

Chapter One

“I’m sorry, but we don’t have you down to move in today.”

Roxi puckered her lips for a moment and hoped her face looked more comical than the combination of irritated and depressed she actually felt. “But I confirmed with the office. Yesterday. On the phone.” She tried her best to keep her tone light, but it was hard. Coordinating between gentle notes and the growing lump in her throat required too much effort from her already-exhausted self.

The leasing agent flipped through the stack of papers piled neatly on her clipboard and shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. What did you say your name—”

“Roxanna. Roxanna Lovegood.”

More rustling, more rifling, and the agent turned to the large desktop monitor with a few clicks of the sleek mouse. Why this wasn’t the first thing she did was a question Roxi didn’t feel compelled to ask. Finally, with a semi-dramatic nod, the agent flashed her an apologetic smile. “I am so sorry, you’re absolutely right, Ms. Lovegood. I found you in our system, but there seems to have been a glitch on our backend. The apartment you toured is no longer available.”

Blinking felt like the only appropriate response. *How?* But given the circumstances, this was just the cherry on top of an unavoidable sundae...and the more she blinked, the hotter her eyes became until they glistened.

That seemed to activate a “help mode” within the leasing agent, for the woman suddenly began to rapidly flip through files and simultaneously click through the screen until she sighed and smiled with relief. She cast a quick glance to the teary-eyed young woman and cleared her throat, plastering on her best and most reassuring Sales Smile. “I do have some good news! We happen to have a very nice unit available in our south wing, if you’re willing to wait a few hours for our cleaning staff to verify it’s move-in ready. It’s not rehabbed like the original one you signed on for, but if you’re into vintage....”

“How vintage?”

The agent tilted her head and did a few quick mental calculations. “Well, this building is around 120 years old, and given the periodic upgrades...I’d say mid-90s, early 2000s was the last full rehab done in that section.” She glanced at the screen and nodded. “And yes, just as I thought—given the lack of upgrades, you’re looking at a significant decrease in rent. A couple hundred dollars, by the looks of it.”

This did make Roxi re-evaluate her predicament. At least the tears eased back from their threat to burst through the dam. “What will I need to do about the deposit?” Everything had been calculated according to the originally agreed-upon unit, and a decrease in rent could mean a nice increase back into her bank account. First month’s rent, last month’s rent, and a security deposit equal to each added up quick.

“Tell you what. Given the embarrassing circumstances on our end—and please accept our sincerest apologies, this is not at all to the standards of operation we pride ourselves in—I can offer you the first two months rent-free if you sign an extended lease, and I’ll manually waive the deposit.”

“Deal!” Roxi felt a grateful grin spread across her face. No required deposit meant she could furnish her apartment with decor marginally faster than originally expected, or at the very least, her first grocery run would be a bit more substantial than a few boxes of macaroni and cheese and a six-pack of hard cider. She signed the amended leasing papers without a second thought, simply grateful to have a place to sleep that night. “What should I do with my things?”

The agent stapled the lease papers together and tucked them into a manila folder as she skimmed her gaze over the daily calendar pad on the desk. “You can tell your movers to bring the truck around...three? Yes, three.”

Dammit. There was the lump choking her throat again. “I...ah...okay. Thanks.”

She slung her backpack over her shoulders and ducked under the cross-body strap of her duffel bag, then grabbed the handle to her hardback suitcase and nodded her thanks to the agent before she shuffled out of the leasing office and into the main lobby. Logically, in her rational mind, she knew this was an incredibly lucky find. What was about to become her new home happened to be a stunningly refurbished twentieth-century hotel nestled in one of Chicago’s more beautiful and affluent neighborhoods lining the shores of Lake Michigan. Now an apartment complex, *Le Nouveau* boasted state-of-the-art amenities while maintaining the luxuries of Chicago antiquity.

Roxi suspected her south-wing studio would be a bit less than state-of-the-art. It was a disappointment she shoved hard below her resolve to make the best of a bad situation, to see the forest for the trees and genuinely enjoy the greenery. Given her limited budget, hand-washing her dishes was a small sacrifice compared to being homeless.

Yes, things were going to work out just fine.

###

Summers in Chicago were famous for the “hanging gardens” the plethora of restaurants turned into, whole sections of the city blocked off to accommodate tourists and locals alike who eagerly filled the outdoor seating just to enjoy the warm, summer air and breathe in the fragrant aromas of savory steaks and succulent chicken, fresh-caught fish on the grill, ripened tomatoes and fresh basil crushed atop the classic deep-dish pizza. All mingled with the soft allure of peonies and hydrangeas and countless other flora arranged gracefully from one restaurant to the next, together masking the less-than-appetizing yet far more honest scents of the big city.

Roxi pretended to wait her turn at one such bustling intersection, even though traffic was redirected another block over. She just wanted a moment to watch, listen, envision herself being in the sort of rebuilt life where she could casually seat herself at any one of these fine

establishments and order without looking at the menu...or counting the expected total down to the last penny.

As it were, she was cursed with “champagne taste on a beer budget,” according to the loving teases of her mother. Most of the time her budget couldn’t even include beer.

But now, thanks to the waived deposit, Roxi Lovegood was a few hundred bucks richer and even if she didn’t dare wheel the only belongings to her name onto the grounds of one of those fancy restaurants, she was definitely going to enjoy a good burger. Well...better than the dollar-menu variety she’d originally planned on.

She had no idea how to pronounce the kitschy name of the burger joint she felt most called to, but the atmosphere inside promised a good experience with low expectations from her. It was already bad enough that she looked bedraggled from two train rides, a public bus, and general stress; the inability to clean up paired with the necessity of lugging her few earthly belongings through Old Town added weight to the slowly increasing pressure of embarrassment.

No. Don’t cry. You made it. Don’t cry.

“You look like you could use a burger.”

Roxi blushed deeply when she glanced up and met the gaze of a devilishly charming, golden-haired surfer-god-of-a-man who grinned at her with a mischievous gleam in his eye. His voice strongly hinted at a New Zealand accent, but she couldn’t be too sure. In any case, she was suddenly and morbidly aware of her disheveled appearance—and inability to slink away, because he was the grill chef awaiting her order. “Um, yeah...actually yes,” she laughed, and to her relief, it was a genuine chuckle. “It’s been a day.”

“A double-decker, got it. Number two on the pad, luv.”

She tapped out her order as he directed and swiped her card while he got to work pressing the beef patties with practiced precision. When his order screen beeped, he winked at her and nodded toward the case of imported sodas behind her. “Don’t forget your drink.”

Shoot. That’s exactly what she did—completely forgot to add a drink to her order. But when she lifted her hand to tap out the new selection, he cleared his throat and nodded at the frosty case again.

“Bottle opener’s on the left. On that chain, see?” He flashed her another grin, another wink, another head tilt.

Roxi was not about to turn down a little freebie, especially from such a dashing stranger currently making her what was shaping up to be a mouthwatering double cheeseburger. She tucked herself into the booth farthest from the door, deepest in the shadows, and sipped the imported soda as she waited for him to call her name. They were the only ones in the small diner despite it being the tail end of the lunch hour, and she felt grateful for the quiet solace.

Years ago, this would have been a joyous occasion surrounded by friends and family eager to help her move in furniture and pick out new color schemes for each room. It was a lifelong dream of hers to move to Chicago, specifically to this neighborhood, and practically a fever dream to live on Lake Shore Drive. The fact that she sat in that diner, in that neighborhood, killing time until they verified her apartment for move-in on that very same drive, spoke volumes

about how far she'd come. Years ago, to do this would have been the inspiration for a huge housewarming party and free-flowing drinks until the sun came up.

Years ago, *he* would have been by her side, signing the papers with her.

But that was then, and this was now. "Now" consisted of quiet days scraping by and painful nights desperately sinking into restless dreams just long enough to escape the endless weight of depression that haunted her every waking moment.

Some days it was easier to forget. To pretend. To focus on something more pressing and present, like finding a new job or dodging the nosy inquiries from fair-weathered "friends" who also loved to pretend. Most days the pain numbed to a pulsing throb under her skin, deep within her chest, but manageable.

But on days like today, when she was forced to stare at the lone duffle bag and single suitcase summing up the whole of her earthly possessions, when she was forced to feel the distinct absence of friends, family, *him*....

"Order up." The grill cook carefully set a basket full of seasoned fries and an incredibly juicy, cheesy burger in front of her, just in time to make her blink back the fresh set of tears so close to falling. His grin broadened as he flourished a small plastic cup full to the brim with a stack of pickles. "You strike me as someone who prefers extra pickles, Miss Roxi. Let me know if you need more."

Before she had a chance to ask him how he knew her name or what gave away the fact that yes, she actually does love pickles, a family wandered in and started asking questions about the gelato menu. The grill cook flashed them that same disarming smile and returned to his post, his flirtatious nature lending to his recommendations, and Roxi practically rolled her eyes heavenward when she realized: the order screen. It automatically generated the customer's name based upon their card payment and pulled up on the grill's side for easy reference.

The pickles were just a lucky guess.

Several things were making it difficult for Roxi to wallow in her sadness, the cheeseburger sending her taste buds into euphoria being one of them. The eye candy flipping burgers behind the grill counter who periodically glanced her way and gave her a conspiratorial smirk added to the dining experience, for sure. Even though he was a complete stranger and someone she'd probably never see again (unless this became her new neighborhood go-to), in this moment it felt like she wasn't actually alone. Sure, she sat alone, but something warm and comforting made her feel less...abandoned.

But the heaviest blow against her darkness was the sight of the city's skyline right outside the window. The Willis Tower sat in full view, large and looming, a reminder that despite everything, despite the hellfire that scorched her life and drove her into her dream city out of desperation and not opportunity, she still made it. She was finally there, and not Chicago-adjacent.

Downtown, bustling, beautiful Chicago.

Deep in her lightened reverie, she absentmindedly reached for her near-empty bottle of cola and flinched when she felt the frosty glass of a fresh bottle. *When did...?* Damn, was she

that exhausted? And heaven forbid anyone mistook her for being greedy, taking two free bottles instead of the one—

But no, only one bottle sat there, bottle cap off and exactly where she remembered setting it on her napkin. It was full, fresh, and as if she hadn't just drunk three-fourths of it between the wait time and basking in her burger. *Weird.*

But tasty.

Roxi made sure to polish off the last of the fries and willed herself to have room for gelato because there was no telling where—or when—her next full meal would be. She needed to balance the unexpected windfall of cash with very much expected expenses, like basic household toiletries and probably tech setup fees for her Wi-Fi. No telling how much *that* was going to cost, and the last thing she wanted to do was gamble.

So she tapped out a few quick texts to her family chat group confirming her safe arrival (and leaving out the disheartening apartment details), scrolled through Pinterest for apartment decor ideas, checked her emails, and pretended to be busy while in reality, she was just waiting for her stomach to settle so she could enjoy some gelato. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a pleasant young woman tie on an apron and greet the grill cook, who joked with her about something that made her shake her head and laugh. *Shift change. Damn.*

“Hi, there! What’s your flavor?” The new girl’s ponytail bounced cheerfully as she greeted Roxi, who skimmed through the hanging menu and then debated on the tubs of Italian ice cream in front of her.

“That mocha chip cookie one looks incredible,” Roxi playfully moaned.

“Oh my gosh, it is! You should definitely go with that one.”

“Done.” With a grin, Roxi went back to the order pad and paid for her single scoop of the heavenly, creamy goodness and made sure to leave a generous tip for the sweet server. But when she turned back to accept the cup, what she received was a lidded pint.

“I’m such a space case today!” The girl laughed and waved her gelato scooper by her head with a dramatic eye roll. “I totally forgot to check what size you wanted and just autopiloted for a pint, it’s such a popular option. Might as well take it home, I can’t put it back in the tub!”

Roxi opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again. Then, finally, “So which size do I select to pay?”

Another flick of the scoop and tiny dots of mocha cream flew everywhere. “Don’t be silly! It’s totally my fault, not yours. Enjoy!”

“Oh...okay, thank you!” Roxi felt a genuine smile spread across her face, a rather unfamiliar feeling as of late, and it felt wonderful. She graciously accepted the paper bag with handles to help carry the pint home and loaded her little caravan onto her back for the return walk to *Le Nouveau*. There was enough time; she might stop in one of the parks on the way and enjoy some of the gelato with the spoon the girl tossed into the bag at the last second.

When she did, settling down onto a park bench and carefully peeling open the brown paper bag, Roxi froze.

A fresh, frosty bottle of cola sat nestled beside the pint.

###

Something in the back of her mind whispered that each moment should be savored, celebrated, recognized for every little accomplishment. The final signature to receive her new apartment keys, actually receiving said keys, the warm but perfunctory handshake and murmur of congratulations and welcome to her new home. The first elevator ride up to her high-rise in the south wing, the first insertion of the new key into a very old-looking lock, the first turn of the doorknob, the first sight of her new abode.

But exhaustion was a beast clinging tightly to her back, and it was all Roxi could do to not simply fumble down the hall and crash into the empty living space of her studio apartment, brain entirely focused on finding the bathroom.

Oh thank you, God. Toilet paper. Some kind soul anticipated the next tenant's need for a fresh roll.

It seemed fitting that Roxi's first full and undistracted view of her new home was from the doorway to the surprisingly beautiful bathroom. A realm of possibilities lay before her while a pile of shit washed away behind her. *Accurate.*

The apartment was absolutely stunning in its vintage beauty, with polished hardwood floors and elegant wood columns inlaid with hand-carved foliage framing the living space. And what a living space! The studio was huge, far larger than the shoebox she'd expected at such a reduced rate, with plenty of room for a queen-sized bed, small couch, and home office. A granite countertop wrapped around the very much up-to-date kitchen where, *bless whoever did this*, a new dishwasher was discreetly tucked into the cabinetry.

The same glitch that stole her dream apartment away and forced her into the south wing must have also misinformed the leasing agent regarding rates and refurbishments. Either that, or what management considered to be "not worth the markup" vastly differed from Roxi's expectations. This was better than she anticipated and far better than she felt she deserved.

A soft thump at the door reminded her of the supply delivery she placed while killing time at the diner, and she sent up a prayer of gratitude for perfect timing. Ten dollars was worth the expense if it meant having a decent air mattress delivered in time to sleep on something softer than the floor. She even splurged a bit and ordered one of the "fancy" models, a thick queen self-inflating mattress that would work quite well while she figured out all the other furnishings. Like a bed set.

Eventually.

She was idly flipping through celebrity news articles on her phone when she opened the door and nudged the bag with her toe—only to quickly discover it was not a bag at all, but a vase filled with roses three seconds away from tipping over.

“Shit!” Roxi dropped her phone in her dive to catch the vase before it soaked the hall carpet, then cursed under her breath again when her fingers fumbled to pick up the phone. It was an awkward balancing act pivoting from doorway to countertop, but whoever designed the studio kept deliveries in mind and made sure the granite stretched to the door. With vase and phone safely settled, Roxi gently nudged the stems of blood-red roses aside until she found the card.

Her name was scrawled across the small envelope in the most elegant script, a lavish flourish underlining the letters like elegant filigree. Chicago florists went all out for their clientele, apparently. The card inside didn’t say who sent the flowers, or even which florist made the arrangement; only two words were printed—no, handwritten—on the thick paper.

Welcome home.

For the briefest flicker of moments, Roxi’s heart skipped a beat and that lump formed anew in her throat. Mysterious little notes and flourishes of beauty were things *he* used to give her, just to remind her that even when he was off saving the world, she was still *his* world.

But these roses were not from him. They couldn’t be, for one simple reason.

He was gone.

The dam burst and the tears flooded her face, but she didn’t do anything to stop them. She was alone; no one around to watch or stare, no one to ask her what made her double over the counter and sob into her arms. Some proper part of her brain kept the card in mind and her fingers held it up away from her dripping face to preserve the ink, the lettering far too pretty to smear with her sorrow. As her tears slowly subsided, Roxi peeked up at the words and let them sink in. One in particular.

Home.

A loud buzzing on the counter yanked her out of limbo. “Heyyy,” she sighed into the phone. “I made it.”

“You made it.” Cameron’s warm tenor filled her ears and soothed away whatever tension remained post-cry. Best friends often had that effect. “How is the new place?”

“Different. I mean, it’s a different unit from what they showed me, but honestly....” Roxi glanced around the spacious studio and smiled. “I think it’s way better. I love it.”

“What’s wrong?” *Dammit.* There was no hiding from this man’s bat ears.

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

Roxi sniffed and breathed out a small chuckle. “It’s just been a long day. Between the travel and public trans—”

“Oh god. I’d cry, too, taking public trans.”

That made her genuinely laugh. “Right? I didn’t know I’d have all this extra money so I was pinching pennies, but oh well.” She filled him in on the sweet deal negotiated with the leasing office and gave him her updated address, all the while flipping the card back and forth between her fingers as she leaned against the counter. “Hey, Cam.”

“Hey, Roxi.”

“You didn’t send me flowers, did you?”

He paused. “No...but do tell. Details. Does Miss Roxi have a lover? A secret admirer?” His voice sounded conspiratorially giddy.

“No! Probably just Mom or...I don’t know. A welcoming committee.”

“Or the wrong apartment.”

She hadn’t thought of that. *Damn*. “Shut up. Let me enjoy the rare possibility these two dozen blood-red roses are actually for me.”

Cam whistled low. “Two dozen? Are you *sure* you don’t have a secret lover or sugar daddy or...confused neighbor?”

“Cam!” Roxi gasped in playful indignation.

“If I were you, I’d be checking out all the neighbors. Thoroughly. Rowr.” She could practically hear his brows waggle through the phone. “But anyways, no, sorry, I didn’t send you *two dozen red roses* because it’s not my style. What *is* my style is to send you a celebratory deep-dish feast which, if I’m reading this stupid app right, should be there in about two hours. Give or take traffic.”

That warmth filled her again, and she wished so much she could hug him. “Seriously, Cam? Thank you!” But then she remembered where he was, and even though she was alone in her own space, she dropped her voice to just above a whisper. “They let you do that?”

He snickered but lowered his voice as well. “Bish, please. When have I ever played to someone else’s rules? I’m on my best behavior because that’s what I want them to think.”

“I miss you.” She meant every syllable. Cameron Evers was the broom who swept up her pieces when her world shattered, and the duct tape that at least tried to help her keep it all together through the darkest of times as much as the lightest. She knew, without him saying it, that he called to check in on her—and not just because of the new apartment.

His voice softened, and his words floated to her like the warmest hug. “I miss you, too. Really. When I get out of here, I’m crashing your pad and you’re giving me the full tour, and we are going to get smashed at Navy Pier and flirt with every sailor in sight. Got it?”

Roxi giggled. “Aye aye, captain.”

“Hey, Roxi.”

“Hey, Cam.”

Another pause. He sighed. “I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you, too.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“Good.” Voices muttered something in the distance, and he let out a much more impatient sigh this time. “Duty calls. I’m needed on Leto Deck.”

“Got it. Be good.”

“Never.”

And just like that, just like always, Roxi forgot all about the pain that gut-punched her only moments before. The tears were long since dried on her face, replaced by a glowing smile given to her by one of her closest and dearest friends. When a knock at the door signaled the

actual air mattress and bedding delivery, Roxi practically skipped to the entrance and attempted a cheerful swing of the bags.

Nope. Air mattresses, packed tightly in their boxes, were actually quite heavy.

##

Roxi waited until sundown to enjoy her special delivery of “Chicago classic” deep-dish pizza on the rooftop. She wanted to see if her theory was correct, and it absolutely was: the view from the top was breathtaking.

Brilliant hues of purple and red painted the sky over an endless stretch of sapphire, bordered by the granite and silver towers of Chicago’s skyline. To the right, it was an endless sea of architecture spanning centuries of innovation and artistry. To the left, nothing but blue speckled with tiny white sailboats and private yachts. The wind was a bit much for someone trying to enjoy pizza without dripping tomato sauce all over her shirt, but she felt silly for even mentally complaining about it in what was literally called, “The Windy City”.

It was simply enough to be on top of the world.

##

The lights in the apartment gave off a warm golden glow, almost like candlelight, and Roxi loved the ambiance. It reflected off the wood and gave the whole place a richer, more ethereal feel, almost like stepping back into the time of gas lamps and fireplaces.

Zero complaints about this “downgrade”, to be sure.

The only thing Roxi was not in love with was the mirror hanging inside the front closet by the entrance. *Nope. Nopity nope.* She carefully lifted the glass panel from the back of the closet and set it down in the far back corner of the tiny space with the reflective side facing the wall. If she had a spare sheet, she’d throw it on top for good measure, but closing the door would have to be good enough. There wasn’t anything she could do about the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, but closing that door, too, would work.

It’s not that she hated her reflection—on good days, she enjoyed doing her makeup in the early morning sunlight as it poured through a window. But that was the extent of her mirror usage and tolerance. Mirrors, in general, were uncomfortable, and mirrors after dark were a solid and indisputable “nope” altogether.

Not since she was ten years old.

Not since the nightmare of the Black Queen grinning back at her.

Nope, best to not take any chances with the spirit realm and haphazard mirrors. It didn’t matter to her if this was the twenty-first century and mirrors were no longer backed with silver or used for scrying—when it came to spirits, demons, nightmares, any sort of dark phantasma, precautions were always taken.

And with that in mind, Roxi realized she nearly forgot to do the essential house blessing before going to bed. *Way to risk a haunting, Roxi.* Thankfully, her mother had made sure to pack a small bottle of olive oil and a bundle of sage in her “for the road” care package tucked neatly inside her duffle bag, along with a baggie of chocolate chip cookies and homemade caramel corn. For a moment, Roxi’s heart squeezed, and she wondered just how long she could make the food last before homesickness for her family would set in.

But there was business to attend to, especially if she planned on getting a good night’s sleep—*alone*. No telling what all went on in a building this old, and no chances would be taken to find out.

She cupped her palm over the sink and poured a small amount of oil into her hand, massaging it into her skin as she made her way back over to the now-inflated air mattress and sat down. It was always best to get comfortable for the first part.

A house blessing was a tradition taught to her by her mother, who admitted one day that it was something Roxi’s father taught her back when they were teenagers. Most families called upon priests or ministers to do it “formally”, but Roxi and her family had enough experience with the spirit world, and strong enough faith in their God, to do it themselves. She crossed her arms in front of her, palms up, and bowed her head in prayer, asking God for blessing and protection over her new apartment. For guidance to do what was right in this new place, among these new people. For help and strength to continue her journey of recovery.

For her to finally be *home*.

Warmth filled her palms and tingled on the tips of her fingers. The room glowed just a bit brighter. When Roxi uncrossed her arms, the surge of energy in her palms hummed and swirled just above the surface of her skin, waiting for her to throw it.

Instead, she let it float and simmer from her fingertips into the space around her, willing it to fill every corner and cranny beyond what her eyes could see. Uncrossing her legs and rolling off the mattress onto her feet, Roxi made her way around the apartment to every window, door, and perceivable point of entry and made a small mark of a cross on each with the oil on her hands.

The mirrors received a cross on every corner, just to be thorough.

She used the gas stove to light the sage and quickly blew it out, waving the bundle around the studio in no particular pattern. This was the part that made her feel especially ridiculous, dancing around a room clutching dried plants to ward off evil spirits. But she respected the tradition, bore with the smell, and appreciated the fact that this particular bundle of sage was blessed by the spiritual leaders of the Oglala Lakota—a gift from one of her mother’s friends.

Now that the apartment was spiritually sealed and cleansed, Roxi felt confident that this night, and every night after, would be peaceful and filled with better dreams.

###

“Careful! Careful! We don’t want to wake her.”

Whispers, very soft whispers, floated from the front door. Roxi sucked in a breath and willed her body to carefully, slowly roll from her bed...but she couldn’t move.

She couldn’t move at all.

“I’ll check the bathroom. You check by the bed.”

She braced herself for towering intruders to thump their way toward her, but what she saw instead made her eyes widen with disbelief.

A glowing silver orb the size of a basketball floated through the air, and walking just below it was a small, bearded man in a floppy pointed hat. His beard grew into a point that brushed the tops of his very obviously handmade shoes, neatly trimmed and oiled judging by the healthy sheen reflected in the orb’s soft light. He quietly made his way across the empty floor toward the bed, thumbs tucked in the lapels of a rather classic-looking tweed vest. The luminescent sphere floated into the bathroom and disappeared for a few moments before darting back out. “It’s not in here.”

It spoke.

The glowing floating thingie *talked*.

“Are you sure it’s here at all?” The incredibly short man furrowed his brow as he looked around. “This place is empty.”

“Look at her. It’s *her*.” The orb slowly glided towards Roxi’s prone form. “You felt her wards just as I did.”

At this angle, Roxi could just barely make out the slightest flicker of...*wings?*

Wings.

An impossibly short, bearded man in Tolkein-esque clothes and a floppy, pointed hat...with a shimmering ball of light that spoke in a high-pitched voice and very much looked like it had dragonfly wings.

No. Way.

The man scoffed and shook his head, an amused smile spread across his face. “I’m impressed, to be sure. He will be, too. But we need to find ‘it’ first, and before she wakes up.”

“She’s already awake.”

Damn.

Roxi tried to move again, but still found herself frozen in place. Stranger still, she couldn’t feel herself blinking. At all.

“No, she’s not.” The gnome—*what else could he be?*—scrunched his face as he peered at her over the crochet blanket she’d tucked around her before sinking into her dreams. “She’s still asleep.”

The orb lowered closer to both of them and sighed. Oh yes, those were definitely wings, fluttering like a hummingbird’s but attached to...a very, *very* tiny person. “Her body is asleep, but her mind is wide awake. Her eyes are closed, but she sees all.”

Now it was time for the gnome to sigh. “Great. Fantastic. Do *you* want to do the honors, or should I?”

“It is an honor to be in her presence.” The pixie tilted her head and smiled at the apparently-sleeping form of Roxi Lovegood. Despite the fair distance and tiny features, Roxi didn’t need binoculars to notice the way the smile remained, but the eyes hardened. “It is a curse to whoever touches her unbidden.”

“So you want me to do it.” He sucked in a breath and nodded. “Of course. Great. No problem at all.”

Roxi tried to scream when his hand grabbed her jaw and yanked it down, forced her mouth open, but nothing came out. She struggled to push him off, but still her limbs disobeyed in frozen slumber. His fingers tightened their grip and pulled her mouth open wider, impossibly wider, to the point where the corners of her mouth started to burn. She screamed harder, louder, but still...nothing came out.

“Sorry for this, *do mhorgacht*.”

He shoved his free hand into her mouth, wriggled his fingers over her tongue and back, back, back until she fruitlessly gagged, soundlessly screamed, and his pudgy little fingers grabbed ahold of one of her wisdom teeth.

Everything went dark.