

# SOPHIE'S BOMBE ALASKA

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ANDIE LOW





# SOPHIE'S BOMBE ALASKA

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# 1

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Sophie Cannon had been watching Dr. Marvin for exactly seven months, two weeks, and three days.

Not that she was counting.

Well, she was counting. She kept a small notebook tucked beneath her mattress with observations written in her cramped, careful handwriting. Things like: "October 14th. Dr. M took two slices of apple crumble. Smiled when eating. Good sign?" and "November 3rd. Dr. M's rabbit sneezed during the healing demonstration. Dr. M said, 'Bless you, Harold.'

Tonight, however, the notebook was staying under the mattress. Tonight was the night Sophie Cannon was finally going to speak to Dr. Marvin about something other than dessert.

She surveyed herself in the mirror that hung crookedly on her cottage wall. There was nothing she could do about her gray-streaked pixie cut, but the denim dress was new and unlike anything she'd ever worn.

Even better was that the color was an exact match for her eyes. Meanwhile, her nervous expression, although unfortunate, was also unavoidable.

From his apple crate in the corner, Stinky the hamster watched her with beady, judgmental eyes. His study of her was intense tonight. Perhaps more intense than usual, which was saying something.

"I know what you're thinking," Sophie said, pointing a finger at her familiar. "And you can keep your opinions to yourself."

Stinky twitched his whiskers but said nothing. As usual. That was a problem in their relationship. Despite being bonded as witch and familiar for nearly two years now, Sophie had never once heard Stinky's voice in her head.

Other witches chatted with their familiars constantly. Gwen and Jojo had full-blown arguments that could strip paint from walls. But Stinky just... sat there. Judging. Like a furry little gargoyle with impulse control issues.

"You could at least pretend to be supportive," Sophie muttered, turning back to the mirror to adjust a wayward strand of hair. "Other familiars cheer their witches on. Offer encouragement. Emotional support."

Stinky's whiskers twitched in what Sophie could only interpret as derision.

"Fine. Be that way."

The Bombe Alaska, now out of the freezer, sat in pride of place on her kitchen counter, a magnificent dome of meringue over layers of sponge and ice cream. It had taken her three attempts to get it right.

The first had collapsed. The second had been fine until Stinky had somehow gotten into the ice cream. The third was, if Sophie said so herself, a masterpiece.

Sophie might be rubbish at traditional spells. Her warming charms were lukewarm at best. Meanwhile, her levitation spells had a disturbing tendency to make things heavier rather than lighter. There was no avoiding the fact that this was essentially the opposite of levitation and probably deserved its own name. Gravitation spells, perhaps.

And the less said about the incident with the color-changing hex that had turned Stanley's beard purple for a month, the better. But she could bake. Baking was like magic, only it actually worked when she did it.

## *Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

Tonight's coven gathering was being held at Magic Beans, with the space magically enhanced to give everyone more elbow room. The other thing there'd be more of was witnesses when Sophie finally talked to Dr. Marvin.

Witnesses, or an audience for her humiliation. One of the two.

She'd planned it all out. She would wait until after the main course, when everyone was relaxed and full. She would present the Bombe Alaska with a flourish. Dr. Marvin would be impressed. He would say something like, "Sophie, this is extraordinary," and she would say, "Oh, it's nothing, really," and he would say, "No, truly, you have a gift," and she would say something witty and charming that she hadn't thought of yet but would definitely come to her at the moment.

It had to. The universe owed her one.

"Squeak."

Stinky had escaped his crate and was scaling the kitchen cabinets in a beeline for the Bombe Alaska.

"No! Stinky! We talked about this!"

She scooped him up just before his tiny paws touched the meringue. Stinky wriggled in protest, whiskers twitching indignantly, and made a sound that was less "squeak" and more "how dare you."

"You're coming with me tonight," said Sophie firmly. "I can't leave you here unsupervised. Not after the last time."

Last time, she'd come home to find Stinky had somehow gotten into her supply of gunpowder. She dabbled in small explosives as a hobby. Nothing serious, just the occasional firecracker.

It was while she was working on a Catherine wheel that he'd tracked black powder prints across every surface in the cottage. The walls. The ceiling. Her pillow, somehow. It had taken three days to clean up, and she still wasn't sure how he'd reached the light fixtures.

Stinky squeaked again, this time with what Sophie interpreted as resignation.

"That's more like it." She tucked him into the pocket of her lacy cardigan, then carefully lifted the Bombe Alaska. "Now, let's go make a good impression."

Magic Beans was already bustling when Sophie arrived. Long tables had been set up in a U-shape, draped with white cloths and decorated with floating candles. Gwen's contribution, which meant they stayed exactly where she'd put them.

No one, be they witch, warlock, or candle, would dare to disobey a command from Gwen Morris, the coven leader's daughter. The woman had once turned a warlock into a newt for using the wrong fork. That she'd turned him back eventually was considered an act of mercy.

Sophie spotted Dr. Marvin immediately. He was hard to miss, what with the top hat and the cape. Some of the younger coven members thought his outfit was old-fashioned, even ridiculous, but Sophie found it charming. There was something wonderfully theatrical about a man who committed so fully to an aesthetic.

He was currently in conversation with Calico Jack, who was resplendent in what appeared to be a new jacket. It was modern in cut but styled like something from his privateering days. All brass buttons and fine stitching.

Sophie hurried to the dessert table and set down her Bombe Alaska with trembling hands. It was still perfect. The meringue gleamed under the candlelight like a snow-capped mountain.

"That's quite the confection."

Sophie jumped so violently she nearly knocked the whole thing onto the floor. She turned to find Gwen peering at the Bombe Alaska with narrowed eyes.

"It's Bombe Alaska," Sophie managed. "Ice cream and sponge under the meringue."

"I know what a Bombe Alaska is, girl. I was eating them before you were born." Gwen leaned closer, sniffing. "Vanilla ice cream?"

"And raspberry. Layers."

"Hmph." This was high praise from Gwen, and Sophie felt a small flutter of hope in her chest.

In her pocket, Stinky stirred. Sophie pressed her hand against him, hoping he'd stay quiet. The last thing she needed was a hamster incident before she'd even talked to Dr. Marvin.

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## *Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

Dinner proceeded smoothly. Sophie picked at her food, too nervous to taste the excellent pot roast. She kept sneaking glances at Dr. Marvin, who was seated at the head table, occasionally visible between the floating candles.

He ate with precise, elegant movements. Even the way he buttered his bread was refined. Sophie buttered bread as if she were applying spackle to a wall, ensuring it reached the edges. Yet another item for the list of reasons this infatuation was doomed.

When he laughed at something Calico Jack said, Sophie felt her heart do a complicated little gymnastics routine in her chest.

"You're staring."

Sophie nearly choked on her water. As focused as she'd been on Dr. Marvin, she hadn't seen Stanley move from the head table. As confusing was why he'd chosen to reappear right next to her. As disquieting as his regarding her with a knowing look.

"I wasn't staring," she whispered furiously. "I was... observing. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Stanley's top lip twitched. "Still, we could do with a magical medic joining the coven. Perhaps you could seal the deal, so to speak."

Sophie's face went crimson. Was she really that obvious? "I don't know what you're—"

"Relax, Sophie. Your secret is safe with me." He paused. "Though perhaps not from Gwen. My daughter notices everything, and she has a strange aversion to happily ever after."

Wonderful. Just wonderful.

He drifted away, leaving Sophie more flustered than ever. In her pocket, Stinky had squirmed with increased urgency. She could feel his tiny claws scrabbling against the fabric.

"Not now," she hissed under her breath. "Please. Not now."

But Stinky had apparently decided that now was exactly the right time to make his presence known. His head popped out of her pocket, whiskers twitching, nose working overtime as he took in the feast.

Sophie grabbed him before he could make a break for the table, cupping him in her hands. He was warm and soft, and for once, he

didn't bite her. He just looked up at her with those beady little eyes, and for the first time, Sophie thought she saw something other than judgment in them.

Curiosity, maybe. Or trust.

"Dessert time!"

Stanley's announcement sent a ripple of anticipation through the room. Sophie's stomach clenched. This was it. Her moment.

She stilled, her hold on Stinky tightening. She had a problem. She couldn't present the Bombe Alaska while carrying a hamster. It would look ridiculous. Unprofessional. Dr. Marvin would never be impressed by a witch who couldn't even leave her familiar at home.

But she couldn't put Stinky back in her pocket since her plan had always been to remove her nana-style cardigan before she presented the Bombe Alaska to the head table.

Her familiar had already shown he didn't want to stay put in the pocket. And if he escaped while her hands were full, he'd make straight for the food, and there was no guarantee he wouldn't try to burrow into someone's trifle.

There was only one solution.

Sophie glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then quickly stuffed Stinky down the front of her dress. He squeaked in protest, but after a moment of wriggling, settled against her chest with what might have been a contented sigh.

And that's when Sophie felt it.

Warmth spread from where Stinky nestled against her heart. Not uncomfortable. The opposite, actually.

It was like being wrapped in a cozy blanket on a chilly night, like the first sip of hot cocoa, like coming home after a long journey.

For the first time since she'd been assigned Stinky as her familiar, Sophie felt connected to him. Really, truly connected. She could sense his small heartbeat, rapid but steady. She could feel his contentment, his trust, his.

"His hunger," she realized with a start. The little monster was still thinking about food, even now.

But underneath the hunger, there was something else. Affection.

### *Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

Loyalty. A bond that had apparently been waiting for exactly the right moment to snap into place.

Sophie didn't have time to process this development. The dessert parade had begun, and she needed to get her Bombe Alaska to the head table.

After draping her cardigan over the back of her chair, she collected her creation and weaved through the crowd. Dr. Marvin was watching the procession of sweets with interest. His rabbit, Harold, was also watching, though possibly for different reasons.

"That's a fine-looking Bombe Alaska," Dr. Marvin said as Sophie set it down in front of him. His voice was warm and cultured, exactly as she'd imagined it would be when he finally noticed her.

Sophie opened her mouth to say something witty, something charming, something that would make him see her as more than just the witch who served him pie at coven gatherings.

"It needs to be lit," she said instead. "The meringue. I need to... flambé it."

Flambé it. She'd said flambé. Like she was a fancy restaurant and not a witch who'd just shoved a hamster down her cleavage.

Brilliant, Sophie. Truly brilliant. Seven months of planning, and that was the best she could manage.

"Allow me," said Gwen, grabbing the nearest floating candle.

"No!" Sophie's voice came out sharper than intended. Every head at the table turned to look at her. Even Calico Jack paused mid-sip of his wine. "I mean, no, thank you. I'll do it myself. It's... traditional. For the baker to light their own Bombe Alaska."

Gwen raised an eyebrow before she thrust the candle back into its assigned spot. Her words when she said, "By all means," were equally sharp.

Sophie took a deep breath. This was fine. She could do this. She would cast a simple warming spell to ignite the brandy she'd drizzled over the meringue; it would flame up beautifully, everyone would applaud, and Dr. Marvin would be so impressed he'd have no choice but to fall madly in love with her.

Simple.

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She raised her hand, feeling the magic gather at her fingertips. At the same time, she felt Stinky stir against her chest.

Felt that new bond between them pulse with warmth.

She spoke the words of the warming spell.

And the world exploded.

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Only it wasn't the world that exploded. It was the Bombe Alaska. But at that moment, it certainly felt like the world.

Later, the coven members who'd been present would describe it in various ways. "Like a volcano," said a visiting warlock. "Like a small bomb," said Stanley, rather tactlessly. "Like the wrath of an angry god expressed through the medium of meringue," said Gwen, who had a tendency toward the dramatic.

Sophie herself would remember it as a moment of pure, crystalline horror. One second, the Bombe Alaska was sitting there, beautiful and perfect. Next, it was everywhere.

Molten meringue erupted like lava from a volcano, spraying in all directions with tremendous force. It hit the ceiling, the walls, the floor, and everything in between. It coated the table, the chairs, and every single person within a fifteen-foot radius.

It hit Dr. Marvin square in the face.

It hit Calico Jack's new jacket.

The silence that followed lasted approximately two seconds. Then came the screaming.

"My face!" someone wailed.

"It's burning!" cried another.

"My jacket!" This was Calico Jack, his voice reaching octaves Sophie hadn't known the male voice could achieve. "Look what she's done to my jacket!"

Sophie stood frozen in the disaster's epicenter, covered head to toe in meringue and ice cream and what might have been raspberry coulis but looked distressingly like blood. Stinky had emerged from her cleavage and was perched on her shoulder, licking meringue from his whiskers with gleeful satisfaction.

"Oh no," Sophie whispered. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

The healing witches sprang into action. There were three of them present tonight, and they moved through the crowd with practiced efficiency, their hands glowing with soothing magic as they treated burns and prevented scarring. Sophie watched in mounting horror as they worked.

She'd hurt people. Her stupid, useless magic had actually hurt people.

Dr. Marvin was wiping meringue from his eyes with a handkerchief, his magnificent eyebrows singed and smoking slightly. His top hat had been knocked askew, and Harold the rabbit had completed some magic of his own and disappeared.

Sophie wanted to sink through the floor. She wanted to disappear. She wanted to go back in time and never, ever suggest she bring a dessert to the coven gathering.

But she couldn't do any of those things. For one thing, her magic wasn't good enough. Certainly it wasn't up to cleaning this lot magically, so instead she did the only thing she could. She started helping in the old-fashioned way.

She fetched wet cloths from the kitchen. She helped the healing witches by holding things and staying out of the way. She apologized over and over to anyone who would listen and many who wouldn't.

"This is unacceptable." Gwen Morris's voice cut through the chaos like a blade. She'd escaped with only a small splatter on her sleeve, which she was examining with undisguised disgust. "I'd expect something like this from a child. Or a Normal."

She then fixed Sophie with a look that could have curdled milk.

### *Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

"Perhaps the coven should reconsider which applicants we accept. Not everyone is suited to the magical arts."

Sophie felt something shrivel inside her chest.

"Some people," Gwen continued, loud enough for half the room to hear, "should stick to baking. Without magic. In a kitchen far away from the rest of us."

As always, Gwen's words were cutting, but Sophie couldn't fault the witch for her summation of her skills. Magic Beans looked like a meringue bomb had gone off.

Which, essentially, it had. Several coven members were still being treated for minor burns. And Calico Jack was standing in the corner, his ruined jacket in his hands, looking like he might actually cry.

"My essence was in these threads," he was muttering to anyone who would listen. "Do you understand? I wove protective magic into every stitch. This jacket has saved my life three times. Three! And now look at it!"

"It's just a jacket, Jack," said Mac, who owned Magic Beans and clearly had a death wish.

"Just a jacket?" Calico Jack's voice hit a register that made dogs howl three streets away. "Just a jacket?! I spent six months enchanting this! Six months! Do you know how hard it is to bind protection spells to velvet?"

Mac wisely retreated to check on the coffee machine.

Sophie edged away from the dispute, all while adding "mortal enemy of Calico Jack" to her growing list of problems. As focused as she was on this task, she nearly walked straight into Dr. Marvin.

He was holding his upturned top hat in his hands, his eyebrows looking rather worse for wear, but his expression was more bemused than angry.

"I'm so sorry," Sophie blurted. "I'm so, so sorry. I don't know what happened. I just cast a simple warming spell, and I don't know why it. I mean, my magic isn't usually. Well, actually, my magic is usually terrible, but not like this, not explosively terrible, just sort of pathetically terrible,

and I never meant to. Your eyebrows. oh goddess, your eyebrows, I'm so—"

"Miss Cannon." Dr. Marvin's voice cut through her babbling. "Please. Breathe."

Sophie breathed.

"These things happen," he said, with a kindness that made her want to cry. "Magic is unpredictable. Even the best of us have accidents."

"But your eyebrows..."

He touched them gingerly. "They'll grow back. And I've been meaning to trim them for ages. Nurse Hendricks has been telling me they were getting too bushy."

Despite everything, Sophie felt a tiny flutter of hope. He wasn't angry. He was being kind, understanding, even. This was her chance.

She could still salvage something from this disaster. She could apologize properly, maybe make a joke about it, show him she was more than just a walking catastrophe.

She opened her mouth to say something, only she wasn't sure what. But surely her brain would cooperate just this once.

That's when the top hat twitched. Harold's ears, which had been flat against his head, suddenly perked up. His pink nose emerged from the hat, whiskers quivering. Dr. Marvin tilted his head slightly, his expression shifting from kindly concern to focused attention.

Sophie recognized that look. It was the look she got when Stinky was communicating with her. A familiar speaking to their witch.

"I see," Dr. Marvin said to the rabbit. "How serious?"

Harold's nose twitched rapidly.

"Right. Of course. I'll leave immediately."

He turned back to Sophie, and her heart sank as she saw the apology already forming on his face.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he said. "I'm needed elsewhere. Magical emergency. You understand."

"I... yes. Of course."

He was already making moves to leave. "It was a lovely Bombe Alaska," he called over his shoulder. "Before the, ah, incident. I'm sure the next one will be splendid."

*Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

And then he was gone in a flash of magic that smelled vaguely of burned lettuce.

Sophie stood there, covered in meringue, surrounded by chaos, looking at the spot where the man she'd spent seven months working up the courage to talk to had stood.

"I'm so sorry about your eyebrows," she whispered to the empty air. On her shoulder, Stinky squeaked.

But for the first time, Sophie heard him inside her head. Clear as a bell, in a voice that was surprisingly deep for such a small creature.

"Well. That was a catastrophe of truly spectacular proportions. I'm almost impressed. Almost."

Sophie was too stunned to respond. Stinky continued.

"I mean, I've seen you mess things up before. Regularly. But this? This was art. Terrible, meringue-coated art."

The cleanup took over an hour, even with magic in the mix.

Sophie stayed until the very end, partly out of guilt and partly because Gwen had made a pointed comment about "those who make messes cleaning them up." She scrubbed meringue off the ceiling the old-fashioned way, not daring to risk her magic again. She mopped floors. She apologized to Mac approximately forty-seven times until he begged her to stop.

By the time the tables were restored to their usual positions and the chairs wiped clean, Sophie's arms ached and her dignity was in tatters.

The coven members had disappeared in ones and twos, some offering Sophie sympathetic glances, others, like Calico Jack, pointedly refusing to look at her at all. He was still clutching his jacket, still muttering about essences and meringue stains that wouldn't come out no matter how much magic he threw at them.

As he passed Sophie, Calico Jack finally looked at her. His expression was one that told her he wasn't letting this go as easily as Dr. Marvin.

"Boom-Boom," he said, glaring at her with an intensity that suggested he was imagining creative ways to dispose of her body.

"I'm sorry?"

"That's what I'm going to call you from now on. Boom-Boom." He held up the ruined jacket, displaying a stubborn meringue stain that seemed to glow faintly in the lamplight. Almost mockingly. "Six months of enchantment work. Ruined. By dessert." His eye twitched. "I want to make sure you never forget this."

"I really am terribly—"

"Save it." He thrust the jacket toward her face. "Look at it. Look at what you've done. This stain? It's never coming out. I've already tried three cleaning spells. It just glows brighter."

Sophie looked. He was right, the stain was glowing brighter. Almost pulsing.

"I think the meringue might have bonded with the protection spells," she offered weakly.

Calico Jack made a sound like a teakettle reaching boiling point, and not something Sophie would have associated with the scourge of the Caribbean.

He then disappeared as Dr. Marvin had earlier, although this time the scent left behind wasn't of burned lettuce, but rather scorched velvet.

Sophie sank into a chair, exhausted and humiliated. Stinky had retreated to her pocket at some point, but she could feel him there, a warm weight against her hip.

"Boom-Boom," she said to the empty room. "That's me now. Boom-Boom."

"I've heard worse names," came Stinky's voice in her head. "At least it's memorable."

Sophie laughed despite herself. It was slightly hysterical, and it turned into tears halfway through, but it was something.

"You can talk," she said, pulling him out of her pocket and holding him up to eye level. "You can actually talk. All this time, and now, on tonight of all nights, you decide to speak to me."

"I could always talk. You just couldn't hear me. Not until tonight."

"The bond," Sophie realized. "When I stuffed you down my... when you were close to my heart. That's when I felt it. The connection."

"Took you long enough," Stinky said, but there was no real criticism in his tone. If anything, he sounded almost fond. "I've been trying to get through to you for two years. You just weren't listening."

"I thought you hated me."

"Hate you? Don't flatter yourself. Hating you would require emotional investment." He scratched behind one ear with his back leg. "I thought you were hopeless. Still do. But you're my hopeless witch, and I suppose that means something. Though what, I haven't decided yet."

Sophie set him down on the table and stared at him. Her familiar. Her actual, proper, communicating familiar. It was the one good thing to come out of this catastrophic evening.

"Was it you?" she asked suddenly. "The explosion. My magic is rubbish, you know that. A simple warming spell shouldn't have been able to do... that."

Stinky had the grace to look abashed. Which, for him, meant his whiskers drooped approximately two millimeters. "When a witch and her familiar bond properly, it can amplify the witch's magic. Bucket loads. You weren't prepared for it." He paused. "Neither was I, if I'm being honest. I was expecting a modest boost, not... that."

"But my magic is rubbish. You've said so yourself. Repeatedly."

"Your precision is rubbish," Stinky corrected. "Your aptitude for delicate spellwork is nonexistent. But raw power? That you have in spades. You just never had the control to channel it properly." His whiskers twitched. "Think of it like... you've been trying to thread a needle with hands made for wielding hammers. The bond didn't make you better at threading needles. It just gave you a much bigger hammer."

"So my warming spell—"

"Had the power of a small inferno behind it, yes. Focused through your complete inability to do anything gently."

"That being an explosion that could be seen from space?"

"I don't think it was visible from space."

"Stinky."

"Fine. Possibly low orbit."

"So my terrible warming spell became..."

"It was a rather impressive incendiary event. Yes."

Sophie buried her face in her hands. "I'm never going to live this down. Dr. Marvin's eyebrows. Calico Jack's jacket. Everyone's faces when the meringue hit them. I can never show my face at a coven gathering again."

"That seems dramatic."

"I set fire to the most eligible magical medic in Seattle. I'm dramatic now. I've earned it."

Stinky was quiet for a moment. Then, in a gentler tone than Sophie had yet heard from him: "The good doctor didn't seem angry. Surprised, certainly. A bit singed. But not angry."

"He was being polite. He's a polite person. A good bedside manner is mandatory for medics." She slumped further in her chair. "He probably went home and had a good laugh with Harold about the ridiculous witch who blew up her own dessert."

Following a heavy sigh, Sophie dropped her voice before continuing, "Remember that pathetic creature who set my eyebrows on fire, Harold? Let's never speak to her again."

"You're spiraling."

"I'm allowed to spiral."

"I don't think so," said Stinky, now sounding supremely confident.

"How would you know?"

Stinky's whiskers twitched. "Harold and I caught up about it. He says Dr. Marvin is lonely." After this bombshell, he continued. "He buries himself in work because he has trouble connecting with people."

Sophie looked up. "Really? When did you and Harold have time to chat? You can't even leave the boat without me."

"Familiars have their ways." Stinky's tone was decidedly smug. "You'd be amazed what gets discussed while you lot are busy making awkward small talk. Harold and I have had many illuminating conversations. Across rooms. Through walls."

"You've been gossiping about me? With Dr. Marvin's rabbit?"

"We prefer 'exchanging intelligence', and not just about you. Harold's been complaining about Marvin's romantic hopelessness for months. Apparently, the man rehearses conversations with you in front

of the mirror and then chickens out every time he sees you at a gathering."

Sophie stared at him. "You're making that up."

"I am not. Harold does an excellent impression. Well, as excellent as a rabbit can manage."

"And Harold says Dr. Marvin has mentioned 'the quiet witch with the excellent pie' more than once. Actually, on several occasions."

Despite everything, the humiliation, the disaster, the new and terrible nickname, Sophie felt something warm kindle in her chest. "He said that? About my pie?"

"Focus, Sophie. Your obsession with baked goods is part of what got us into this mess."

"The pie isn't what exploded!"

"No, but your desperate need to impress him with dessert led to you casting a spell you couldn't control while I was wedged between your—"

"We don't need to revisit the details!"

Stinky sighed. Could hamsters sigh? Apparently so. "My point is, tonight was a disaster, but it doesn't have to be the end. You could talk to him. At the next gathering. Or the one after that. Or you could find some other excuse to cross paths."

But Sophie was already shaking her head. "I can't. Not after this. Every time he sees me, he'll remember his singed eyebrows. Every time he eats dessert, he'll duck for cover. I've ruined any chance I might have had."

"Sophie..."

"No." She stood tall and tucked Stinky down the front of her blouse, no longer caring if anyone saw her. He settled against her heart with a contented sigh, the little traitor. "It's done. I'll just... I'll focus on other things. My baking. My explosives."

"Your explosives?"

"The firecrackers I make. Remember? You tracked gunpowder all over my cottage last month."

Stinky was quiet for a moment. Then: "That wasn't actually gunpowder. It was sulfur, and it was delicious, by the way."

"You ate my sulfur?"

"I'm a hamster. We eat things. It's what we do."

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Sophie couldn't help it. She laughed again. And this time, it didn't turn into tears. It was just a laugh, small and tired but real.

"We make quite a pair, don't we?" she said.

"We do," Stinky agreed. "Boom-Boom and her sulfur-eating hamster. The coven won't know what hit them now we've finally connected."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

## 3

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In the weeks that followed, Sophie discovered something interesting about her newly amplified magic. It was still rubbish at traditional spells.

Her warming charms remained lukewarm. Her levitation spells still made things heavier. The color-changing hex, when she attempted it again on an old cushion, turned it a shade of purple that was even more aggressive than the one she'd accidentally inflicted on Stanley's beard.

But when she channeled her magic into her little homemade firecrackers and sparklers, the results were spectacular.

The first time it happened, she was in her kitchen, mixing a small batch of what should have been basic firework powder. Stinky was watching from his crate, offering unhelpful commentary about her technique.

"You're stirring too fast," he said. "The sulfur won't bind properly."

"The sulfur is fine. I know what I'm doing."

"Do you, though? Because the evidence suggests otherwise. Exhibit A: the explosive Bombe Alaska. Exhibit B: Stanley's beard. Exhibit C: the time you tried to light a candle and set fire to the curtains. Shall I continue? I have a list."

"You have a list?"

"I've been compiling it for two years. It's quite extensive."

Sophie ignored him and added a pinch of powdered copper for color. Blue. Dr. Marvin had been wearing a blue waistcoat the night of the disaster. Not that she was thinking about him. She was absolutely not thinking about him.

"You're thinking about him," Stinky said.

"I am not."

"Your left eye twitches when you lie. It's twitching now."

"Maybe I have something in it."

"You don't."

Sophie added more copper than strictly necessary. The blue would be very blue. Aggressive blue. Defiantly blue.

She felt the magic gather without consciously calling it. That bond with Stinky, the one that had formed so catastrophically, seemed to pulse in response to her concentration. The powder in her bowl glowed faintly.

"Sophie," Stinky said, his voice carrying a warning note. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I'm not doing anything. I'm just mixing..."

The glow intensified. The powder lifted from the bowl in a swirling column, sparkling with inner light. It was beautiful, actually. Like a tiny galaxy forming in her kitchen.

Then it exploded.

But not like the Bombe Alaska. This explosion was controlled when it shot upward. It hit the ceiling and burst into a shower of blue and silver sparks that rained down harmlessly, fading before they touched anything.

Sophie stared at the empty bowl, then at Stinky, and finally at the scorch mark on her ceiling.

"Did I just..."

"Yes," Stinky said. "You did."

"But that was... that was actually..."

"Impressive? Yes. Dangerous? Also yes. But mostly impressive." Stinky's whiskers twitched. "I'm forced to admit I may have underestimated you. Not by much. But somewhat."

*Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

"Was that a compliment?"

"Don't get used to it. I'm sure you'll do something idiotic soon enough to restore the natural order."

Sophie sat down heavily, her mind racing. Her magic didn't work for normal spells. Those required finesse, precision, a light touch. Everything she lacked.

But explosives? Explosives required power. Force. The ability to channel enormous energy into a single spectacular moment.

Everything she apparently had in abundance.

She wasn't a witch who was bad at magic. She was a witch who'd been trying to perfect the wrong sort of magic all along.

Over the following weeks, she experimented carefully. She created fireworks that wrote words in the sky. She made sparklers that burned in colors not found in nature. She developed what she privately called "bath bombs," though you definitely wouldn't want to put them in your tub.

They looked innocent enough. All fizz and pleasant smells, like something you'd buy at a fancy soap shop. The lavender ones even had little dried flowers pressed into them.

But drop one, and you'd better run, because the bang that followed could take out a wall.

"You've created weaponized self-care products," Stinky observed, watching her arrange a batch in a basket that looked like it belonged at a farmer's market. "I'm genuinely proud. And slightly terrified."

"The trick is in the potassium nitrate to chamomile ratio."

"I don't know what that means, but I'm choosing to be impressed."

She kept it quiet at first, embarrassed by this strange new talent. But word got out eventually. Word always got out in a coven, leading to Stanley knocking on her door with a request.

"The coven needs someone who can handle... delicate situations," he said, looking uncomfortable. "Situations that might require a bit of a bang."

"Are you asking me to blow things up for the coven?"

"I'm asking if you'd be willing to serve as our... specialist. In explosive matters."

Sophie considered this. On one hand, it was a recognition of her abilities, such as they were. It was essentially formalizing her role as the coven's demolition expert, which wasn't exactly the reputation she'd hoped to cultivate.

But then again, what had hoping ever gotten her? She'd hoped to impress Dr. Marvin, and she'd set fire to his eyebrows. Maybe it was time to stop hoping and start accepting what she was actually good at.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

Stanley looked relieved. "Excellent. We'll call you when we need you." He paused at the door. "And Sophie? Your other skills—the steady hands, the patience, the willingness to sit with someone through the long hours—those matter too. The coven may have need of someone who can both protect a patient and care for them." He frowned before carrying on. "Sadly, I think that time may soon be upon us."

It was an odd thing to say, and Sophie filed it away without fully understanding it.

"Um, Stanley. Just promise me one thing."

"What's that, my dear?"

"When the time comes, don't tell Gwen it was your idea. I'd rather she thought I had volunteered. It'll annoy her more."

Stanley's top lip twitched. It might have been a smile. "I knew I liked you, Sophie."

And so began Sophie's career as the coven's explosives expert. She trained herself rigorously, learning control and precision. Her devices became more sophisticated, more reliable, and more powerful.

She traded her floral dresses for practical clothing, started carrying her supplies in an innocent-looking knitting bag, and tried very hard not to think about Dr. Marvin.

She didn't always succeed.

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Months passed, during which Sophie's cottage was slowly filled with explosive components, neatly labeled and carefully stored. Stinky

developed a taste for the more exotic ingredients Sophie kept on hand, and a smug sense of satisfaction at their newfound partnership.

She saw Dr. Marvin occasionally at coven gatherings she couldn't avoid. His eyebrows had grown back nicely. He still wore the top hat and cape. Harold the rabbit still peeked out from the hat, ears twitching.

They exchanged pleasantries, but nothing more. Sophie couldn't bring herself to say anything beyond "lovely evening" and "would you like another slice of pie." The mortification of the Bombe Alaska incident had shown no signs of fading.

Part of her even knew it would become coven legend, because screwups of such epic proportions always did. Hadn't she gossiped about similar incidents?

Calico Jack never let her forget it, either. "Boom-Boom" became her permanent nickname, delivered with a smirk every time they crossed paths.

The shift from mortal enemy to grudging tolerance happened about three months in, when Sophie's particular skills proved useful in a coven matter involving a stubborn ward that wouldn't come down by conventional means.

"I hate to admit it," Calico Jack had said, watching the smoking remains of the ward dissipate, "but that was almost impressive."

"Almost?"

"Don't push it, Boom-Boom." But there was less venom in the nickname now. Almost something like respect. "You still owe me a jacket."

"I'll add it to my list."

"You have a list?"

"Stinky's been teaching me. Apparently they're useful for keeping track of grudges."

Calico Jack had laughed at that, and while they'd never be friends, they'd reached something like a truce. He still called her Boom-Boom. She still winced every time. But it had become less of an insult and more of an acknowledgment.

Sophie had covered his special jacket in molten meringue. But she'd also blown up a ward that three senior witches couldn't crack.

Swings and roundabouts, as her mother used to say.

The ward incident wasn't her only success. Then there was that time a Pukwudgie had taken up residence in a culvert at the end of the pier and refused all conventional eviction methods. Sophie had crafted a series of tiny flash bombs that didn't harm the creature but made its hiding spot so thoroughly unpleasant that it moved three states over.

"That was actually clever," Gwen had begrudgingly admitted afterward, which from her was practically a standing ovation.

And then there was the night a group of young witches got trapped in an abandoned warehouse thanks to a booby-trapped and hexed doorway. Sophie had arrived with her knitting bag, assessed the situation, and blown a perfectly Sophie-sized hole in the wall in under three minutes.

"You saved us," one of the young witches had said, eyes wide.

Sophie had shrugged, uncomfortable with the gratitude. "I just made a hole."

"You made a hole when no one else could. That's not nothing."

It wasn't nothing. Sophie understood that.

And somewhere along the way, Sophie stopped minding.

Not the nickname. She'd never love being called Boom-Boom. But the rest of it? The knitting bag full of carefully crafted devices, the respect she'd earned one explosion at a time, the knowledge that when the coven needed something blown up, they called her?

That wasn't a consolation prize. That was a life.

She'd spent years believing she was a failed witch. Rubbish at spells, hopeless at magic, a walking disaster in a floral dress. But she wasn't a failed witch. She was a witch who'd found her specialty in the most unexpected place.

And if she never got her fairy-tale romance with Dr. Marvin? Well. She had Stinky. She had her explosives. She had a cottage full of carefully labeled components and a coven that needed her.

That was enough. It had to be enough.

It was enough.

Until the day everything changed.

## *Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

It started with a nasty hex.

With the coven's healing witch unavailable, it had fallen to Sophie to look after this very special patient and a man who'd only ever been kind to her. That to one side, the coven needed someone who could take care of the patient in more ways than one.

Yes, there were cold compresses and the like, but if those responsible for the hex turned up unannounced, she could hit them with something more explosive than a full bedpan.

It was also something that meant Sophie worked alongside Dr. Marvin for the first time since she'd relieved him of his eyebrows.

The first few days were agony. She could barely meet his eyes, convinced he was thinking about meringue every time he looked at her. She stuck to monosyllables. Yes, Doctor. No, Doctor. I'll fetch more bandages, Doctor.

"You know you can call me Marvin," he said on the third night, as they sat watching their patient for any sign of improvement. "I think we're past formalities at this point. You have seen me without eyebrows, after all."

Sophie made a sound that might have been a laugh or might have been a small animal dying. She wasn't sure which.

But emergencies have a way of stripping away pretense. When you're fighting to save someone's life, there's no room for embarrassment. No space for months-old mortification.

Somewhere between sleepless nights and pots of coffee, Sophie stopped flinching every time Dr. Marvin addressed her. At one point, she even made a joke. It was a terrible one, but he laughed all the same.

Actually laughed. Not politely. Actually.

"I never thought it was your fault, you know," he said one quiet evening. "The Bombe Alaska incident."

Sophie nearly dropped her coffee. "You didn't?"

"Familiar bonds are notoriously unpredictable. Any competent magical practitioner knows that." He fiddled with Harold's ears. The rabbit, half-asleep in his lap, twitched contentedly. "I thought you were rather brave, actually. Coming back to gatherings after that. Facing everyone."

"I wasn't brave. I was too stubborn to let Calico Jack win."

"That's a kind of bravery." He smiled at her, not the polite professional smile she'd grown used to, but something warmer. "The best kind, arguably."

Sophie felt something flutter in her chest that had nothing to do with Stinky, who was snoring in her cleavage and doubtless dreaming about sulfur.

In her head, his voice emerged, muzzy with sleep: "He's liked you for months, you know. Harold told me weeks ago. Said the old fool's been mooning over 'the brave witch with the excellent pie' since that night."

"You knew? All these months?" said Sophie telepathically to avoid her words being overheard by Marvin.

"You didn't ask," he said, followed by a hamster yawn. "Besides, watching you pine was entertaining. Harold and I had a running bet on which of you would crack first."

"A bet?"

"I wagered on you. Harold backed Marvin. Looks like we both lose, with you both cracking at the same time." A pause. "Or perhaps we both win. Depends on how you look at it."

Across the room, Harold's ears twitched. Sophie could have sworn the rabbit winked.

Sophie should have been furious. She was furious. But she was also smiling.

"Would you—" Dr. Marvin started, then stopped. Cleared his throat. For the first time since she'd known him, he looked almost nervous. "That is, when this is all over. When our patient is recovered. May I take you to dinner? Somewhere without Bombe Alaska on the menu?"

"I'd like that," Sophie said. "I'd like that very much."

Some things, it turned out, were worth waiting for.

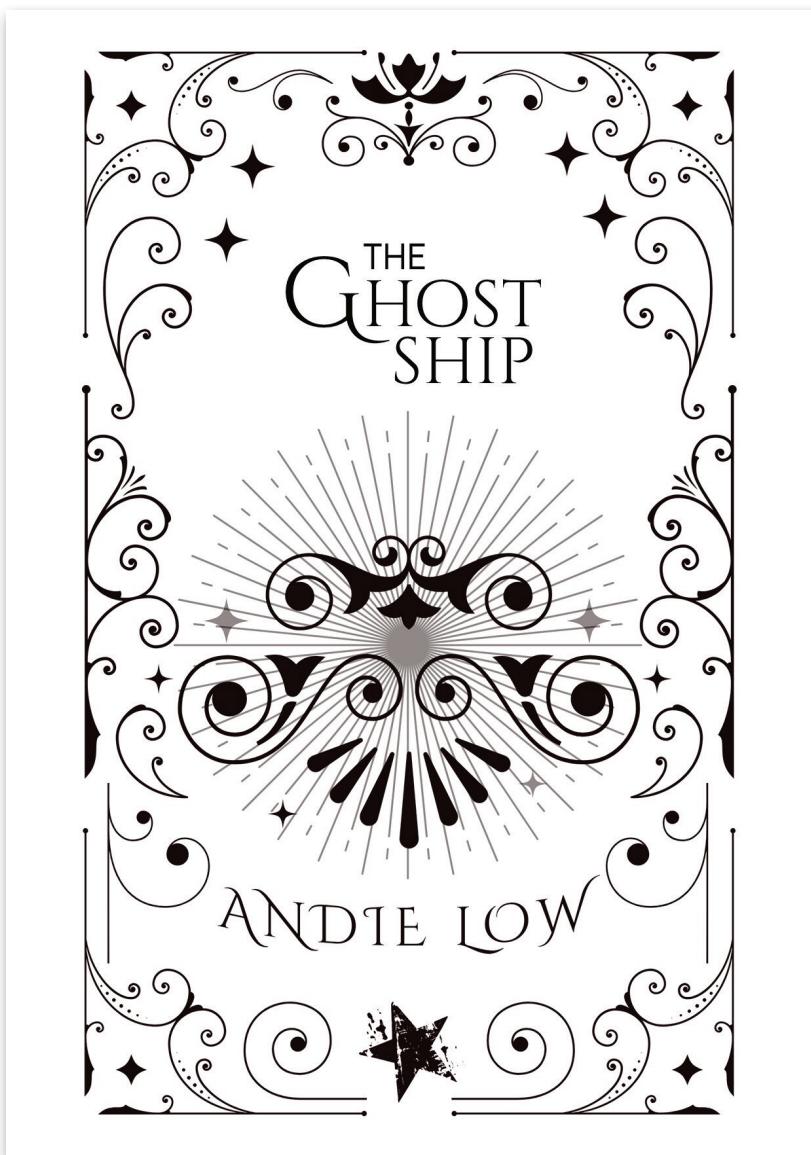
Even if your familiar was a smug little monster who'd known all along.



*Sophie's Bombe Alaska*

Read on for a sneak peak at  
The Ghost Ship, Book 1 in Andie's complete  
Marina Witches Mysteries Series





THE  
GHOST  
SHIP

ANDIE LOW



# 1

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Frankie glanced away from her late mom's BIG BOOK OF SPELLS, checking the progress on the dusting and vacuuming. The spell—page 795—had taken ages to get right and worked like something out of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, but without all those buckets of water.

Despite being twenty-five, Frankie wasn't good at housework—or magic—and so the hours spent perfecting the various housework spells had been worth it. If Mrs. Bryson, her octogenarian landlady, was as picky with tomorrow's 'surprise' spot-check as she had been every other week, Frankie wanted no cause for complaint.

She knew she was being paranoid, but with cheap accommodation scarce in Seattle, eviction would be a disaster. Experience told her that sleeping in her car sucked.

It hadn't taken long to realize that Mrs. Bryson only ever dropped in unannounced on Sunday mornings on her way home from church. Frankie therefore cleaned on Saturday afternoon, giving herself as little time as possible to mess the place up.

The first check came close to ending in disaster. Dexter, her Jack Russell—who wasn't on the lease because of a strict no-pets policy—was

asleep on the rug in the lounge. Flat on his back, his legs twitching in the air, he'd been snoring fit to rouse the dead.

Panicked, Frankie used a put your washing away spell, which saw Dex zapped from the lounge to the beat-up Toyota she'd inherited from her mom. She'd been lucky the pup had arrived in one piece given the car was half a block away. To avoid another nasty surprise, she'd put a doorbell ward on the complex's courtyard that alerted her to the landlady's presence.

Frankie settled deeper into the junkyard sofa, which was part of the rental's supposedly high-end furnishings, doing her best to avoid the dodgy springs. She tapped her e-reader, turning the page to the next spell.

Frankie's mom had performed the spell that saw an e-reader version of the original spell book produced. And while this went against her late mom's love of the old ways, if it helped Frankie study, she was all for it. She also knew if she didn't do it, Frankie would give it a whirl herself, something as likely to see the family heirloom up in flames.

The device also allowed her to concentrate on learning spells without memories of her mom swamping her. Just turning the pages of the original had hints of her mom's favorite perfume enveloping her, with Frankie in tears soon after.

The unforgiving sofa aside, this corner of the lounge was the perfect spot to read, with sunlight flooding in and a gentle breeze blowing through the wide-open French doors.

Frankie wasn't sure how much time had passed when an octogenarian started screeching at her from behind the sofa. "What on earth is that disgusting fleabag doing lying on my good rug?"

Frankie didn't bother turning the e-reader off, tossing it on the coffee table, twisting her legs around, and clambering to her feet. Either the old crone had somehow dodged the ward in the courtyard, or it had failed again. Also, her landlady was a full day early. "Mrs. Bryson, I can explain."

Frankie wasn't sure how, but was going to give it her best shot. The place had been too hard-won to risk getting kicked out. Not when she was still trying to find a job that would give her enough spare time to practice her craft, as she had promised her mom. Frankie still didn't

believe her life was in danger as her mom had warned her, but a promise was a promise.

"I might be old, but I'm not blind." The woman, having missed the ancient vacuum cleaner and feather duster working away without human intervention, rather disproved that. Perhaps it was that the landlady's attention was on Dex.

"We're doomed." Dexter's voice was loud inside Frankie's head, their ability to communicate telepathically courtesy of another gift from Frankie's mom. The tenants in Frankie's apartment back in Portland having complained bitterly about his constant barking, it was that or move.

Turns out he hadn't liked the synthetic nature of his dog bed, saying it lit up like the Fourth of July when he moved too fast. The fluffy nylon bedding being replaced with Egyptian cotton made him a happy pup. Now all Frankie had to deal with was the small dog's incessant chatter and propensity to hum.

"I'm looking after the dog for, ah, a friend. He's going home this afternoon. I'll, ah, vacuum the place until it's spotless."

As tempting as it was to tell the old battle-ax the apartment would be even cleaner than when they'd moved in, Frankie buttoned her lips. She'd said too much, with this brief mention of the vacuum enough to have her landlady noticing the household appliance working away on its own.

It was doing a great job, too. Even getting into the corners and under the battered and dinged sideboard, with Frankie impressed by how well the new-to-her spell was working.

"It's ... it's... it's..."

Unable to add to this, Mrs. Bryson collapsed in a pile of purple velour tracksuit, white hair, and rickety bones. Not that she was down there for long, with Frankie manhandling her up onto the sofa where she'd be safe from the vacuum cleaner.

The be-spelled device, having picked up on Frankie's agitated state, had doubled its efforts to find every speck of dust in the place. There was also no turning the blasted thing off, with it continuing even after she'd yanked the cord out of the socket.

All she could hope was that once she'd put some distance between

herself and the appliance, the spell would run its course. None of her other spells ever lasted for long, the doorbell ward being a case in point.

Frankie had packed her belongings in the Toyota and was sneaking out the French doors with Dex when Mrs. Bryson regained full consciousness. So much for avoiding a big scene. Frankie knew there was no staying following that afternoon's debacle.

Never mind Dex, Normals didn't appreciate witchcraft even when it was being used for as mundane a task as housework. A testament of this was Mrs. Bryson escorting Dex and Frankie to the car to make sure they left. She'd berated them every step of the way, whilst making the sign of the cross and giving them the evil eye.

If Mrs. Bryson had been packing holy water, they'd be wet by now. Safely away from the curb and with no clue as to their destination, Frankie took a quick peek in the rearview mirror. Mrs. Bryson was shaking her fist so violently in their direction that she nearly fell over. And if she had, she would have blamed this on Frankie, too.

"Old bag. She should have paid us to stay there. I doubt it's ever been as clean."

"Not true," said Dex, who was riding shotgun. "While you were packing, I peed on the mat in the kitchen."

Frankie couldn't hold back a splutter of laughter. "Why did you do that?"

Busy scratching behind his ear, he took his time answering. "She said I had fleas." On Frankie looking at him, with an eyebrow raised, he'd huffed out in indignation. "Hey, I caught them off her rug!"

And while that might be true, it didn't change their current predicament. They were back where they had been when they'd first arrived in Seattle. Homeless, and with even less cash to splash.

"I guess we'll find a cheap motel for tonight and search for a new apartment tomorrow. Not that we'll find one as cheap."

"Or nasty," piped up Dex.

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Dex pulled his head back inside the car, licking his lips free of wind-

induced drool. He'd then dropped to the passenger seat and turned to Frankie. "Any chance of a pit-stop?"

"Sorry, dude. I was thinking."

She was thinking back to how different her life had been six months earlier. Before her mom, who was driving Frankie's car, got shunted in front of a speeding freight train.

The police never found the culprits, although the evidence pointed to them having been in a red pickup. Shame that her mom's ability to see the future hadn't allowed her to avoid the accident altogether. From a life full of love and laughter, Frankie's world became so dark she couldn't see a way forward.

Gone were the days of helping her mom, Pat, with the day-to-day running of Patsy's Magic Emporium. Gone were the laughter, the security. However, it was on that last day at the hospital that Frankie's life really took a nose-dive.

During a moment of lucidity, her mother warned her to get far, far away. Her last words were to tell Frankie that her life was in danger. With her mom then slipping into a coma from which she'd never awaken, Frankie didn't get to hear why.

As fantastical as the warning had been, Frankie attributed it to the head injury her mom had sustained. Moving into the small apartment over the magic emporium was her first mistake, with the space chock full of memories of her mom.

Then the shop had faltered, because Frankie was nowhere near as talented a witch and medium as her mom. As if all this wasn't enough, Evan, her boyfriend of two years, dumped her because her constant tears were "bumming him out."

Heart-sore and weary, Frankie decided putting all Pat's things in storage and leaving town was as good an idea as any. She was now second-guessing herself. Grief counseling would have been easier than what she was currently facing.

"In here! In here! Pull in here!"

Dex's excited telepathic shouting had Frankie's concentration back on the road, with her swerving into a parking lot next to a marina a second later. Before she'd had time to engage the handbrake, Dex flew

out the window and over to the nearest pole as fast as he could with his back legs crossed.

His sigh of relief inside her head was loud and heartfelt. While she waited for him to finish his business and sniff every other upright surface in a one-hundred-foot radius, Frankie checked out their surroundings.

Across the road was a collection of shops and trades, and even a café. It was one of the narrowest Frankie had ever seen; it being not much wider than the front door itself. It was a true hole-in-the-wall establishment, and one that begged to be explored. Enough of a draw to have Frankie climbing out of the car, leaning back in to grab her handbag.

"Dex, can you guard the car while I go get a coffee?"

The Jack Russell didn't bother lifting its head from the patch of grass that it was sniffing, as though its life depended on it. "Yeah, sure, whatever."

"And something to eat!" said Frankie.

There wasn't a chance he was ignoring this, with his head shooting up as though spring-mounted. "Blueberry muffin for me!" With his order placed, he returned to his sniffing.

Frankie threaded her way through a motley collection of parked cars and, after checking for traffic, crossed the road to the café. Its name had her smiling. Magic Beans - Proprietor: Mac Fletcher. Well, it appeared Mac had a sense of humor.

Back at the marina, Frankie took a seat on a bench facing the water and ripped open the paper bag that held their muffins. Dex always had a blueberry, while her favorite was anything with chocolate. Her first sip of coffee left her transfixed. Magic Beans was right.

Even with Seattle's reputation for excellent coffee, it's the best cup she's had since arriving in the city. It was rich, velvety, and without a hint of bitterness. That the barista had sprinkled chocolate on top was the icing on the, ah, coffee.

She'd demolished her muffin and was halfway through her coffee before Dex returned, covered in cobwebs and grinning like a loon.

"What's got you looking so happy?"

"I know something you don't know," he sang, before settling himself

on the bench and getting stuck into his muffin as though he hadn't eaten in days.

"Well, don't leave me hanging, buddy."

A muffled "hang on a sec" made its way inside her head, forcing Frankie to wait for her loyal sidekick to finish his snack. He was still licking his chops when he jumped off the seat and trotted away. He'd covered a goodly distance before he looked back. "Well, aren't you coming?"

"Hang on, hang on." Frankie swallowed the last of the coffee, and on her way to join her familiar, chucked the empty cup and bag in a trash can. She'd only just caught up with him when he plopped himself on the boardwalk and looked up.

It took a second for Frankie to register what had caught the small dog's attention. There was a sign nailed to a pole about a houseboat for rent on Pier 51. It was \$100 a week, pets were welcome, and it was currently vacant.

"Wow, that's crazy cheap. It also sounds too good to be true! Wait?" She looked from the sign to Dex. "You can read?"

Dex shrugged as though it were no big deal. "Hey, I have to do something when you're out."

Frankie ripped the sign down to prevent anyone else from seeing it. "Righty-ho. Let's go get ourselves a home." After finding the right pier, she was soon striding down the dock with Dex trotting beside her, humming.

Their future was suddenly looking a lot brighter.



## 2

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With her footsteps echoing on the wooden boards, Frankie's thoughts were in a tangle. What if the place was a hovel? It leaked? It was half submerged? For \$100 a week, it wouldn't be much, although maybe not as bad as what someone had tied up in slip number thirty-two. The rusty shipping container that was plopped askew on an even rustier barge was a maritime disaster on speed dial.

Had she read the number wrong?

Dex, who was on the side deck of this homage to corrosion, interrupted her thoughts. "Nope, it's the right place."

With nothing to lose, Frankie wandered along the floating dock that sat between The Crate—as she thought of the place—and the Jolly Roger, a large cruiser. Frankie knocked on the frosted glass door cut into the side of the container, waiting for someone to answer.

She'd given up when she spotted a yellowed and faded note stuck in the doorframe. This, coupled with the spidery writing and lack of spaces, made it a slow read.

*Welcome aboard.*

*Please go to the  
houseboat opposite*

*forthekkey.Gxx*

All that was missing from this affront to the English language were the hashtags. When she'd finally made sense of the scrawl, Frankie's shoulders dropped in defeat. "Hecking heck, it looks like it's gone."

Dex looked up from his forensic examination of the deck. "Someone already rented it?"

"Yeah. Looks like they have."

"I hate motels. They have fleas."

As she watched Dex plod the length of the barge, stopping occasionally to sniff something, Frankie thought about motels they could afford. A night in the Toyota would be better than staying somewhere they'd get eaten alive.

Perhaps if she flea-bombed it before they moved in?

She was searching for accommodation on her phone when a hatch opened on the cruiser and an older man popped his head out.

"Are you here about renting the Shangri-La?"

The Shangri-La? Was he serious?

Only by sucking hard on her lips was Frankie able to hold in her snort of laughter. "Yes, although I see it's already rented out."

"No. Not that I'm aware? Name's Jack, by-the-by."

That there wasn't a captain tacked onto the front was a letdown, what with him wearing a captain's hat and all. Frankie suspected that if she could see the rest, there'd be navy whites and lots of medals involved.

"Hi. I'm Frankie. Frankie B."

"And may I ask what the B stands for?"

Frankie wasn't sure why she didn't make something up, but she was incapable of lying about this one thing. Not that she lied about much else. Well, apart from being vague about Dex, her roommate, when applying for new apartments.

"It's B for Bonny."

Wait for it. Wait for it.

She'd heard the lot. Bonny and Clyde. Bonny Doon—the place and the band. Even 'bonny wee thing' in an appalling Scottish accent.

"As in Anne Bonny, the pirate?" Jack's face was now lit with excitement.

"Ah yes, but how did..."

Before she could get the rest of her question out, Jack said, "Welcome aboard," gave her a jaunty salute and disappeared back through the hatch.

"That was weird," said Frankie to Dex, who was trying to inch his way around the lattice at the end of the rusty container. "If you fall in, I am not fishing you out."

No one ever mentions Anne Bonny. Everything but.

Her frown transformed into a wide grin. The place was still available and would do until something better arrived. It'd be a step up from a flea-pit motel, and a heap better than the Toyota. At least she hoped so. She hadn't been able to check out the interior, with the glass door frosted and any windows skinny and near the roofline.

Back on the main pier, Frankie approached the gorgeous houseboat that was tied up opposite. The cherry-red front door, with its creepy brass knocker shaped like an octopus, was intimidating, no doubt on purpose.

Not that this stopped Frankie from grabbing a handful of tentacles and knocking hard enough that she may as well have been tenderizing them ready for the grill.

While waiting, she took in the other boats and houseboats, with her gaze coming to rest on a stunning double-masted schooner. Its length was such that it took up the whole dock that formed a tee at the end of the main pier. The American Pearl must be worth millions.

She was still looking at it when the door next to her opened.

On turning, she had her ability to speak stolen. The thief in question stood at least six-three, with a body many in Hollywood would kill for. Even though dressed in a baggy white t-shirt and faded jeans, he had her mouth drier than Death Valley at the height of summer.

Maybe she'd seen him in a movie or ad? She couldn't work out what it was, but she got the sense she'd already met him. He wasn't what she'd been expecting when reading the note stuck in the doorjamb. That note spoke of a little old lady, not a hot-as-hell man.

As he looked at her, a frown knotted his brow, marring his handsome face. He followed this up by crossing his arms over what

looked to be a solid chest and leaning against the door frame in a pose that yelled SCRAM.

Still incapable of speech, or even rational thought, Frankie held the tattered TO LET sign up so he could see it.

The change in him was instantaneous. He pushed himself away from the wall with his shoulder, straightened and grabbed a key off a side table in the hall. He then held it up by its yellow ribbon, lifting it higher when Frankie tried to take it from him.

"What's your name, Shortcake?"

Shortcake? Was he serious?

Frankie checked her outfit to see if it had morphed into something pink and frilly. Nope, she was still wearing no-nonsense boots, jeans with holes in the knees, and a dark gray T-shirt. She ran her fingers through her hair, messing up the short, spiky style. She then tugged a lock forward to check it was still the fiery red she loved so much. Yep.

She returned his gaze with a scowl that matched his earlier one. "Name's Frankie."

"And who is this?"

With the key stuffed in his pocket; he crouched and tickled Dex under the chin. It was something that'd normally have the small dog trying to relieve the tickler of a finger or two. Instead, Dex dropped and rolled onto his back like a lady of the night looking for extra income.

"Oh, don't stop, don't stop, don't stop," Dex mumbled telepathically.

And Frankie couldn't blame him. Heck, watching the guy rubbing his large hand up and down the dog's tummy was doing funny things to her own.

"Sorry, buddy, that's all I've got time for. I've got things to do, and your mom needs to look at the Shangri-La."

He gave Dex's tummy a last flourish before getting back to his feet and digging around in his pocket for the key. Again, he dangled it by the ribbon. However, this time, instead of trying to take it off him, Frankie held her hand out and waited for him to drop it in her palm. She'd not play his stupid games, no matter how good-looking he was.

"Thanks. I'll take a quick look and drop the key back after." No way

*Frankie B - The Ghost Ship*

was she making any commitment to this guy before she'd even seen the place.

Frankie stomped down the houseboat's gangplank, over the pier and onto The Crate. She was conscious of him watching her every step, and it took every ounce of her willpower not to give in to the temptation to sneak a peek back. Dex, however, had no issues about casting longing looks.

After unlocking the glass door, Frankie slid it open, preparing herself for the worst. The outside not being in the running for any Architectural Digest Awards, she was expecting hideous carpet, tatty furniture, and a bathroom behind a curtain.

At least she hoped there was a curtain.

And a bathroom.

"Wow!"

The floors were bamboo, and to her right there was a double cabin bed dressed like something out of a home catalog. To her left stood a table and chairs and a sectional sofa, with a kitchenette and flat-pack wardrobe against the wall opposite. Everything appeared brand new.

There was a bathroom tucked to the side of the cabin bed and—oh happy days—there was a door. While tiny, the bathroom still had a walk-in shower, commode, and vanity.

There wasn't a soaking tub, but there would be as soon as Frankie moved in, with loaner spells easier than others.

Back in the main cabin, Frankie spotted Dex spread out on a fluffy sheepskin rug in front of double glass doors that led to a small back deck. Yep, he liked the place, too.

"Dex! Wake up, you slug. You can't move in until I've signed a lease."

She didn't get a response other than his snuffling as he settled himself even deeper into the sheepskin rug. He was out of luck if he thought she was leaving him where he was.

"If you come back with me, you might get another tummy rub."

Heck, even she wouldn't mind one of those.

It was just the catalyst he needed, and Dex was on his feet and halfway across the pier before Frankie had locked the door.

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The ugly octopus having received another hammering, Frankie didn't have to wait this time, with the door swinging wide, as though The Hunk had been lurking in the hallway.

Not wanting to give him time to call her Shortcake again, she rushed to speak. "I'll..." She cleared her throat and started again. "I'll take it."

"Excellent. I've got a copy of the lease inside."

Being alone with this guy was something she'd prefer to avoid. She wasn't sure what it was about him that had her on edge, but she wasn't ignoring it like she had with her ex.

Even knowing at least two defensive spells, she couldn't use them without outing herself as a witch, and bang would go the rental.

Despite this, she wasn't altogether helpless without her magic. Her dad had disappeared by the time she was two, and she'd spent her childhood living in neighborhoods her mom could afford. These were often so far on the wrong side of the tracks you couldn't hear the trains even if you tried.

This was why she'd joined an after-school program, allowing her to do her homework in peace and not to a soundtrack of street fights and domestic violence.

It was there she'd met her own Mr. Miyagi, and while she hadn't learned karate, she'd learned something she thought was better. Jeet Kune Do was the perfect martial art for women, and Frankie figured if it was good enough for Bruce Lee, then it was good enough for her.

The one maneuver she wasn't keen on was the one where you jabbed someone in the eyes. On purpose! Even thinking about it gave her the heebie-jeebies.

Maybe today would be the day? Mind you, that would mean they missed out on the lease too.

He moved to the side and motioned for her to enter, which she did after a moment's hesitation. Not that she could sense danger emanating from him, but that she wasn't keen on getting up close and personal with that much testosterone.

With her back to the wall, she then waited for him to close the front door.

He didn't. Rather, he clicked his fingers and for a second Frankie thought she was being given the hurry-up.

"Come on, buddy, in you come."

"Dex, his name is Dex." Frankie looked at her familiar, who'd slipped between them and was trotting down the middle of the hall. He looked back every couple of steps to confirm he was okay being indoors somewhere this nice. Frankie couldn't blame him; even she was feeling out of place.

After softly closing the front door, The Hunk padded barefoot past Frankie, overtook Dex, and swung open the door at the end of the hallway. This flooded the dark space with sunlight, leaving Frankie momentarily disoriented.

Inching her way into the room, she then had to wait for her eyes to adjust to the extra light. While the view from The Crate was of boats and an industrial park, the view here was magical. There was a wide expanse of water and the Seattle skyline in the distance, meaning it would be spectacular at night.

A polite cough had Frankie turning to see him standing next to a sleek glass table, with what must be the lease, a ballpoint pen on top.

"Oh, right," she said, remembering why she was there.

He pulled a chair out for her, and not until she was sitting did he do the same for himself. Broken broomsticks, Frankie would prefer he made himself busy somewhere else than sit and stare at her while she plowed her way through a stack of legalese.

She carefully read the first couple of clauses, but conscious of his inspection, scanned rather than read the rest of the first page. Things slowed when she turned the single sheet of paper over.

Looking at the spot at the bottom where she was supposed to sign, two things became obvious. First off, her full name already being listed on the document shrieked of magic. Second, she'd place bets on the guy sitting opposite her not being Gwen Rasmussen.



## 3

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What was going on? Frankie looked from the lease to the guy sitting opposite and back. The familiar sensation of magic tingling in her fingers had her dropping her hands to her lap, where she'd be less likely to set fire to something. Or worse.

"Who are you? Because I doubt your name is Gwen." Rubbing her hands on her jeans, Frankie dispersed the spell that had arisen because of her agitation.

"I'm Zane, a friend of Gwen's. She's out of town, so she left the key with me."

"And how is it that my full name is showing on the lease?"

"You'd have to ask Gwen about that."

Frankie wasn't sure what to do. With Gwen having signed the lease, all she had to do to make The Crate hers was to sign, too. The only problem was that with her full name there in black and white, it smacked of magic. Magic failure she might be, but even she knew you didn't sign a magical contract without knowing who and what.

Hexed hopping rabbits.

"I can't sign this. Not without meeting Gwen."

Frankie placed the key on top of the lease, pushed her chair back and got to her feet.

"Come on, Dex, time to go."

He wasn't as quick to do her bidding as she'd like, prompting her to clap her hands and tell him to move it.

"But I don't want to stay at a motel." He dragged his feet along the hallway.

"Hang on a second." Zane strode by Dex and her, putting his hand on the door to stop her from opening it. "What say you move into the Shangri-La and sign the lease when Gwen is back? Would that work?"

"Hot dang!" Dex bounced and spun on the spot in his excitement at not having to spend the night in a fleabag motel. "Say yes! Say yes!"

Frankie couldn't see a downside to Zane's suggestion. Apart from living opposite him. There was something about him that drew her in. Like an old boyfriend you still think is cute, but whom you know is bad news.

It was only when she arrived back at the car that she realized she hadn't even locked it when she'd gone off with Dex earlier. A frantic search showed everything was still where it should be, including her car stereo. She'd heard stories about the types who hung around in parking lots waiting for someone to be stupid enough to leave their car unlocked. "Phew, that was lucky."

After placing the parking sticker Zane had given her on the dash, Frankie readied herself to grab as many bags as she could in one go. Anything to avoid a zillion trips from the car to The Crate. And no, she was not calling that rusty heap of metal the Shangri-La. It was the most ludicrous and inappropriate name ever.

"Hey, Mom! Would this work?" Dex was on the far side of the parking lot, standing next to what looked to be an old-fashioned mail cart. He was right. It'd be perfect for ferrying the weird assortment that made up their worldly goods.

"I'm not sure, Dex. It might belong to someone."

"So, we're only borrowing it."

When it came to a toss-up between borrowing the cart without asking and carrying everything, Frankie took the risk. "That's the lot," she said,

plonking a large, dark-brown leather suitcase atop everything else crammed in the wheeled cart. The case had belonged to her late dad and —along with her fiery locks and the amulet that hung around her neck —was all she had of his.

"Can I get on? Can I? Can I?" Dex bounced on the spot, showing his enthusiasm for taking a ride in anything with wheels, even if it was an old mail cart.

"Sure you can." Bending, Frankie scooped him up and placed him atop her dad's case, where he sat in splendor as she wheeled everything to their new home.

They weren't even halfway along the pier before Dex was standing on the suitcase, leaning forward and urging Frankie to greater speed by barking out, "Faster! Faster!" inside her head.

"If I go any faster, we'll end up in the harbor."

Even without speed, it was a close-run thing, with Frankie constantly yanking on the cart to straighten it. Courtesy of this zigzag path, it took longer than it should have to see their belongings aboard The Crate. Now all Frankie wanted was a cup of tea and a power-nap. It was just a shame her kettle was sitting on the counter at the old apartment.

With Mrs. Bryson likely still trying to stop the vacuum and net the feather duster while waiting for an exorcist, nipping back to retrieve it wasn't an option.

"Guess I need to go buy a new one."

"You forgot my bowl too," said Dex.

"Hex it!" Grabbing her phone out of her handbag, she did a quick search to see where the nearest supermarket was. She was so shattered it could be next door and still not be close enough. "It's not too far away. Will you be okay on your own?"

"Sure." Dex flopped down on his side on the sheepskin rug, stretched his legs as much as possible, then folded them tight against his body. Following a small tweak to the angle of his head, he shut his eyes, dismissing her.

• • •

Back at The Crate a short time later, Frankie dropped her shopping just inside the door, shocked to find Dex chatting away to three new friends.

"Mom, meet Jojo, Stinky, and Spud," said Dex, nodding at a Siamese cat, a hamster, and a small pig. And the pig was small—as in not crowding eight inches at the shoulder, meaning Spud was a runt, or he'd had help of the magical variety.

"Greetings."

"Hello."

"Pleased to meet you."

Okay, with her able to hear them all, it looked as if it wasn't just the pig that had been magically enhanced. Not that she could fault the manners of the trio.

Frankie was thinking about how to get rid of her unwanted guests when Jojo, the Siamese, tilted her head to the side. "Mom wants me. Bye." She then disappeared in a shower of sparks.

Stinky and Spud didn't even say goodbye before disappearing, too.

"Where did they come from?"

"They're locals from the pier."

"Okay, so I know where they live. How come they were here?"

"Oh, I was thinking it would be nice to have a few friends. And poof, they're here."

This confirmed for Frankie that she wasn't alone in her magical abilities, with other people on Pier 51 also special in various ways. And Dex wasn't the only familiar. It was this, or Dex had magical abilities she was unaware of. Frankie wasn't sure about being part of a group like that. Her mom avoided them at all costs.

With the kettle on to boil, Frankie set to emptying her dad's suitcase. This took longer than it should because of the case being magical and able to hold as much as one five times the size. By the time it was empty, her bed was all but buried by a weird assortment of clothing.

While some items were hers, the majority was stuff she'd kept to remind her of people who were no longer in her life. Frankie found more comfort in burying her face in a much-worn article of clothing than in looking at a flat photo.

### *Frankie B - The Ghost Ship*

Evan was the one person whose clothing she hadn't held onto, with her having burned anything he'd left at her place. His neighbors had been furious about the bonfire in the middle of his front lawn, but Frankie found it rather cathartic.

She and Dex even took marshmallows.

Even without opening the wardrobe, she knew she didn't have any hope of fitting everything in there. She stood before it, going through the spell in her head in a practice run before holding her hands up, ready to get to work.

"Oy! Stop."

"Wait? What? Why?" Frankie looked at Dex and dropped her hands to her sides.

"Remember the last time you did magic with the doors open?"

"Good point. Thanks, buddy."

Only after locking the frosted glass door and drawing the drapes to the deck tight did Frankie raise her hands again.

*Wardrobe, cupboard, closet, chest  
I need more space to hold my best  
With lots of rails and heaps of room  
to hang my hat and store my broom.*

Frankie didn't even own a hat or broom, but wasn't confident enough with her magic to tinker with a known spell. When the magic had built up enough, she pointed at the wardrobe with sparks streaming from her fingers, leaving the wardrobe looking bedazzled. Only after the last spark had fallen to the floor did she open the doors and step inside.

The space was perfect, with lots of hanging space and two sets of drawers, ideal for smaller items. There was even a large, freestanding unit in the middle of the room with shoe storage underneath and a velvet upholstered top perfect for holding jewelry and other trinkets.

Shame Frankie didn't own any bling. Not that she'd wear it if she did. It wasn't her style.

The other enclosed space was the bathroom, with a quick resizing spell transforming this too. No longer a glorified broom cupboard, it smacked more of a high-end spa, and the soaking tub was a beauty. Frankie was wise enough to know she hadn't summoned the tub out of thin air and that it had to have come from somewhere.

Not keen on taking something someone might need; she always visualized a summer or winter house where no one would notice a bath gone for the night. She also made sure she returned it, sparkling and in perfect order.

From time-to-time she'd even send one back in better order than it had arrived. Sure, it'd lead to head-scratching when the owners saw the bath was cleaner and that the chip by the plug hole had repaired itself. That she could live with.

Her cup of tea abandoned in favor of putting everything away, Frankie was still folding and hanging when there came a booming knock on the side of the container. As tempting as it was to magic the rest away, she was still hit-and-miss—mostly miss—with free-spelling. And based on her recent luck, her favorites would end up in the wardrobe at their ratty old apartment.

Rather than look like she'd been up to something shady, Frankie closed the wardrobe and opened the drapes. She then unlocked the frosted glass door and slid it open; unsure of who it would be, with no one knowing she was living here.

Apart from Zane, that was.

He held his arms wide, a bottle of bubbles in his left hand, and two champagne flutes in his right. "Welcome to the marina." His smile was as wide as his gesture.

"Don't you think this is a tad premature?" Frankie placed herself in the doorway, blocking him from entering. "I haven't signed the lease yet."

"But you will." His tone was self-assured.

His manner had Frankie bristling. What was it her mom used to say about guys like him? That's right. "Why buy a book when you can join the library?"

## *Frankie B - The Ghost Ship*

They were at an impasse when Frankie noticed small blue sparks filling the space between them. Ah, he was a witch, warlock, or even worse, a sleaze like Evan. Why hadn't she sensed that when she was with him earlier? And hex it if he didn't look to be trying to spell her into letting him come inside.

With her hands up in a defensive position, Frankie didn't hold back. Not that she hit him with magic because she didn't know a 'heave a hunk in the harbor' hex. Instead, she went old-school on him, throwing her weight forward, hitting him solidly in the solar plexus, and shoving hard.

A simple levitation spell she had learned as a child saw her holding the bottle and glasses when he surfaced.

"Next time you try that rubbish, I won't hold back."

She was inching back inside with her spoils of war when he launched himself out of the water. That he landed on the pier after completing a double somersault told her that whatever else he was, he was strong. And it showed, with his wet clothes molding to his body and revealing an eight-pack that would give Jason Momoa some competition.

With that type of power at his fingertips, maybe she shouldn't have been as rough. Worried about being hurt if he retaliated, she was relieved when he broke into a broad grin, although not for long.

He licked his lips slowly and deliberately, making it obvious that harming her was the last thing on his mind. Wonky wands, with part of her still hurting from sleaze-bag Evan's rejection, this was even scarier.

She slid the door shut with her hip and wasted no time putting the bubbles and glasses on the table. With her hands free, she spun around and locked the door. After a second's pause, she threw up a ward designed specifically to keep him away. She didn't hold back either, with it big enough to enclose The Crate entirely.

Ward spell training was the one thing her mom had refused to back down on. She'd made Frankie practice until she could create one without thinking. And with no need of an incantation. Nope, just thinking about the words was enough for these to work.

The question was this. Despite all that training, would her ward be

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strong enough to keep him at bay? The bigger question was, did she want it to?

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## ALL ABOUT ANDIE



Andie likes to believe in magic. To wriggle your nose, or wave a wand, and all your problems disappear in a puff of smoke. If only it were as easy as that.

However, Andie is also all for escaping our day-to-day lives with a fun read. Mia, her editorial assistant agrees wholeheartedly with this approach.

Unless it's dinner time and you're the only one around who has opposable thumbs.



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