

ENCHANTED  
MISADVENTURES  
WITH

GREAT-AUNT POPPY

MAGIC, MAYHEM,  
AND MONSTERS



HALLIE CHRISTENSEN

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# 1

The Alexander children usually enjoyed holiday breaks, but this one was different.

Their parents would not be with them. They would not be in their cozy home all decorated for Christmas with their bright green tree and red stockings. And, they wouldn't be able to do all their festive family traditions—making a gingerbread house, driving around at night to look at lights and drinking hot chocolate, or watching favorite holiday movies. This Christmas was different. This Christmas, they were forced to spend a week with Great-Aunt Poppy.

“Was she the only person that said she could watch us?” Ava, the eldest child, pleaded helplessly in the middle seat of the car. She was the sole kid out of the family who had actually seen Great-Aunt Poppy and been to her house. The best way to describe the house was haunted. The best way to describe Poppy was absolutely horrifying, down to her pointed hat and mole-covered face. Her real name may have been Great-Aunt Poppy, but after that one terrifying experience, Ava secretly gave her the nickname Groppy because, as she thought, *she looks like a Groppy*. And after hearing her frightening tale, her siblings agreed.

“This was such short notice, Ava. We're just fortunate and grateful that we found someone to watch all three of you.” Her mom turned around from the passenger seat and gave a consoling look. “I'm sure you will have a great time.”

Ava was positive she would not.

Six-year-old Charlotte put on a good show crying buckets of tears, but her mom knew crocodile tears when she saw them. “Those are fake tears, Charlotte.” Her mom sighed. “You're not fooling me.”

Charlotte glowered. It wasn't only that she was terrified by the thought of staying with her creepy great-aunt, but she had just gotten new caticorn sheets on her bed and was pretty sure the house they were going to would not have those same bedsheets. She loved cats and unicorns, so the caticorn was obviously the perfect animal. How was she supposed to sleep without hundreds of caticorns around her?

“Are you sure you have to go to work?” Charlotte asked her parents sweetly while trying to make her brown eyes as large and kitten-like as possible. Since the tears hadn't worked, Charlotte would try her second weapon—her eyes. Being the youngest and cutest, she was usually able to get her parents to change their minds about certain things. Especially when it came to things like staying up late, getting another sparkly cat shirt, or receiving a second helping of chocolate cake. But being cute wasn't working today.

“Charlotte, sweetie, I am sorry, but Daddy and I have to go to work. We'll only be gone a week. There are a lot of people that need us to help them. I'm sure they would like to be with their families, too, instead of being sick at the hospital.”

Charlotte crossed her arms fiercely, making her brown ringlets bounce by the sides of her head where they were tied in two pigtails. She pouted in her car seat as she jerked her head to look outside at Christmas decorations. There was nothing Charlotte could do to change their minds.

Ava sighed and leaned her head against the cold glass of the car window, letting her breath fog it over so she could draw sad faces with tears. Her dark blonde hair fell into her face and she pushed it away, revealing sorrowful green eyes. Ava turned to her sister sympathetically.

“If the pros and cons list I made won’t change their minds, then nothing will. Not even your puppy-dog eyes.”

“They’re *kitten* eyes,” Charlotte corrected her and sniffed.

Ava understood her parents had to go to work. They were doctors and too many people had gotten the flu. This holiday season was not a season of joy but of germs and bacteria. That’s why she had been extra careful at school. Ava hated germs. *Hated* them. She carried hand sanitizer on her backpack, and an extra one inside her backpack, and hand wipes in her pocket, just to be safe. At the early age of five, Ava had unequivocally determined that kids were covered in germs and spread them quickly. She dreaded the school bathrooms, pencil sharpeners, doorknobs, lunch trays, and anytime someone handed her a piece of paper after wiping their runny nose with their sleeve. She shivered just thinking about it.

In the middle seat, looking particularly bored with his slicked-back brown hair that Mom had tried to tame that morning, sat the middle child and their only brother, Nolan. He also did not want to go to Groppy’s. Nolan would have put up a fight, but it seemed like too much effort when he already knew he wouldn’t win. He had at least tried to get sick at school by sitting close to any classmates that sneezed or coughed, but Nolan never seemed to get what he wanted. He was healthy and well and could go to Groppy’s.

Nolan’s main reason for not wanting to go was his eating habits. Nolan was a picky eater. He liked gross things like zombies, but he certainly did not like eating gross things. And he was pretty sure that gross things were all he would be eating at Groppy’s. A whole week of strange, disgusting food. Probably lizard tails and eyeballs or beetle soup. Yuck. He smashed his palms onto his face and groaned.

“I’m going to starve.” He held his hands out toward his parents, imploring. “Don’t you care about me dying?”

“Nolan, she will have food for you to eat. The only way you would starve is if you refused to eat it,” Dad replied without even batting an eye. Nolan groaned again and pretended to die right there in the car, very dramatically. Charlotte poked him in the arm to make sure he wasn’t really dead.

“Ow,” grunted Nolan. “Just bury me outside by the shed and on my tombstone write the words: *Here lies our favorite child. We should have fed him pizza and let him stay at home.*”

Dad sighed heavily. He wasn’t buying it, either.

“You’re all acting as if it’s the end of the world,” Mom said, laughing. “What’s so wrong with staying at Aunt Poppy’s?”

Everything. Because the Alexander children were positive that Aunt Poppy was a witch.

# 2

Ava was six years old the first time she met Groppy. Groppy was Ava's mother's aunt, making her Ava's great-aunt, meaning she was *really* old. And Ava certainly did not think Groppy was great.

She and her mom had driven to Groppy's house, which was out in the country, surrounded by flat pasture land and thick woods. She lived in a two-story wooden house that, to Ava, looked like it belonged in a scary movie. Paint was chipping off the sides, shutters hung loosely by one good nail, and the steps were crooked and creaked when you stepped on them. The color of the house looked like the same color Ava saw when she cleaned off her paintbrush in a cup of water in art class—a grubby mud puddle. A long, crooked brick chimney puffed out sooty smoke constantly. The house wasn't even straight. It leaned a bit to one side. How it hadn't fallen over, Ava didn't know.

The inside of the house hadn't looked much better. There was a lot of clutter, stacks of papers, scrolls, and books, old pens that looked like feathers, dust-covered blankets piled on top of old, ugly, floral furniture, and tall oak bookcases filled with thousands of books. Perched on all of these were lots and lots of cats that climbed all over the house.

Large, dirty windows let light in the musty old house. When the sun shone through the smudged windows, Ava could see how much dust and cat hair were floating all around her. She had quickly pulled her shirt over her mouth and breathed deeply.

The walls were covered in a striped wallpaper with the most unpleasant color combination Ava had ever seen—brown and burnt orange. And the gross wallpaper was filled with weird portraits. What made it so creepy was that every portrait on the wall had owls in them. Some owls can be fluffy and cute, but these were the kind with sharp slit eyes and pointed beaks, razor-sharp talons, and a wicked glare. They were dark brown or a snow-white, and their eyes seemed to follow Ava wherever she went. She stayed close to her mom during that visit and did not dare leave her side.

And then there was Groppy. She was a shorter plump woman, with thick black hair twisted in a fat, wide braid that hung down her back. She had big moles on her face. Ava found it difficult not to stare at them, but her eyes always moved to those big brown lumps on her aunt's chin, cheeks, and forehead. Especially when there was a hair in one. Groppy's teeth were only a little yellow and crooked, but her breath? *Whew!* It was bad. And let's not forget Groppy's clothes. How no one saw that she was a witch was beyond Ava. Groppy was dressed head to toe in all black clothing. A high-necked button-up black blouse was tucked into a frumpy long black skirt. Everything was black, except for her socks. They were a wildly striped purple and green color, and they bounced off the black outfit like the reflection of the sun off a car window.

Did Ava not see this exact outfit in the dictionary under “witch”? And of course, on top of her head was a pointed black hat. Ava decided that either her mom was blind or Groppy had put a spell on her.

Groppy also smelled strongly of spices, which would have been okay if she didn’t also smell strongly of nasty kitty litter. Because she had a billion cats in the house, she had to have a billion litter boxes. The smell was awful.

All of this Ava told her siblings to fully prepare them for the coming week: a spooky and dirty house, tons of cats, musty air, scary portraits, hairy moles, and Groppy. Nolan and Charlotte had gobbled up the horror stories but had hoped that Ava was just overexaggerating.

Since Groppy lived far out in the country, they hadn’t had time to go and visit her. It had been years since Ava had been to her creepy, old house, and she silently wished and hoped it wasn’t as bad as she remembered.

“Are we close to Groppy’s?” Nolan whispered to Ava with a nervous look on his face.

“I think so,” Ava replied. “I’ve seen fewer and fewer houses, and we haven’t passed a store in miles, so we’re getting close.”

“Does she live in the woods?” Charlotte asked, a bit frightened herself. Scary things were known to live in the woods. Ava nodded solemnly, and Charlotte’s eyes widened. She was not going to survive this Christmas.

“Now, you kids don’t worry about Santa.” Mom turned around to smile at them, interrupting their hushed conversation. “We made sure to write a letter and told him you would be staying with Aunt Poppy. Oh, this will be such a fun Christmas. I’m jealous I won’t get to celebrate it with you and Aunt Poppy. Out in the beautiful country surrounded by woods. So much fun!”

The children all stared back at their mother with the most disgusted and depressed looks they could manage. Mom took the hint and sighed, turning back around in her seat. Santa finding them on Christmas Eve was the least of their worries. They just wanted to live through the week.

“Can we sleep together?” Charlotte asked her siblings.

“You kick in your sleep,” Nolan protested. “If we have to share a bed, I won’t be sleeping beside you.”

Charlotte whimpered. Ava reached over her rude brother and touched her sister’s hand. Charlotte turned to look at her. “I’ll sleep by you,” Ava said with a smile. That made Charlotte feel much better. Then, Ava winked. “We’ll make Nolan sleep with the cats.”

Nolan crossed his arms. “Yea, that’s not happening.”

“We’re here!” Dad sang out brightly. The sound of loose gravel crunched beneath the car tires, and the van came to an abrupt halt. All three of the Alexander children’s heads turned slowly, eyes wide open, to gaze outside. It was just as Ava had remembered. Maybe, even worse. The old haunted-looking house still stood there leaning to one side. Bits of chipped paint hung loosely from the rotted wooden boards. Shutters shook violently in the breeze, being held by large and silky spider webs. Smoke still billowed from the crooked brick chimney, which was also falling apart. Tall dead grass and weeds covered the yard as a cool breeze swayed the few leaves that were left on the skeletal trees around the house. The woods in the background looked deeper, thicker, and darker than Ava had remembered. They cast a ghostly shadow over the house, and a light gray wispy fog seemed to unfold from the edges of the forest.

Charlotte squinted. “Why does she still have her Halloween decorations up?” she whispered.

“That’s just the way her house looks,” Ava answered, disturbed.

“But there are cobwebs hung all over the house,” Nolan fussed. “You can’t tell me she has that many spiders that live *on* her home that they were able to cover the whole thing in webs.”

Charlotte gulped. A high-pitched howl echoed from inside the woods. All three kids jumped.

“What was that?” Nolan shrieked. “Was that a wolf?”

Dad laughed it off. “No, silly. It’s probably just a coyote. They don’t have wolves around here.”

“What’s a coyote?” Charlotte asked so quietly Ava could barely hear her.

“Well.” Their dad scratched his head. “It’s like a wild dog or a small wolf. They won’t come inside the house or anything if that’s what you’re afraid of. They’re probably just howling so they can find each other out here in the woods.”

“Find each other?” Nolan asked in disbelief. “You mean there’s more of them?”

Dad shrugged. “Maybe.”

All three Alexander children sat back in their seats, eyes forward. Things were not looking good. And for some reason, their parents were completely fine with leaving them at this creepy old house in the middle of nowhere with coyotes howling all around it. Mom and Dad got out of the car and stretched. The kids didn’t dare move. They shivered as more coyotes called out to each other.

A loud and eerie *CREAK* sounded outside the open van doors. The kids jerked in their seats and looked toward the sound. The front door of the house had opened, and several cats fled out of the doorway, *rawring* and *meowing* as they went. They were all black and short-haired with bright yellow eyes. One jumped onto the hood of the van and hissed at the children through the window. Nolan hissed back. Ava reached over and closed the van door, locking it.

*THUD. THUD.*

Something emerged from inside the house and now stood on the porch—a hefty woman dressed in a black blouse and skirt, a thick black and gray braid running down her back, with moles so large on her face, you could see them from the car. Ava could have sworn she even saw a hair in one.

The children all sucked in their breath. There stood their “baby-sitter” for the next week. In petrified unison, Ava, Nolan, and Charlotte whispered, “GROPPY.”

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