

I dumped three spoons of sugar into my coffee mug, thought about it, and added another. Irene grabbed the sugar bowl from the table and clunked it on the counter. I stirred, clinking the spoon against the mug as loudly as I could. Irene sat down across from me, pulled her pipe out of nowhere, and starting puffing on it.

I sucked down coffee and cherry tobacco smoke. A nicotine craving was riding me hard, but for the third day in a row my cigarettes had gone missing. New, full, unopened packs, too. “How’d you light that pipe, Irene?” I said.

“Told you once, girl. Got a little salamander does it for me.” Irene said. Her newspaper whispered as she turned the pages.

Grumpiness ruled me right then. “Right, right. What the hell is that, Irene? Slang for some kind of lighter or something?”

The old woman gave me an irritated look. “Learn nothin’ at school, girl? Salamander. Lizard, you know.”

I glared at her.

She shook her head. “Someone’s in a right mood. Stayin’ up too late?”

“No, Irene. I’m in a right mood because personal items from my room keep going missing.”

“Look under your bed. I’m thinkin’ I’ve seen a boggart hangin’ around. Put some salt outside your door.”

Did I want to tackle that? Sure, I’d heard something giggle once or twice under my bed, but I’d been tired and/or drunk so it was probably nothing more than my mind playing tricks on me. No, I just wasn’t up to trying to make sense of what Irene was talking about right now. I pushed onward. “I’m also really tired, Irene. I’m tired because for the last three days I haven’t had time to catch my breath. I’ve been up and down the inside and outside of this house nonstop. Repairing the roof. Hanging the shutters. Hanging the storm windows. Re-hanging the shutters which seem to evolved the ability to leap off the damn windows. Cleaning the damn gutters again and again.”

Irene was as calm as a rock. “No need to curse. Anyways, ain’t that your job? Fixin’ things?”

“Well, yes, but all at once? Can you possibly tell me how, in the space of three days and with no leaves falling anywhere else on your property those gutters get absolutely packed?!”

Irene sipped her own coffee thoughtfully. “Boggart don’t like to go up on the roof. Prob’ly pixies.”

“Pixies.” I said flatly.

“Could be gremlins, but it ain’t the right time of year for them.”

“Uh-huh. You don’t say. You know, I really need a raise.”

Irene snorted. “Hardly earn your pay as it is.” With surprisingly grace the old woman sprung to her feet, tossed the paper into the recycling bin, and headed out the back door. “Hop to it, girl!” she yelled back to me. “Dishes can wait. I got errands in the backyard and then errands to run in town and you’re drivin’.”

“You can drive yourself – you proved that last week!” I shouted back. The screen door slammed shut. I gulped the rest of my coffee and hurried after the trail of pipe smoke out into the bright morning.