

FAIRLY FAIRY

By Roxanne Smolen

CHAPTER ONE

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Brittany woke to the sound of someone thundering up the stairs and a loud rapping at her bedroom door.

“Hurry! Get up!” Aunt Lynette rasped. “Queen Imogene just pulled into the driveway.”

Oh, no. The tyrant queen. What does she want at this time of the morning?

“Be right down.” Brittany groaned.

The queen had taken an interest in Brittany’s progress as a witch and started showing up at odd hours to educate her. Aunt Lynette didn’t believe the lessons were beneficial or even safe.

But Imogene was the queen of all the witches in South Florida. She must be benevolent. Brittany had to trust her. Right?

Brittany threw off the covers and staggered to the closet. She dressed in fresh jeans and a T-shirt. She still had sleepy hair, as her mother called it, but that couldn’t be helped. There was no time for a shower.

She scurried downstairs. Aunt Lynette's partner, Myra, stood in the living room wringing her hands. Myra was also a member of Aunt Lynette's coven—and she was terrified of the queen. Brittany hugged her. The front door stood open. The morning was breezy and cool, and the wind seemed to pull the breath out of the house.

Aunt Lynette stood outdoors with Queen Imogene and her ward, Ravyn Crowe.

The queen was a haughty hag with graying hair pulled into a messy bun. She always wore long flowing robes. She also wore clattering necklaces made from the spoils of her conquests—one had the horns of a demon.

Ravyn was seventeen, Brittany's age. She had Asian features but dark skin. Her hair was a mass of long locs. Like Brittany, Ravyn had the potential to become the next witch queen. Unlike Brittany, she had been coached in witchcraft her entire life and knew things Brittany could barely imagine. And she made sure Brittany didn't forget it.

Aunt Lynette sighed as if repeating something for the fifth time. "I ain't contesting that the girls be trained together. I'm just saying we could work out a schedule. I'd like to know when to expect you."

"But then we would lose the element of surprise." Queen Imogene quirked her brows. "I find a person learns quicker under duress."

"I was asleep." Brittany pushed open the screen door. "I find a person learns quicker when they're rested."

The queen looked up at Brittany on the porch steps. For a moment, her face twisted, and her beady eyes gleamed. Then she smoothed her features. "We shall see." With an enigmatic smile, she glided over the grass toward the backyard. A gust of wind caught her robes and made them flap behind her. Her necklaces clacked and clattered.

Brittany looked at her aunt. Aunt Lynette was Brittany's guardian and a bona fide Wiccan priestess. She hadn't known about the Queen of South Florida until she moved back to her childhood home after her father died. And Brittany hadn't known of her potential as a witch until she met her aunt.

"It's all right. I've got this," Brittany told her.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. It'll be fun." She gave her a crooked smile and stepped beside Ravyn.

They walked along the side of the house, an old, two-story clapboard that Brittany's grandfather had built. It had an enclosed front porch filled with white wicker furniture and an attached garage that had never seen a car; a flowerbed with hip-high weeds filled the space where a driveway would have been. Forest bordered the wide yard on all sides. Her grandfather once owned acres of land but sold some of it to pay taxes.

They reached the ritual site. It was made of the remains of a little pink playhouse that caught fire when Grandpa Earle tried to smoke out a hive of bees. Brittany still saw the playhouse like a spectral image when she looked at the place. She sensed the love with which Gramps had built it so many years ago and the innocent joy Aunt Lynette felt as she played there. All that was left were charred boards laid end-to-end in a ring and an altar made from the flat steppingstones that had once led to the playhouse door.

Brittany and Ravyn stood on the grass outside the circle. The overgrown lawn was wet with dew, and Brittany wished she'd taken a moment to put on her shoes. Queen Imogene trod upon the rich black soil within the site, leaving footprints to the altar. With a muttered chant, she placed a gold candle on the stacked stones. She had to light the candle twice because of the wind. "You have this long." She strode out of the circle. As she stepped over the boards, a magical barrier sprang up behind her. The barrier

consisted of sparkling energy and was meant to protect them from whatever she had just conjured up. Without another word, she glided back up to the house.

“Might as well get comfortable.” Ravyn grunted as she sat on the dew-drenched grass. She moved like she had a stiff neck. Bruises darkened her arm. They looked suspiciously like fingermarks.

Brittany motioned. “So, what happened to you?”

“Walked into a wall.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“What? It happens. I was distracted.”

There was a hint of panic in her eyes. Had someone roughed her up? Ravyn had recently taken in a homeless girl—Maria, the love of her life. Perhaps they’d had a lover’s quarrel.

Brittany sat and crossed her legs. “How’s your girlfriend?”

“She’s fine. Better than fine. She made us a nice breakfast this morning. Imogene won’t let her live with us unless she does chores.”

“You’re letting Queen Imogene turn your girlfriend into a servant?”

“I don’t think she minds. She’s amazed at how much food we have. And she’s safe.” Her voice became wistful. “It’s nice to have someone around to talk to, you know? Someone who cares.”

“Queen Imogene cares about you. You’re her pet project.”

“Imogene doesn’t care about anyone.”

Someone cleared their throat. “Order. Come to order, please. This isn’t a social hour.”

Brittany looked toward the circle. A little man sat next to the candle dangling his feet over the edge of the stone altar. He looked to be no more than three feet tall. He had bright red hair and fluffy sideburns, and he wore shoes with big silver buckles.

“What happened to Surgat?” Brittany asked. Surgat, their previous instructor, was the enslaved ghost of a demon. She didn’t like him and was relieved to see someone new.

“Surgat says you are an *Un-Teachable Monkey*.” Ravyn smirked. “So, Imogene sent him on a mission. This is Stubby McFarland. Hey, Stubs.”

“Please don’t call me that,” the little man groaned.

“Stubby is a leprechaun.”

Brittany’s eyes widened. “Like with a pot of gold?”

“Unfortunately, my pot has been confiscated,” he muttered. “Now, if we could get down to the lesson at hand? Today, ye’ll be learning about the origins of magic.” He whipped his hand through the air, and a pair of reading glasses appeared. At the same time, a thick, worn-looking book appeared on his lap. He opened the book and perched the glasses on his nose. “Let me see. Ye know, of course, that magical races predate human beings. Entities such as dwarves, gremlins, ogres, and dragons were all here first.”

“What happened to them?” Brittany asked.

He blinked at her with his magnified eyes. “I don’t follow.”

“Well, they’re gone, right?”

“They are not gone.” He puffed up. “Their populations may have declined, but they are most certainly not *gone*.”

She frowned. “You’re saying there are still beings like ogres and dragons alive in the world today?”

Ravyn rolled onto her side with a fit of giggles. “You are such a *monkey*.”

Brittany ignored her. “What about fairies?”

“Amn’t I a fairy?”

“Leprechauns are fairies?”

He nodded. “Many fairy races still exist today. There is a large encampment of them not far from here. A sanctuary, so to speak.”

She gasped. Her aunt’s friend, Theodora, said there were fairies around, but Brittany thought she was joking. “Here. In Florida.”

“They live on a secret island,” he said. “They put an enchantment over it so ye barely know it’s there. Humans may see it, but their eyes kind of drift away. It’s an impressive piece of work.”

“Do fairies fly?” she asked.

“Will-o’-wisps do,” Ravyn said, still chuckling. “They’re sometimes mistaken for fireflies, but if you look close, you’ll see pastel colors glowing around their wings. I saw a frolic of them one time when I was hiking through the mountains.”

“Pixies also have wings,” Stubby said. “They’re the type of fairy ye’ll see most on the island.”

“How many types of fairy are there?” Brittany asked.

“Well, as I said, there are pixies. They’re about six inches high, and they have pointed ears and bushy eyebrows. They live in colonies high in the trees, but they magically cloak them so they can’t be seen. And when they attack, they do it en masse, like a swarm of bees.”

“I heard pixies live a hundred years or more,” Ravyn said.

“That would explain their animosity toward humans. A lot of persecution in that amount of time.” He kicked his dangling feet. “There’re also brownies. They look like pixies, but they have no wings.”

“Why do they call them brownies?” Brittany asked.

“They wear brown clothing. Also, because their faces are dirty. They live underground.”

“All right. So, leprechauns, will-o’-wisps, brownies, and pixies. That’s it?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Ye got your basic hobgoblin. They’re two feet tall. They set up in the trees. Uncivilized, ill-tempered buggers. Youse should hope ye never run into them.”

“There’s also grundels, right?” Ravyn said. “They are three feet tall or so, and they work for the elves. Kind of like servants.”

“Verry loyal.” Stubby nodded. “They’ll stay with the same family for generations.”

“Oh,” Brittany said. “Like house-elves.”

“Ah. You’re referring to the book. Indeed, they are *exactly* like house-elves,” he said. “However, they’re allowed to wear clothing. They prefer stripes.”

“Are elves a type of fairy?” Brittany asked.

“Ruling class. They stand about five feet, but they’re verry slight, verry delicate.”

“Do they have pointed ears like in the movies?”

“They do. Pointed ears, high cheekbones. No wings. They’re good at arts and crafts. Beautiful creations.”

“And they have wicked magic,” Ravyn warned. “Trust me.”

“All fairies have magic,” Stubby said, “of one sort or another. But elf magic is formidable. The queen is an elf.”

Brittany fell silent. Dangerous or not, she wished she could meet the elven queen.

“But we are off-topic.” He tapped the book. “As I said, magical beings were here first.”

“And humanity should all just get on a spaceship and leave the planet to you.” Ravyn scoffed. “Never took you to be a racist, Stubs.”

“We are all racist,” he said, “albeit to different degrees. But that isn’t the point. Because the magical races have used magic for so long, it flows from them. Fairies don’t have lessons. Ogres don’t write books. Magic for them occurs naturally. They don’t think about it. It just happens.”

“Just happens,” Brittany murmured, thinking about the strange white light that once burst out of her hands, turning several vampires to dust. She had no idea how she’d done it. It just happened.

“And that’s what ye should aspire to do. Use magic as easily as breathing.” He glanced at the flickering candle. It had burned down to a nub. “We’re almost out of time. Any questions?”

“Yeah,” Ravyn said. “Then why do we need lessons? Aren’t we magical beings?”

“Ye are not.”

“I was told that everybody has a little magic in them,” Brittany said. “They just need to try and—”

“Humans are not inherently magical. Some, such as yerselves have talent, but that is usually because their ancestry includes magical dalliances. With a fairy, perhaps. Or a troll.”

Ravyn laughed. “I’ve met a few people I thought were descended from trolls.”

“That is the lesson for today. Practice until magic feels—” POP! He blinked out of existence. The candle had gone out.

“That’s the end of that,” Ravyn said.

Brittany frowned. “I don’t like the idea that not everyone has magic.”

“Why? Don’t like being special?”

“I’m not special. Besides, if I had magical blood in my past, then so would the rest of my family. What about my older brother and sister? My little brother? My mother?”

“Your father?”

“No. Not him.” Brittany shuddered at the thought of her father having supernatural powers. She’d spent her childhood in fear of him—a drunkard and a brute. Which made her think again of the bruises on Ravyn’s arm. “The queen doesn’t hurt you, does she?”

Ravyn’s gaze shifted, looking everywhere but at her. She stood and brushed at the dampness on the back of her jeans. “Only when I deserve it,” she said and walked back toward the house.

The look on Ravyn’s face seemed familiar. Brittany had heard similar words. When she was young, her father used to beat her mother, and her mother always made excuses for him. *It was my fault, or I deserved it.*

Brittany got to her feet. Her head felt crowded with too many thoughts. She glanced at the altar with its puddle of cooling wax then followed Ravyn across the wide yard.

She heard the argument before she got to the front porch. Aunt Lynette and Queen Imogene were yelling at each other.

Brittany hurried around the corner of the house. Ravyn stood there as still as stone. The adults were on the screened-in porch. Myra sat on a white wicker rocking chair holding a glass of sweet tea as if she could hide behind it. Both Aunt Lynette and Queen

Imogene were on their feet, facing each other. Red lightning strobed the queen's hands—her anger barely contained.

“Do you think me a fool?” the queen shouted.

“I do if you think you can get blood out of a turnip,” Aunt Lynette shouted back.

“Of course, you're making money off that website. Why else would you have it?”

Website? Brittany frowned. She'd started a blog in her aunt's name about herbs and their properties. But they weren't being paid for it. She thought she'd wait until they had a following before she set it up to display ads.

“I am your queen. It is within my right to demand tribute.”

“That's where you're wrong. No Wiccan queen I ever known expected her subjects to buy her a car or a fancy condominium on the Atlantic Ocean.”

The queen sputtered, dark eyes glittering. Her gaze fell upon Ravyn and Brittany standing in the yard.

“Well.” She lowered her voice. “It appears lessons are ended for the day. We will continue this another time.”

“Different day, same answer,” Aunt Lynette said.

The queen slammed out the screen door and down the steps. “Come along, Ravyn.”

“See you later, *monkey*,” Ravyn murmured to Brittany. She got into the car. With their tires spinning on the loose gravel, they drove away.

Brittany rushed onto the porch. “What was that all about?”

Her aunt paced, muttering, “Old biddy. Who does she think she is?”

Myra stood slowly. Her face was pale, and her hands trembled, making the ice clink in her glass. “Queen Imogene expects a cut of the profits from the herb blog.”

“But there are no profits.”

“Yeah, right?” Aunt Lynette huffed out.

“We tried to tell her.” Myra looked ready to cry. “What are we going to do?”

Brittany rested a hand on her shoulder. “We’re going to go inside, and I’ll make us all some breakfast.” She guided Myra into the house, leaving Aunt Lynette to calm herself in peace.

Once in the kitchen, she started the coffee, beat a half dozen eggs with cream, nutmeg, and cinnamon, and cut thick slices from the loaf of homemade bread leftover from dinner. She let the slices marinate in the eggs while she melted butter in a heavy, cast-iron skillet.

Her aunt came in from the porch. She sat beside Myra at the kitchen table. Myra smiled and took her hand. Brittany cooked the French toast until they were golden brown and garnished them with early Florida strawberries.

“Thank you, Brit,” Aunt Lynette said as Brittany set a pair of steaming plates before her and Myra.

Brittany sat across from them. She smothered her plate in maple syrup. They’d gotten a bottle from the farmer’s market.

“How come you never told me we could be making money off that there blog?” her aunt asked.

Brittany nodded around a mouthful. “I planned to. You know, after the blog was established. I also thought we could take some of the more popular posts and make a book out of them. Sell it on Amazon.”

Aunt Lynette grunted and bit a strawberry.

Myra said, “The queen has the impression that we sell herbs from the blog.”

“We could do that. We could incorporate and then open an online store. Something similar to the candle shop you had in Georgia. But we’d never be able to compete with the major players. We don’t have the acreage for a large farm like they do. We don’t even have a garden.”

“Still, it’d be nice to have a little extra income,” she said.

“Not if that old hag wants a cut of it,” Aunt Lynette growled.

“Don’t call her that,” Myra whispered. “She might hear.”

Aunt Lynette threw down her fork. “You don’t buy into that nonsense that she has invisible spies, do you?”

“If she didn’t, how would she know about the blog?”

Brittany opened her mouth to explain about search engines, but that would just confuse them. Besides, an Internet search engine didn’t explain all the other things the queen was privy to.

“It’s bad enough the queen stops by unannounced,” Myra said, “but she always has Ravyn with her. Like a malevolent shadow. That girl gives me the creeps.”

“Probably filling her head with all sorts of dark magic,” Aunt Lynette muttered. “Girls like that lap it up.”

“I’m not a Ravyn fan,” Brittany said, “but do you think Queen Imogene might be hurting her?” They both looked up to stare, and she shrugged. “There are bruises on her arms.”

“Oh,” Myra said. She exchanged a long look with her partner.

“Well,” Aunt Lynette said, “let her know she’s always welcome here if she needs a safe place to stay.”

“But you don’t like her,” Brittany said.

“I don’t dislike her enough to leave her in an abusive situation.”

Brittany tried to imagine living with Ravyn Crowe. Smirks and snide remarks and Ravyn calling her monkey. They would never be close friends—but they might get along if they could get past the whole *being rivals thing*. Ravyn had been raised to think that becoming a witch queen was the sole purpose of her life. Brittany couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for her.

“I’ll be sure to tell her,” she said.