'And anyway, I don't see the connection between going to college and escaping Xan. I don't see your college degree getting you much protection or anything else except stuck in that damn bank. At least I get to watch movies.'

'I wouldn't be stuck in that damn bank if you'd grow up and take care of yourself—' Dee stopped.

Oh, Dee. 'I'm sorry,' Lizzie said into the silence, trying to fight the sick feeling inside her. 'Dee, I'm sorry about the bunnies and I'm sorry about the bank. I'll get us money, I'm almost there, I've almost got it, I'll get us the money and you can quit and paint fulltime, I swear—'

'No, Lizzie, it's all right.' Dee patted Lizzie's hand. She reached out to Mare and Mare pulled back. 'Mare, I didn't mean it, I'm fine at the bank. We're fine. I just want you to have a future.'

‘I have a future.’ Mare focused on the muffin crumbs and they piled onto each other in lumpy parodies of muffins, little Frankencakes, misshapen and wrong.

That’s not how you make a muffin, Lizzie thought. Mare didn’t know how to make things. Making things took time and patience and thought and understanding.

Mare shook her head and let the muffins fall apart again. ‘You don’t need to work at the bank for me, Dee. I don’t want college.’

‘You haven’t even tried it,’ Dee protested.

Mare met her eyes. ‘College can’t teach what I need to know, Dee. I need to know how to use my power, we all do, we’re cramped here in this little house, hiding our powers from everybody, and they’re rotting inside us. The only one who can show us how is Xan.’

‘No,’ Dee said. ‘You don’t know her. You were too young when we ran, you don’t remember. She killed Mom and Dad, Mare. She could—’

‘She didn’t kill anybody.’ Mare flipped her hand as if she could flip the idea away. ‘They died of stupidity, just like the coroner said. You really have to get over that, Dee.’

Dee clenched her hands. ‘Trust me. She’s dangerous. Isn’t she, Lizzie?’

‘Yes,’ Lizzie said. *I can’t stand this*, she thought, picking up her book again.

‘At least Xan doesn’t hide who she is,’ Mare said. ‘At least Xan doesn’t tie her own hands and hide from the world.’

Dee straightened. ‘We are not going to Xan, and that’s final. Now it’s time to vote.’ She turned their mother’s jewelry box so they could see inside. ‘I vote yes. We use one of Mother’s necklaces to send Mare to college.’

‘Not the amethyst,’ Lizzie said from behind her book, and blinked as she felt that coppery dust in her eyes again. She could feel the satin sheets against her naked skin, the weight of the purple stone between her breasts, his breath warm and . . . She shook her head. *Not the amethyst*.

‘Not any of them,’ Mare said. ‘I vote no.’

‘Lizzie?’ Dee said to the cover of the metallurgy book.

Lizzie lowered the book. ‘You really don’t want to go to school?’ she asked Mare.

Mare rolled her eyes in exasperation. ‘No!’

Lizzie looked at Dee. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t think we should force . . .’ Dee scowled at her, her eyes stormy, and Lizzie sucked in her breath. ‘I abstain.’

Dee drew a deep, angry breath, and green fog began to rise, swirling around her.

‘Oh,’ Lizzie said faintly. ‘Oh, no . . .’

Well, that tears it, Dee thought, coughing green fog. It wasn’t bad enough that her head was about to explode, now the rest of her was, too. Her skin burned. Her heart pounded like a jackhammer. Her body was in the throes of cataclysmic change, and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it.

Couldn’t she just cry when she got upset like other women? Maybe throw a tantrum? Hell, even spinning muffins would be better. No, she had to be theatrical. But *God*, didn’t the two of them understand? Did they *want* to end up stuck here for the rest of their lives?

She didn’t. She wanted what she’d seen when that copper dust had blown through the door and into her eyes: a high, white studio in Montmartre and paint on a canvas, and a model she seemed to know. A breathtaking man who smiled as if he’d waited just for her . . .

‘Oh, *Mare*,’ Lizzie said.

‘I am *not* taking responsibility for this,’ Mare said.

Dee could feel her cells metamorphosing, twinkling into new patterns like the transporter beam in *Star Trek*. Her throat tightened, her vision sharpened, the colors faded. Damn it, this was the worst time for this to happen. It was tough enough to get Mare to take her seriously. It was even harder when she was—

Poof!

‘An owl!’ Lizzie said, as she waved away the green fog. ‘Oh, dear. Are you a screech owl?’

‘I’m a pissed-off big sister owl,’ Dee said, but it came out in screeches and chirps only her sisters could understand. She wasn’t sitting at the table anymore, she was on top of it, clad in cinnamon feathers and perched on a set of talons, frantically scrabbling for purchase in the nest of her collapsed clothing.

‘You sound like a screech owl.’ Mare stood up and shoved her chair under the table. ‘Not that you don’t most of the time anyway.’ She looked down at Dee, perplexed, as if she were ready to continue the fight but wasn’t sure how. ‘Listen, I think I’ll just go ahead and do my morning run now. You have a nice, uh, flight.’

She did *not* always screech.

‘You’re not going anywhere until I return to form,’ Dee screeched.

Mare bent down, so that they were eye to eye, which made Dee blink. ‘You look very Disney, all ruffled up like that. You should have a perky little musical number with the other forest creatures coming right up. Call me if the urge to sing sweeps over you.’

‘Go on and run like the dog you are,’ Dee said. ‘But I’ll be here when you—’

The doorbell rang.

For a second, they froze, looking at each other.

‘I’ll get the bunnies,’ Lizzie said.

‘I’ll check the window,’ Dee said.

‘I’ll get your clothes,’ Mare said and scooped up the nest out from under her.

Lizzie shoved the bunnies into the kitchen. Mare tossed Dee’s clothes into her room. Dee focused on the view out the front window, which revealed nothing more than the jungle of flowers that was their front yard and the picket fence that contained it.

‘One person at the door,’ she said. ‘No official vehicles at the gate.’

Lizzie sat back down and tried to look calm. Dee tried to look as normal as an owl could under the circumstances. They all nodded to each other, and Mare opened the door.

‘Good morning,’ a baritone voice said. ‘You must be Moira Mariposa Fortune.’

‘What’s it to you?’ Mare snapped, but Dee’s beak dropped open. That man. The one she’d just seen posing for her in Montmartre, there in the swirling dust: she swore it was him. Tall, lithe, and dark, his sable hair just a little too long, his leather jacket a little too worn, and his battered jeans a little too tight. In short, as wicked as sin. Especially when he smiled. When he smiled he was Dennis Quaid in Daniel Day-Lewis’s body. And in her fantasy he’d been smiling at *her*.

‘Well, if I’m right,’ he said with a big smile at Mare, ‘it means I can stop tramping across this town like a door-to-door salesman.’

‘Then move on, Willie Loman,’ Mare said and tried to shut the door.

The guy stuck his foot in her way. ‘If you’ll just listen . . .’

Dee’d listen, all right. She’d nestle against his neck and trill in his ear. She might be the oldest virgin in North America, but she wasn’t a dead virgin. And she could swear she knew what every inch of him looked like without those clothes.

‘Good heavens,’ Lizzie whispered from behind her. ‘You’re preening.’

Good heavens, she was. Fluffing her feathers and twitching her tail and tucking her head, as if the guy standing in the door was a big barn owl.

‘Did you know you have a screech owl on your table?’ he asked Mare.

‘No,’ Mare said. ‘I hadn’t noticed.’

‘Close the door, Mare,’ Dee begged.

It came out as a descending carillon of chirps. The guy on

the other side of the door lifted amazed eyebrows at her. 'And I think she likes me.'

Leave it to her to turn into an owl in front of an ornithologist. Who else would recognize the mating call of the Eastern screech owl?

'You think wrong,' Mare said to him, trying to close the door. 'And good-bye.'

'Good,' Dee said, panting. 'Get him out of here.'

It wasn't often a man got under her skin like this. She didn't allow it; it was too dangerous. She'd tried a few times, letting herself believe that the arousal from hormones would affect her differently than the agitation of anger or fear. She'd been wrong. She'd ended up sending two guys into therapy and another to an ashram in India. She could still hear him screaming as he ran into the night, her bra dangling from his hand after she'd shifted right there in the back seat of his Jeep. And not into anything as cute as an owl. No, she'd shifted into his mother. Just like she had with the other two guys. And she hadn't even liked their mothers.

She'd been celibate ever since, and assured herself she was happy that way. She didn't have a choice, after all. But for some reason, this man suddenly made her feel like a nun peering out the convent gate, longing for what she could never have.

Thank God he was leaving.

He kept his foot in the door. 'Wait,' he said. 'Please. I'm looking for Moira Mariposa, Elizabeth Alicia, and Deirdre Dolores Fortune. I'm researching a book.'

'Our name's O'Brien.' Mare stopped trying to kick his foot away. 'A book?'

He nodded. 'About Phil and Fiona Fortune. That's your real name, isn't it? You just took O'Brien as an alias when you moved here.'

Dee shut her eyes, suddenly sick. Oh, hell. Didn't it just figure? She couldn't even have a decent fantasy without it blowing up in her face.

‘No, our name really is O’Brien,’ Mare said. ‘And we don’t know anybody named Fortune. Would we lie to you?’

‘Since I got your alias from your parents’ old commune members, I’d say that’s a yes,’ he said, perfectly calm for all the disaster he was unleashing. ‘I was hoping to at least talk to your oldest sister, Deirdre.’

‘She doesn’t want to talk to you,’ Dee chirped. ‘Get rid of him.’

Her heart was slamming against her tiny chest. Her head threatened to explode again. It wasn’t fair. They’d run so far, hidden so well. And here was the man of her dreams – well, her dust – blithely threatening to do a great big Geraldo on them.

‘Thanks,’ Mare said, ‘but no thanks. Now if you’d move your foot so I could close this door—’

He just kept smiling. ‘That’s what I was told you’d say.’

‘Really?’ Mare asked. ‘And here I thought I was being delightfully unpredictable. Go away.’

‘Find out who told him who we are,’ Dee begged.

‘How about we start over?’ he asked, putting out a hand. ‘I’m Danny James. Like I said, I’m researching a book M’

He never had the chance to finish. Mare stomped on his toes, and when he winced and jerked his foot back, she slammed the door. Then she turned and looked at her sisters. ‘Well, this is another fine mess the ’rents have gotten us into.’

Dee was frantic. That was disaster standing on their front porch. How could Mare just dismiss it like an inconvenient Mormon on a mission? ‘We have to find out what’s going on,’ she said. Flapping her wings, she swooped over to perch on the living room windowsill.

‘I don’t have to find out,’ Mare said. ‘I don’t care. I got rid of him. He’s gone.’

‘I don’t have time,’ Lizzie said, picking up her book. ‘I have work to do. I’m really close to a breakthrough.’

‘Well, I have time.’ Dee stared out the front window

where she could see Danny James pause out by the curb. 'What if *she* sent him?'

'Who?' Mare asked.

Dee glared. 'Xan.'

Mare shook her head. 'She's your nightmare in the closet. Let it go, Dee.'

'Open the door.' Dee ruffled her feathers, preparing to fly. 'I'm going after him. Somebody has to keep an eye on him. I can do it without being caught.'

'You don't think he'll find an owl on his ass suspicious?' Mare asked.

'He'll never see me.'

'How about when you change back to human form in the middle of the sidewalk and you're naked?' Mare stopped and looked thoughtful. 'Actually, men usually don't ask questions about naked women, so you might get away with that one.'

Dee ruffled her feathers again. 'I have clothes stashed all over this town. Nobody's going to see me naked. And anyway, we have to know. I can at least see where he goes before I have to be at the bank.'

'Couldn't he just be what he says?' Lizzie asked. 'A book researcher?'

Dee inched her way to the edge of the table. 'Mother and Dad have been dead for twelve years. Why would anybody do a book now? And exactly who gave him our alias? We can't just assume Xan isn't behind this. The last time she came after us, we almost didn't get away in time. Open the door.'

Lizzie and Mare looked at each other.

'Maybe we should vote on it,' Mare said. 'Just because Dee is over twenty-eight, that doesn't mean she gets to choose her own life M'

'*MARE!*' Dee screeched, and Lizzie slipped around her and opened the front door.

Dee shoved off the dining room table and launched herself past them, out into the morning sky.

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Xantippe Fortune put aside her silver spell bowl, the coppery dust of the True Desire spell gleaming in the bottom, and then wiped her see glass clean while the short, dark-haired woman next to her looked defiant but nervous. Very nervous.

Good, Xan thought and settled into the silver brocade wing chair, the folds of her red gown falling smoothly over her wrists.

It was hell finding competent help for a supernatural power heist in the twenty-first century, especially in a place as small and clueless as Salem's Fork.

'All I did was sneeze,' Maxine said, smoothing down her polyester peasant blouse.

Fashion always tells, Xan thought. 'You sneezed on a magic glass, Maxine. Twice. The first one blew the front door wide open, which made the sisters close it instead of leaving it open to the screen door, which made it impossible to hear what was happening in the front of the house. The second sneeze almost made them close the garden windows, and if they had, I would have lost the dining room conversation. Because you were never taught to use a handkerchief, they think a hurricane is coming. Plus it's *unsanitary*. You just bought a diner, woman. I shudder to think what happens in your kitchen.'

'I'm going to call it Maxine's,' Maxine said in a dreamy voice.

'No, you are not,' Xan said. 'You are going to do nothing to call attention to yourself or to the fact that you have suddenly acquired enough money to buy a diner. Our arrangement was that I would give you the money to buy the diner in exchange for your *clandestine* services for the next three days, but you must not call attention to yourself. That's where the "clandestine" part comes in, Maxine. Until Monday, the Greasy Fork stays the Greasy Fork. Do you understand?'

‘There are gonna be *big changes*,’ Maxine said, looking off into the distance at her magnificent future.

‘*Maxine!*’ Xan snapped, and Maxine jerked to attention. ‘What are you going to do for the next three days?’

‘I’m gonna watch the Fortune sisters and not make any big changes because I’m clandestine,’ Maxine said.

‘And?’

‘And I’m gonna keep an eye on the three men who come for them.’

‘And?’

‘And I’m gonna tell you everything.’

Xan settled back into her wing chair again. ‘Good, Maxine.’

‘And then I’m gonna sell martinis at the Greasy Fork.’

‘*Maxine!*’

‘But not until Monday,’ Maxine said hurriedly.

When hunting season comes, Xan thought. *I’m going to turn you into a rabbit.* ‘Good, Maxine. You may go.’

Maxine looked around the room. ‘How do I—’

Xan waved her hand and Maxine vanished, only to reappear in the see glass, looking dizzy and slightly nauseated behind the Greasy Fork’s Dumpster.

I know how you feel, Xan thought. *The whole town makes me feel that way.*

Then she turned her attention back to the Fortune house, her heart beating a little faster now that her plan was in motion. She’d cast one spell and brought the sisters’ True Loves to Salem’s Fork, then cast another and the sisters had seen their True Desires. Now Danny James had met Dee and Dee was on her way after him. Lizzie was about to turn around and meet somebody amazing. And Mare—

‘Xantippe?’

Xan sat bolt upright as Maxine stood before her. ‘How the *hell* did you get back here?’

Maxine blinked. ‘The portal by the Dumpster was still open.’

Xan closed her eyes. If someone breathes in the natural psychic energy of a supernatural center like Salem's Fork her entire life, Xan told herself, even if she's a dolt like Maxine, she'll pick up some basic skills. 'Yes?'

'Danny James just checked into the Lighthouse Harry Lee Bed and Breakfast Inn.'

Xan nodded. 'Thank you.'

Maxine nodded back. 'About the martinis, I—'

'Maxine, do you have any idea how powerful I am?'

'No, Xantippe.'

Xan waved her hand and Maxine became a mouse, frozen in terror on the floor, the only part of her left that resembled Maxine her tiny horrified beady black eyes. Xan waited a beat and then waved her hand and Maxine stood before her again, shaking so hard, her head bobbed.

'Never forget, Maxine,' Xan said gently, 'that I turned you back by choice. The next time, I may leave you turned. And you might not be a mouse.'

Maxine sucked in a terrified breath.

'But of course, I won't,' Xan said. 'I need you, Maxine. You're *my friend*.' She smiled into Maxine's eyes, radiating hypnotic goodwill, and after a moment, Maxine relaxed.

'Good one,' Maxine said, still a little rocky.

'Go watch the girls.' Xan waved her hand and Maxine disappeared, only to reappear in the see glass, next to the Dumpster again, stumbling as she landed. 'Next time, it's *in* the Dumpster, Maxine,' Xan said to the glass, closed the portal, and sat back, catching sight of the sisters in another angle of the see glass: Dee flying away in the shape of an owl, and Lizzie and Mare in the doorway, talking.

Xan leaned closer to the glass and whispered, 'It'll be a fair trade, darlings, those spells were true,' and Lizzie looked up, startled, and said something to Mare, who looked stolid as ever, shaking her head and then pounding off down the pavement like the draft horse her nickname said she was.

They didn't know it, but they were lucky to have Xan

looking out for them, taking care of them, making them the deal of their lifetimes. It wasn't going to hurt, it truly wasn't, and they'd be better off in the end. She wouldn't miscalculate, nothing would go wrong this time, and if it did, it would hardly be her fault. No, they were very lucky.

Especially Lizzie, Xan thought, feeling a pang of jealousy as Lizzie turned to go inside.

Especially Lizzie . . .