

The Alchemist of All Hallows Eve

Gigi Pandian

Chapter 1

I dashed through the wrought iron gate that stood open, the misty rain leaving nearly invisible droplets on my silver raincoat as I made my way to the house. Ivy tendrils wound their way around the curved black iron of the gate and fence, hiding the wires of electric candles that illuminated the yard with a warm glow.

By the time I took my first step on the stone path, I already knew. The house was perfect.

A perfect family home. I blinked back tears. What an astonishing idea, after so many decades living on the road. On my own. On the run. Never staying in one place for long. Never imagining I could have something more. The last two years in a fixer-upper were two of the best years in my life, still on my own but tentatively testing the idea of putting down roots. All the joys and trials of these last two years had led to this moment. Finding a home for me and Max. For the start of a new life together.

A twenty-foot *Malus domestica* tree towered above me, bringing me to a halt when I should have been rushing inside to see if I'd made it in time. The apple tree's green and yellow leaves shielded smooth branches brimming with red-gold apples ripe enough to pick. I ran my fingertips across the smooth bark and crouched to touch the spot where the trunk met soil. Gnarled roots peeking out of the earth told me the tree's advanced age, but it was thriving. The person who tended to this tree truly cared for it. As I would.

A bright yellow door, only three inches high, rested at the base of the tree. It was a fairy door, inviting anyone who took the time to notice it to imagine a portal to the fairy realm. I wondered if the whimsical doorway was there year-round or only because it was the week before Halloween. Behind the tree, crimson delphinium flowers were blooming. Red was a rare color for the flower, and it was late in the year for the spire-like stems to bloom. They, too, had been well tended.

As curious as I was about the person who attended to this landscape, I didn't have time to speculate. I stood and hurried on.

Old-fashioned lanterns lit the stone steps leading to the covered porch. Two massive copper owls flanked the front door, one guarding a carved pumpkin, the other an autumn vegetable I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen: a mangelwurz. I've celebrated many types of Halloween traditions over the years, so I recognized the root vegetable that had been popular for Halloween carvings over a century ago in Britain and Ireland. These decorations weren't plastic toys from a modern manufacturer, but talismans that harkened back to celebrations of the autumn harvest—and the idea that October 31 was a night when the veil between worlds of the living and the dead was thin.

I smiled at the mangelwurz's grotesque grinning face, wondering how a modern-day homeowner in Portland, Oregon had stumbled across the tradition of carving creepy faces into the lumpy root related to a beet.

But I didn't have time to linger outside and wonder.

I was lucky that nobody had put in an offer on the house while I was away last week, since the housing market was so tight these days. Today, I'd hoped to arrive right when the open house began, but it was such a busy afternoon at Max's new shop that he couldn't get away. We decided I should go on ahead. Still, it was already twenty minutes past the hour when the showing began.

And yet, the squeaky door of my old 1942 pickup truck was the loudest sound I'd heard since arriving. Instead of a rush of other eager homebuyers, the inviting yard was deserted. No kids were exploring the whimsical décor. No voices could be heard coming from inside the house, but perhaps the walls were thick?

The old home was beautiful and the listing price far lower than expected. *Why was I the only potential buyer here?*

The front door stood open, and as I stepped inside a tall woman in a cream-colored pantsuit greeted me.

"Zoe?"

I nodded and took her outstretched hand.

"Simone Friday," she said, ushering me into the cozy foyer of the house. "Congratulations again on your engagement. This is a wonderful home to begin a new life together."

I touched my malachite engagement ring. The green stone was the most perfect embodiment of Max's and my love for each other. Malachite, the stone of transformation.

"What a stunning ring." The real estate agent pulled her gaze from my ring finger and craned her thin neck to look around me. "Is Max still in the car?"

She had no idea how unique the ring truly was. Not that I could ever tell her.

"Max is running a little late," I explained, hoping that wouldn't make us look irresponsible if the owner was making a decision between multiple interested buyers. This housing market was brutal, and homes around here were being snatched up as soon as they hit the market. The agent Max had found us hadn't suggested this house. I'd found it while browsing.

I'd reached out to the seller's agent ahead of time to make sure the low list price wasn't a mistake. She told me the owner needed to sell on an expedited timeline, prioritizing a buyer who could close quickly. He'd had a bad fall and was currently recovering in the hospital, hoping to move into a retirement community as soon as possible since he could no longer handle living alone in this big, multi-story house.

Looking out the front window, I smiled as I spotted even more autumn decorations I hadn't noticed on my way in. Sheltered on the covered porch, an owl made from a pinecone and acorns sat next to a trio of gourds with silly painted faces. With this type of creativity, wherever the owner ended up, I had a feeling he'd be just fine.

"You're an outdoorsy person," Simone said. "I can tell. You're in for a treat. I've been doing this for decades and believe me, this place is quite a find."

I continued through the house, enjoying the solid wood paneling and cozy nooks that included a built-in window seat in the main bedroom. The back garden included a small kitchen garden, bountiful flowers, and even more fruit trees. Three types of apples, plus two each of cherry, plum, pear, and fig trees, making a full dozen. The Spartan apple tree's ripe

apples hung unpicked, but I was more worried by its thin branches, which were drooping from more than the weight of the fruit. When I was a young woman helping with farmland that included a nearby orchard with apple and pear trees, I would have immediately known what was wrong. Was I losing my edge? What did the tree need?

“Zoe?” The agent’s voice shook me out of the memory.

I’m Zoe Faust, born in 1676, in Salem Village in what’s now Massachusetts, a hundred years before the Declaration of Independence was signed. My natural aptitude with plants led to my being accused of being a witch, and later being taken under the wing of famed alchemist Nicolas Flamel. Under his tutelage, I learned the principles of alchemy, which led to my accidentally discovering the Elixir of Life. When I said I’d celebrated many types of Halloween traditions, I wasn’t kidding.

“Ready to look at the guest house?” Simone asked.

She led me through the backyard to a small cottage almost entirely hidden by trees.

“Designed for someone who loves to cook, as you can tell!” she said as we stepped inside. “Take your time out here. I’ll be in the front section of the main house to greet others.”

She wasn’t kidding about the layout. Two-thirds of the little home’s open floorplan was taken up by a massive kitchen. The style was a bit dated, but for the one who would be using the space, it was functionality that mattered. Max and I needed a home of our own, but we couldn’t abandon our friend Dorian. It would be impossible for him to live on his own. And as a chef, he would love this space.

I stepped back outside into the miniature orchard. Everything about this place was perfect. *Too perfect*, the nervous part of my brain chimed in. The part of my brain that had kept me safe for centuries. That had kept me moving, avoiding being detected as an alchemist. But this house... I knew this was where I was meant to be. Where we were meant to be.

I rooted through my bag for my phone. It took Max four rings to answer.

“Zoe, is everything—”

“It’s perfect. So perfect. How soon can you get here?”

“I had no idea how wild weekend crowds could be. I don’t know if I can—”

“You’re at the register?” I imagined him ringing up the customers lined up at his cozy shop, The Alchemy of Tea, with a smile on his handsome face as he told people about how best to brew his custom tea blends or use the various styles of teapots he stocked.

“I stepped outside to take your call.”

“Mary can handle the register on her own. She did it beautifully while you were away. Truly. You need to see this place today. What if someone else puts in an offer that’s accepted? As soon as you see it in person, you’ll understand why it’s so special.”

“Do you know,” he chuckled, “it’s impossible to say *no* to you, Zoe Faust.”

Max arrived ten minutes later and found me in the backyard’s mini orchard, where I was trying to figure out what was afflicting the ailing apple tree.

I threw my arms around him. “I thought you were going to call me when you arrived. Did you see the house?”

Max didn’t answer immediately. More than that, his shoulders were stiff. And he wasn’t hugging me back. As I pulled away, expecting terrible news, only then did I see the look of worry on his face.

My own smile drained away. “Someone else got the house?”

“I doubt it.” He looked past me towards the house.

“What’s going on?” I followed his gaze. *What was I missing?*

“This is *Rufus Hitchcock*’s house.”

“You know the owner? It’s not on the listing—”

He groaned. “It wouldn’t be. But I know the house. You really don’t know the name?”

“Why would I?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t look more closely at the listing, or I would have spotted it. I’ve just been so busy—”

“Max. If you don’t tell me what’s going on right now, my head is going to explode like an overheated cucurbit. What could possibly be wrong with our dream house that we can’t fix?” Whatever it was, I hoped it wouldn’t need too much money. This is embarrassing for an alchemist to admit, but I’m wretched at making gold.

“It’s not fixable.” Max looked forlornly at the perfect house. “I wish it was... but—”

“Max.”

He turned back to me and shook his head. “Rufus Hitchcock is a *murderer*, Zoe. He killed his girlfriend in this house forty years ago, and strange things have been happening here ever since. That’s why nobody else wants this house.”

###