

## Jewels of Clay prologue

### Terra

**D**ry leaves crunched under his boots as Liam, the leprechaun paced in front of me. We were standing under a bridge in the park nearest my home at five-freaking-thirty in the morning like a couple of trolls, *negotiating*.

Characteristic name aside, for creatures who supposedly had pots of gold stashed under every rainbow, he was exceptionally greedy. But he was my last and best hope for a solution to my impending life of homelessness and poverty, so I forced a calm, sweet tone into my voice. “I understand. If I had more, I’d give it to you, but after I pay for the ride to get to where I’m going, I’m literally down to my last penny.” Absolute truth.

*My Gram’s old Magic 8 Ball would say: Outlook not so good.*

He paused to smell the sweetness of the air as the sun began to beat life into the park. I couldn’t help but join him. We were both Earth elementals and it had been over a week since I’d allowed myself outside even a second to absorb the Ambient magic around me. Saving yourself turns out to be a time-consuming task.

Liam paused and cocked his head, his long red beard tangling in the zipper of his hoodie. “For Mage’s sake, I should get to the barber.” I didn’t disagree. He was pretty much rocking the leprechaun look in every way he could: red hair, green hoodie and sweats, full beard. The only thing missing was a top hat.

Most Magicals wanted no part in looking like our species out in the world. We liked to blend in with the humans, keep a low profile. But Liam appeared to be in the *lean into it* category. The closest thing to gnome I ever got was my favorite red beanie, which I was rocking that day.

Before she died, my Gram gave me all sorts of unhelpful, but fun information about Magical species. For example, leprechauns may be diminutive in size, but they’re not diminutive in *size*. I looked down to see if Gram had been right, but I couldn’t tell from his loose-fitting sweats. Not that I had time for attachments or feelings of any kind, but he was kind of cute if you could ignore the bush on his face.

He untangled his beard and lowered his gaze on me. “Okay. Because your grandma was a good client, I’ll accept two hundred. But you’ll have to get yourself to and from the location and I’ll answer no more questions for free.”

“Deal.” Before he could change his mind, I whipped out my phone and cash-apped him the money. After he confirmed the receipt, he pulled a small carved trunk from his duffel bag and shoved a piece of paper with an address on it into my hand. “Once you capture your prey, put them in here. There’s a magic spell to keep them from fleeing before you’re ready. Luck o’ the Irish, Terra.” He was in his green VW bug faster than I could say thanks.

I took a deep breath. This was it. I was on my way to the most important thing I’d done in twenty-two years. I just had to get there first. After glancing at the address and doing a quick calculation, I was certain I had just enough money left to get me there and back, so I pulled up the ride share app.

He must have been nearby because my ride showed up just a few minutes later. It was an expensive black SUV and my chest fluttered as the driver rolled down the window and looked through his dark shades at me. He glanced at his phone, then back up. “Terra? I’m your ride.” The way he said my name in a rough husky voice made other places on my body flutter.

*Lock it down. You have work to do.*

“Um, yeah?” I shoved the piece of paper with the address on it at him, anxious to get him to stop looking at me. Even through his sunglasses, I could tell his stare was intense. “I have a hundred dollars. Will that get me to the address and back to at least somewhere close to here?” I could walk a few miles home if necessary. I hoped it wasn’t.

He read the address, then slid the sunglasses up on his head. It made the little wavy strands of his dark hair stick out in a way that was both adorable and sexy at the same time. I was right. His gaze *was* intense, like he was trying to bore a hole into my brain and root around in it. His eyes, though, on a scale of one to ten, they were a *bells yes*. “I can do a hundred. Get in.”

I slid into the back seat and after he input the address into his GPS, he took off without a word. I didn’t even get his name or even one of the normal rideshare speeches about adjusting the air control or radio. Nope. He said nothing.

The entire way.

An hour.

It was simultaneously unnerving and nice.

I didn’t know if this dude was human or Magical and I didn’t want to have to come up with a lie about where I was going and why. But at the same time, would it have killed him to put a little effort into small talk?

He finally found his voice when the GPS told him he'd arrived. He turned around, slinging a muscular arm over the seat. "You wanted to go to the ass end of one of Oregon's National Forests? Why?"

There was the question I'd been dreading. "Never mind. Just stay in the car. I'll be back in a few minutes."

I hoped so anyway. Never caught a fairy before so, in truth, I had no idea how long it would take. I just hoped Mr. Silent, Dark and Handsome would stick around long enough. He grunted, which I took for *'okay sure, I'll stay here as long as you need, by the way, you look really pretty today'* and scooted out of the SUV.

I probably should've just told him I was doing a drug deal.

We'd arrived at an abandoned campsite which was blocked off by a gate. I never would've found the location myself. The only way Liam knew was his leprechaun Location magic that allowed them to track down any little thing in the world. He'd sent me to the fairy ring closest to me and I needed to hurry if I was going to make it back home in time to do what I needed to do before my esteemed guests and werewolves arrived at eight.

I stepped over the gate and into the dense woods, enjoying the Autumn scent of the trees as I traveled deeper into the forest. After several yards, I spotted the ring and dropped on my knees, breathing in the rich aroma of the mushrooms. The trunk lid squeaked as I opened the lid, and a chill raced through me. I was about to catch a fairy. And this fairy was going to save me.

I held my breath, peeping under the largest mushroom in the ring without disturbing the ground around me. I was a bit of a klutz, and I couldn't let anything get in the way of my goal, including myself. I hoped I wouldn't have to wait long, but I was prepared to sit there like a statue until I had my prize. Even if it meant denying the part of me who wanted to dig deeper into the woods and surround myself in the dense, dark, quiet it offered me.

"If you're trying to catch fae in that trunk, you're going to be there a long damn time." I looked up and found the rideshare driver staring down at me.

*Okay, that answers the question. He's Magical with a capital M.*

I had the immediate urge to argue with him, though I shouldn't have. He obviously knew more about catching fae than I did. He tromped over, upsetting the dirt and trampling at least five mushrooms with his massive feet. I winced at the thought of the fae he'd just Godzilla'd under his shoes.

I yelped. "Careful, you'll hurt them!"

His throaty laugh echoed across the dense forest, shaking some pine needles loose from their branches. "Oh my Mage, woman, do you know nothing? The fairy ring isn't their home. It's their bathroom."

I jumped up, wiping the dirt from my jeans, and grossing myself right out about it. Then I had it on my hands, which I wiped back on my jeans and suddenly I was covered in fae poo. Heat bloomed across my face as I planted my hands on my hips. Great, fae poo on my favorite black shirt now. I huffed at the driver. "I didn't have a typical Magic upbringing, okay? You could stand there and laugh at my ignorance, or you could tell me how to do it."

The driver kept his hands in his pockets and pointed to the circle of trees around the fairy ring with his head. "Free fae live in the trees around the ring. You'll have to climb up and catch one in your hands, then wrestle it into the trunk. Assuming the trunk has been spelled, just close the lid and the fairy will be yours to command."

I glanced up at the circle of trees. They were all very tall, as trees tended to be. I blew out a breath of determination then made my way over to the pine with the lowest hanging branch and jumped up. I had no time to waste. I had things to do, and, thanks to the mushroom-bathroom situation, I wanted a shower more than anything. Other than the fairy.

The driver chuckled behind me after I fell on my ass, almost breaking the trunk underneath me. His laughter lit a fire within me like I'd never known. I was going to get in that damn tree if it killed me.

Which it almost did.

I fell a dozen more times and I was certain my butt was black and blue.

Finally the driver took pity on me and came over. He made a step with his hands and hoisted me up like I weighed nothing. Almost shot over the branch like a cannon. Whatever species he was, it was strong. I was more than curious, but it was rude to ask Magicals what they were. I know I hated the inescapable torment of being asked what species I was.

I slung my leg over the branch and clung to the trunk of the tree as I stood and steadied myself. Below, the driver was tense and focused, peering up like he expected me to fall. Which, given my previous attempts to get up there, was almost inevitable. I just hoped he was as good at catching as he was at being silent and strong. And hot.

Steering my brain in a different direction, I looked up. A dozen small birdhouses dotted the upper branches of the tree. They were well-hidden from passersby, but cute and brightly painted, like a little beach community in a tree. It made my stomach churn to think I would be ripping a fae from one of them.

I had no choice.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the closest home. It was lime green with turquoise trim and it came off the branch easily. I opened the door, peeking inside, then slamming the door closed when I confirmed there was a fairy inside. I couldn't tell the fairy's age or sex or any other feature but it's big, blinking blue eyes.

A flutter of movement startled me and before I could think, dozens of fae burst from the houses, flying around and shouting warnings. Some of them flew right at me, poking me with small sticks they used like daggers. A couple of fae flew around my legs. I couldn't figure out why, at first, but when I started to lose my balance on the branch, I tried to stick a leg out to steady myself, but they'd flown a long vine around me ankles, tying my legs together.

I couldn't really blame them. I was destroying their homes and faenapping one of them. I was definitely the bad guy in this scenario. I hated that, but there was no other way, or I would've taken it.

I tottered on the tree, grasping the fae house in one hand and trying to grab the tree trunk with the other. I yelped as the carved trunk my fairy was supposed to go in, slipped from my grasp. Wincing, I looked down, expecting to find it's tattered remains on the ground, but I squealed with glee when I saw it perched lightly in the hands of the driver. He'd caught it, thank the Mage.

Man, I wish I had money to tip him after this.

In my distraction, the fae took their opportunity to pull the vine around my ankles tighter. I wobbled, feeling myself teetering. "Oh shit!"

My feet slipped from the branch, but I held tight onto the fae house with the blue-eyed fairy inside as I dropped, hoping I would break the fall and keep it alive. My stomach plummeted and the next thing I knew, I was being cradled in the arms of the rideshare driver.

"I got you." His arms were tight around me and his massive, and granite-like chest heaving. I sucked in a breath. I was stunned at the beauty of his deep purple eyes. He was glaring at me like I was the most precious thing on the earth, and I wanted nothing more than to feel worthy of that look.

But before I could react to it, to him, he shook himself out of it. Then deposited me on the ground and picked up the carved trunk he must have laid down before he went all hero on me and caught my ass. "You have to put the fae in yourself or it won't be bound to you."

I took a huge step away from him because it felt too intimate to be standing chest to chest with the alluring Magical. And it wasn't just his stunning good looks. It was everything emanating from him. He was like a magnet. I needed to pull away. Far. far away.

Like, Toledo.

Refocusing, I stuck my fingers under the roof of the lime green house, and it opened just like the birdhouses my Gram had placed all over our back yard. A cute male fairy with cerulean wings and eyes was tucked in the corner of his home on a bed he'd made from what looked like bird feathers. He just sat there blinking at me.

I kept my voice to a whisper. "I need your help."

He cocked his little head and guffawed. "Tough titties."

The driver snarled and the fairy poked his head out of the roof to see what had made that sound. His eyes went wide, and he dove back into his house, trembling as the driver cursed. “Shut the fucker up, shove him in the trunk and let’s go. You don’t have to be nice about it.”

I turned to the driver, annoyance coloring my tone and rocketing through my body. “You’re scaring him. Just go start the car. I’ve got this.”

“Do you?” he drawled, the corner of his mouth kicking up when I stepped toward him and nodded. He ran his hand over his stubbled jaw for a few seconds before he skulked away toward the car.

I took a calming breath. That guy was intense.

Looking down into the fairy’s home, I decided to try for tact instead of brute force. “As I was saying, I need you to help me cook a meal tonight. It’s super important and I can’t hire a chef who isn’t Magical. A leprechaun told me fae are good at tasks like these. Can you help me?”

He laughed. “Well, why didn’t you just say so, Babycakes? I’m known for my skill in the culinary arts before I came over to this side. I can make you anything you want. And frankly, I was getting tired of the other fae I’ve been stuck with here. They aggravate me around the cock.”

I shook my head. “What did you say? They aggravate around your cock?” I couldn’t imagine what kind of fae orgies were happening in that place. It ramped my need-to-shower urge to maximum plus.

“You know, around the cock, it means all of the time.” He looked at me like I was the dumbest person on the planet.

Oh. Okay. “The phrase is around the *clock*.”

“Eh, I guess that does make more sense.” He shrugged. “Anyway, is this my ride?” He pointed to the trunk.

“Are you sure you want to help me?” I asked. I don’t know why I needed his cooperation, why I felt the deep urge to make sure he was okay with this arrangement. Especially when I wasn’t telling him the whole truth about my needs.

“I love to cook. Going new places, travelling? That’s my jelly.”

I sighed. “Your *jam*?”

“Yeah. That. So, you want me in the trunk, yes?” I nodded. He sailed from his home and straight inside, closing the lid himself. Maybe it wasn’t going to be as hard as I’d originally thought. I just hoped he really was a good cook like he’d said.

When I got back to the car with my trunked fairy, the driver was sitting behind the wheel with his shades back on and arm slung around the seat next to him. He peered over his shoulder as I slid in the back. “Did you get him?”

“Yep. We can go now.”

He started the car, and it was a silent ride all the way back to town, save for the fairy in the box humming and talking to himself about recipes. Little did he know I had the entire meal planned from start to finish, but I let him have his fun because he seemed to be happy enough in the trunk.

I was on the opposite end of the spectrum, entranced with worry about how the rest of my night was going to go, I didn't even notice when the driver pulled in my driveway. He jumped out of the car and opened the back door for me and walked me all the way to my front porch. Was he a gentleman, as well as a hero?

*Reply hazy. Try again.*

Hold on. Wait a second. “How did you know where I lived?” Was that info in the rideshare app?

He crossed his arms across his chest. “I know a lot about you, Terra.”

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, glancing around the neighborhood to see if maybe Mr. Rodriguez or Mrs. Holmes were outside and could call for help. This guy knew my name and my address. He stepped so close I could feel the heat radiating from his body. I clutched the trunk, thinking maybe it could be used as a weapon, but feared it may hurt the fairy inside.

The driver glared at me and despite myself, I was caught in the ferocity of his gaze. His eyes flicked down to my mouth, like he was thinking of kissing me.

And I was thinking I wanted him to.

*That was absolutely the worst thought ever to cross my traitorous brain.*

He pulled small bag from his back pocket. His voice was low and gravelly, and it settled inside my bones as he spoke. “Believe me, I don't want to do this to any of us, but it's the only way I see to keep you safe.”

My stomach clenched. “Do what? Safe from who? Who are you?”

I was a veritable font of questions.

He was a vault of no answers whatsoever.

He opened the trunk I was still clutching in my hands, then took a bit of black dust from the bag he held and blew it at the fairy. He coughed a couple times, then sat back down in the bottom of the trunk like nothing had happened.

The driver shrugged like it was no big deal that he'd just accosted my fairy. “This powder is made from ground up Glawackus eyes.” When I blanched at that, he continued. “Glawackus eyes cause memory loss. Once we inhale this substance, we won't remember the last four or five hours.”

“Why would we want to do that? The fairy needs to remember he’s bound to me.” Panic clawed its way up my throat. “I have to make sure everything goes right tonight and if I don’t remember, I’ll—”

He decided to stomp down the panic and shut me up by kissing me. He pressed his lips to mine, and I completely was lost in the feel of them. I grabbed the buttons of his black Henley, pulling him closer to me. It was dumb and exhilarating and the best kiss I’d ever had in my sorry life. No idea why I thought kissing him was a good idea, but I would thank myself later.

If I remembered.

We were both panting when he pulled away from me. “I shouldn’t have…” True, but I couldn’t complain.

Oh, I wanted to, but I couldn’t.

That kiss had woken me the fuck up from the slumber of my life.

He took a step away from me and I missed the warmth of his skin. “Please tell me what’s happening here?” I meant other than the raging landslide of hormones this guy was causing.

“I can’t. I don’t know exactly what you’re planning to do with the captured fairy, but you’re smart and capable and I hope he can help you get what you want. I just have to keep any knowledge of this from my alpha or he won’t even show up. I’m trying to help you here.”

“Alpha? You’re not just some random rideshare driver, are you? You’re one of the wolves coming tonight? With the Conclave leader?” I knew before he answered I was right. And I had the feeling he was telling the truth—he wanted to help me in some way.

He blew the Glawackus dust into my face, then I watched in horror as he snorted a bit up his nose like it was cocaine or something. I coughed and he touched my cheek in the most tender way, the warmth of his thumb skating across my skin made me shiver. “I won’t remember helping you or being with you this morning, but know this, Gnome, there is no fucking way I’ll ever forget *you*.”

He took off for his car faster than I could track.

I shook my head. What a freaking morning I was having. Who knew catching fae could make your ass ache and your clothes filthy? Not me. It would be worth it in the end though. As soon as those werewolves showed up and I delivered them the meal of their lives.

I laughed. I couldn’t believe I’d done it: I caught a fae all by myself and I was on my way to securing my spot in the Conclave. For me, for gnomes, just like my Gram wanted.

For the first time in weeks, I felt like I was going to be okay.

*Concentrate and ask again.*

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