

Chapter One Sample by Caro Geelen 2022

Celia what have you done?

'You bought a kingdom?' Alison Griffin gasped.

'Bought is a strong word...' Celia responded to her younger sister. 'Got it off a guy at a pub is probably more accurate?'

'You picked up a kingdom at a pub. Where was this amazing place where they were dealing in kingdoms?'

Celia winced. Her hangover was beating on the inside of her head like it was trying to escape. 'Some place out at Reef End.' She brightened. 'Phil was there.'

'Of course he was. What did you buy.' This was a resigned statement, not a question.

Celia floundered. 'Thornwall,' she muttered.

Alison burst out laughing.

'What?' Celia said defensively. 'You said that once upon a time, the Griffins owned most of the northern seaboard.'

'Four hundred years ago!' Alison said. 'Now look at us! We hardly have the money to own the room above the shop, and you bought a kingdom! You picked up a kingdom when you went dousing at some terrible off-license place in Reef End – you know those places are the worst, you said so yourself – and not only that but you get Thornwall. Thornwall! That place is haunted at best and cursed at worst and my sister decides that she needs it.' She paused in her rant. 'Actually, how much did it go for?'

Celia made a face. 'I kindof... traded... for it.'

Alison pulled her hair. 'Please. Please don't say it.'

'Well, nobody wanted it!' Celia cried. 'It's fine. It's not a big kingdom. It's got, like, a city and some farmland and that's about it. It was a good deal, Ally.'

'Celia Griffin...' Alison moaned.

Celia summoned her courage. 'I traded the shop for it.'

Alison rolled her eyes. 'Of course you did. And who bought it? Some old guy in a smelly wizard's cloak and an eye for a soft touch? Someone who is totally, definitely, a hundred percent going to flog all our best antiquities off on the black market and make a killing? You don't think, Celia! We're going to be stuck in a kingdom that nobody else wants and it's only known for its thorns and dirt.'

'You know, he *was* wearing a cloak,' Celia mused, a part of her almost desiring to annoy her sister more even though she knew the situation was bad enough already. She pulled out the crumpled papers from her jacket pocket, and for the first time Alison leaned in, interested to see what was going on.

'Celia,' Alison said, and Celia felt the whip behind the flat word, flinching.

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'You can't undo it now,' Alison sighed. 'At least Phil was there to check through the clauses first so you didn't walk out of there with just a sheet of parchment. There's some wiggle room in this contract.' She stared at the words on the page, and the bright purple swoosh of ink which indicated the signature of the vendor. 'Mornesh Firmin, Celia.'

Celia slumped. 'I honestly didn't check,' she murmured.

'You never do,' Alison said. 'I do wonder how a magician of his calibre ended up with the title deed to a failure such as Thornwall, but the ways of magicians are mysterious at best.' She flipped the pages through and the last page was a hefty sheet of parchment, wreathed in drawings of brown thorns and stamped at the bottom with a crimson wax seal in the shape of a wheel. The parchment was headed "Thornwall" and listed the assets and entails of the kingdom, including, as Celia had mentioned, a city and a decent amount of farmland, and a harbour on the northern seaboard. The

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parchment shimmered with a rainbow glint at the edges. It was real. Both girls had seen enough magically-endowed documents to recognize the authenticity of this one.

'I suppose a harbour and a city is something,' Celia managed to squeak out.

'It would be good, if it wasn't completely inundated with magical thornbushes,' Alison said. 'Please tell me you didn't say you'd take it immediately?'

'I don't know!' Celia cried.

Alison put down the documents, picked up her phone, and called Phil.

'How drunk were you last night?' she asked, without saying any greeting. Celia did not hear Phil's answer. There was a moment of silence. 'Hm. How long did he give us?' Celia wished she remembered. 'Two days?!' Alison shrieked, and hung up the phone. Celia faced her as bravely as she could. 'Two days, Celia?'

'I am never drinking again,' Celia muttered, and wished she could disappear into the floor.

'I am very disappointed in you,' Alison told her older sister with as much admonishment as she could muster. 'But it is what it is. I have some contacts. I should be able to move most of the good stuff out of here before Firmin comes to take ownership.'

'Um... I might have mentioned the books?' Celia said.

Alison pierced her sister with a violent gaze, but her words were calm. 'Well, he wouldn't have traded a kingdom for the carpets, Celia. We'll just have to make do with that. He might find a gem in there somewhere, but I doubt it – I've been through all those boxes and they're hardly worth the paper they're printed on. Still, we can keep him in hope, and in the meantime we can slip some of the other bits out of here with our personal effects. I now will not nor will ever trust Phil again, but at least he crossed out that clause about the personal items, and Firmin signed it.' She stared Celia down. 'A kingdom, Celia?'

Celia raised her chin. 'We can be proper Griffins again, Ally. Think of the possibilities!'

Alison remained flat. 'It's cursed, Celia. That's the only reason someone like Firmin would get rid of it as fast as he did.'