

FAIRY
Godmothers,
INC.

Also by Saranna DeWylde

How to Lose a Demon in 10 Days

How to Marry an Angel in 10 Days

How to Seduce a Warlock in 10 Days

FAIRY Godmothers, INC.

Saranna DeWylde



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For the bit of fairy godmother in each of us . . .

PROLOGUE

Petunia “Petty” Blossom happened to have an extra gleam in her twinkling eyes on that particular morning. Much to her sisters’ chagrin.

First, spring had come to Ever After, Missouri (they only had winter in December), and the fairy godmother sisters had set about their duties bringing the town to lush and vibrant life. To any nonmagical person on the outside looking in, the sisters looked like a trio of kindly grandmother types who had run slightly wild in their youth, but who now baked cookies, enjoyed gardening, and collected cats.

The sun was high in the clear blue sky, and fat birds singing their songs of young love dotted their unfortunately naked cherry tree. Several squirrels waited patiently, clasping their tiny little paws together as they looked back and forth between the fairies and the tree. Petty hoped she wouldn’t have to disappoint them.

“I don’t know what you’re smiling about, Pets. We’re all going to hell in a rather thorny handbasket.” Bluebonnet sighed and slapped her wand against her hand as she tried, and failed, for the fourth consecutive time to bring a bloom to the cherry tree that dominated the backyard of their gingerbread-style cottage.

“Decidedly cherry-free, I might add.” Jonquil crossed her arms over her chest and scowled.

The scents of magic and their herb garden flooded her

awareness and she grounded herself in the moment. She allowed herself to feel the magic of the green grass and rich, loamy earth beneath their cedar deck, and she recalled childhood memories of her sisters.

When they first got their wings.

Their first wands.

Learning to be magical.

And she filled herself with all the love she could summon.

Love for her magic, for her darling charges, and, of course, for her sisters. Petty bumped her ample hip into Bluebonnet's and a zing of magic crackled from the wand and produced exactly one perfect bloom.

"How did you do that?" Bluebonnet frowned.

"Stop frowning, Bon-Bon. It'll give you wrinkles," Jonquil said.

"You've already got wrinkles." Bluebonnet stuck her tongue out at her sister, but then quickly checked her compact to see if she had, in fact, developed the ever-dreaded wrinkles.

"So what? I'm not afraid of my age. I just know how terrified *you* are." Jonquil returned the rude gesture.

"Sisters. You know, we could argue until kingdom come, which is going to be soon if we don't do something. Or, we could get to the talking about *how* I brought a bloom to our sad, little tree." Petty pushed her glasses up on the end of her nose. They were more a fashion statement than anything, but she liked the effect.

"Yes, fine. Let's get to that." Bon-Bon rattled her wand again and then looked around. "Oh dear, I hope the neighbors didn't see."

"Stop shaking the poor dear. You're going to give him motion sickness," Jonquil said.

"I am not."

"Yes, you are. If you'd just—" Jonquil reached for the wand. Bluebonnet was not about to have any of that nonsense.

She jerked the wand away, but it slipped out of her grasp and when it hit the cedar planks of their deck, it shattered into toothpicks.

"Look what you did!" Bluebonnet cried.

Petty could see that things were about to go decidedly south, and that wasn't something they had time for.

"Love!" Petty shrieked.

Both of her sisters turned to look at her.

"Excuse me, what?" Jonquil asked as she tucked her silver-white hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, what?" Bluebonnet added. "Love?"

Petty nodded. "Yes, exactly. That's our answer."

Jonquil sagged down into a deck chair, unmindful of the dirt now on her bright-yellow dress. "We can't even bring spring to Ever After. How is love our answer?"

"It's the problem *and* the solution," Petty continued. "The world is running out of love. That's why we're running out of magic."

"That sounds like hippie woo-woo to me." Bluebonnet wrinkled her nose and leaned against the cottage door.

"We're fairy godmothers, but the magic of love is hippie woo-woo? This is why we're going extinct. Honestly." Petty shook her head. "No, seriously. I'm telling you that's how I made your magic work. I thought about how much I love you."

"And you only got one bloom?" Jonquil cackled.

Petty narrowed her eyes. "It was the best I could do because we're all low. So much strife, hardship, and fear. Those things both drain love and make it stronger. For us, I fear it's drained our compassion, our empathy, and yes, our love."

"So what do we do?" Bluebonnet bent over to pick up the toothpicks and tried to reassemble them in a way that represented her poor little murdered wand.

"The answer has been right in front of our noses for the longest time. Look at where we live. It could be the premier

wedding destination.” Excitement lit Petty with an ethereal glow.

“I hate to break it to you, sister dear, but Nowhere, Missouri, is never going to be a premier wedding destination. Have you been smoking the wormwood?” Jonquil scrutinized her sister for any signs of being in a chemically altered state.

Petty huffed. “Nowhere is in Arizona. I got my picture by the sign. See?” She whipped out a picture of her standing by a sign in the middle of the desert and one run-down, vandalized building that might’ve, at one time, been a gas station. “We live in *Ever After*.”

The picture disappeared into the nothingness from whence Petty plucked it.

“Humans don’t normally come to Ever After. There’s a reason we’re not on any maps,” Bluebonnet said.

“Well, we’re just going to have to change that, and I know just how to start,” Petty began.

“We’re all ears,” Jonquil replied, and began working her bare fingers in the dirt of the flowerpots that sat waiting for her attention.

“With Lucky and Ransom,” Petty said. “They both owe us favors.”

Bluebonnet made a face. “Oh no. No. No. That’s an awful idea. Don’t you remember what happened the last time we meddled in their lives?”

“I know. Whatever. They’re adults now. I’m sure they’ve forgotten . . .”

No. Everyone present knew there was no way *anyone* had forgotten.

Petty cleared her throat and continued. “This is also our chance to try to help Lucky with her *unlucky*. Regardless of what that could do for the town wells, and our magic, isn’t that our job? We’re their fairy godmothers. They’ve withstood the trials. They’ve battled through the long night. It’s time they get their Happily Ever After. They’ve earned it.”

Jonquil gave a heavy sigh. “Well, you know we can only meddle so much. They have to make the choices themselves. You can lead a prince to his princess, but you can’t make them kiss.”

“Oh yes, we can. That’s what poppets are for. But that’s neither here nor there.” Petty straightened her apron. “Are you in?”

“If we can convince the town, it might be worth a shot.” Bluebonnet looked out at the magical, lone bloom on their cherry tree.

“I just don’t buy it.” Jonquil shook her head.

“You know with fairy dust, you have to believe. That’s the magic.” Petty tapped her foot with obvious impatience.

“I thought it was love.” Jonquil snorted.

Petty stopped mid-foot tap and her eyes narrowed. “Jonquil, so help me . . .”

“Fine. Fine. *Fine*. I believe.” She coughed. “I guess. Whatever.”

“Good. Sisters, get out your best meddling outfits. I’m going to call a meeting with the town council. We’re about to put Ever After on the map!”

Chapter 1

Lucky Fujiki had always hated her name. Whenever she had too much time by herself, like now, waiting at the park for her partner-in-crime and ride-or-die bestie to drop her kids off at school, she thought about it.

Lucky tried to focus on the ducks flapping in the melting pond, the first blooms of spring on the trees, which were pushing forward much too early by the way, and the landscaped grounds.

Nope. No chance. Because if she stared at the ducks too long, they'd get agitated. Or the tree would get struck by lightning. Or the grounds . . . well . . . who knew, really?

She hated her name so much.

Not the Fujiki, she was more than good with that one.

Lucky. What the hell? That was just asking for trouble.

Why couldn't her mother have named her something traditional like Akira, or Keiko, or even Tatsuo? She had a friend named Keiko who was very successful.

The world didn't fall apart at the seams whenever Keiko walked by.

That was all Lucky wanted, to be able to move through the world without the fabric of the universe coming undone.

Of course, there was an ancient Japanese proverb that fit her situation nicely: "Shit in one hand and want in the other, and see which one fills up first."

No, on second thought, that wasn't Japanese. It was a uni-

versal truth. Really, she could want and wish as hard as she could and it wouldn't change her situation. Although, her mother would argue that point endlessly.

She hated her nickname, too. "Un-Lucky." Yay her.

Her mother, of course, had told her it would pass, but what did she know? *Her* name was Fortune, and she'd lived up to it with no problem at all.

Lucky. She spat on the ground.

"Whoa! Friendly fire!"

Lucky looked up to see her best friend, Gwen Borders, holding out a cup of coffee. From the looks of it, a mocha chip caramel latte, hopefully with a shot of blond espresso. And whipped cream with a hearty dusting of cinnamon.

She needed a lot of sugar and caffeine to maintain.

"Sorry, Gwen. Thanks for the fortification." She accepted the cup gratefully.

"Bemoaning your name again, huh?" Gwen sat down next to her on the park bench.

"Like I do every day."

Gwen took a drink of her coffee and sighed happily. "I talked to the woman who does my tarot cards about your problem. She said that you're out of alignment with the universe. So if you could just figure out what's causing the misalignment, you'll be good as gold."

Lucky wrinkled her nose. "What does that even mean?"

Gwen shrugged. "Hell if I know. I just give the woman money. Maybe you should go see her? I could book you some sessions. Then you can ask your questions."

"You've got kids who are going to need a college fund. You don't need to be spending your money on me and my problems. Especially not on some 'hippie woo-woo,' as my godmother likes to say."

Gwen grinned. "It is absolutely my pleasure to spend all of Jake's money on frivolous and stupid things. Plus, I get cash

every time I pay with his card. It gives me an excuse to take out more money for my little nest egg.”

Lucky scowled. “You know, if it wouldn’t affect you and the monsters, I’d go give him a daily dose of bad luck.” She turned to look at her friend. “I really don’t know how you and the kids are immune to my bad vibes. I’m grateful, but I wish I knew how it worked.”

“So you’d only inflict it on people who deserve it?”

“Yep.” Lucky took another sip of her coffee and luxuriated in the sweet warmth on her tongue.

“Oh, don’t look now, but there’s PTA Nancy.”

Lucky looked around the park and saw a woman go into Gaston’s Tea Shop across the street.

PTA Nancy had been making Gwen’s life miserable, and to be honest, poor Gwen already had enough misery on her plate.

“You know, I think I need to buy some tea for my godmothers.” Lucky stood.

Gwen flashed a half grin. “We shouldn’t. I mean . . .”

“Oh, but we should. She’s awful.”

“Do you think this is considered using your powers for good?” Gwen asked.

“Probably not. *I* think it’s a good cause, though.” With that, Lucky marched with purpose toward the tea shop, and Gwen followed close behind.

“Really, I need to send them a little something. I got a care package last week of cookies. Petty’s peanut butter chocolate chip, Jonquil’s raspberry windmills, and Bluebonnet’s pumpkin cranberry cookies.” Lucky stopped to pull a small baggie out of her purse with two of each cookie inside and handed it to Gwen. “Almost forgot.”

“Your godmothers are the best. They definitely deserve tea.” Gwen nodded as she stuffed a cookie in her mouth.

They went inside Gaston’s Tea Shop and immediately,

Lucky was drawn to a fat ladybug teapot. That was definitely going to Petty because she was round, happy, and mostly good luck, too.

“Ope!” Gwen cried, and grabbed her wrist as she reached for it.

When Lucky looked down, she saw that her sleeve had caught on the edge of the glass shelving. One more move and she’d have murdered the display. Gwen untangled her, and Lucky grabbed the teapot.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

“*Lucky* I was here, huh?” Gwen grinned.

“You think you’re funny.” She hugged the teapot to her chest.

“I know I’m funny. I’m a freaking delight.”

“Gwen Borders, is that you?”

Lucky knew without turning to look that the woman speaking was PTA Nancy.

Gwen’s face contorted into a fake smile. “Nancy. Nice to see you.”

“Is it, though? I had the feeling you’d been avoiding me after you saw me having dinner with Jake. . . .”

Lucky had to fight the urge not to swivel her head around on her shoulders like an owl.

“Since we haven’t spoken since then.”

Gwen waved her off. “You know how it goes. I’ve just been busy. I’m glad Jake wants to help with the Spring Sock Hop. The kids will be so happy he’ll be able to chaperone. He never gets to attend these things. He’s always so busy.”

Gwen hadn’t told Lucky about this.

And maybe Jake had just been discussing the dance, but Lucky had a sense for when people were lying, and that story reeked like hot garbage.

“Ah yes, well, he . . . uh . . .” Nancy coughed. “Volunteered you to bake all the snacks. We were hoping for allergy-free. Can you do vegan, gluten-free, nut-free chocolate chip

cookies? That way everyone is covered? We'll need about three hundred." Nancy smiled.

"Of course. It's not a problem." Gwen's smile was real this time, and Lucky knew it was because she loved baking, and a challenge. Gwen had grown up in a place where they didn't have a PTA, didn't have Spring Sock Hops, and she definitely hadn't had a mother who baked cookies.

"Anything for our little darlings, right?" Nancy smiled back.

Lucky wanted to puke.

For a hot minute, she considered it. Everyone in town was used to her mishaps and if she happened to spew Technicolor glory all over PTA Nancy, no one would know it had been on purpose.

Of course, that would mean giving up the delicious coffee she just snarfed and Lucky was not about that life.

Instead, she shoved the ladybug teapot at Gwen and launched herself at Nancy.

Not to pummel her face like Lucky wanted to do, or even to ralph in her hair, but to give her a giant hug.

And rub her bad luck all over the woman.

"I'm so glad my niece and nephew have such great people to advocate for them. So. Glad." She tightened and released the hug with each sentence. Just to make sure the woman was good and covered with Lucky's definite *un*luck. Then she stepped back and beamed at her with a bright smile.

"I . . . thank you." Nancy coughed. "I didn't know Gwen thought so well of me."

Gwen got in on the action. "Oh, Nancy. I should do more to show it. You work so hard on all the events and running the PTA. I mean, even though you're not the president, you always take charge. You get things done."

Which was all code for the fact PTA Nancy, from the stories Lucky had heard, was a raging shitlord.

"I should really get going." Nancy shrugged uncomfortably.

A long silence reigned before Nancy coughed and headed to the register.

"That was pretty brilliant. I thought her eyes were going to pop out of her head like one of those pooping animal keychains. You know the ones? Where you squeeze them and their eyes bulge and so goop squishes out of their butts?"

Lucky laughed. "That's amazing. It's too bad you didn't get a video."

"I've got it on replay in my head right now. Where it's going to stay forever and ever."

"You didn't tell me Jake went out to dinner with her," Lucky said.

Gwen shrugged. "It is what it is. I don't care if he's cheating on me. I just care that it's with her. And they both think I'm stupid."

"Any chance you think they were actually working on the sock hop?"

Gwen snorted. "About as likely as winning the lottery."

"I'm sorry." Lucky reached for Gwen's hand and squeezed. "I've got a shovel and a tarp if you need me. . . ."

Laughing, Gwen pulled her in for a hug. "Thank you. You always know how to make me laugh."

Lucky hugged her back, once again grateful that she was immune to whatever black cloud hung over Lucky's life.

Unless this thing with Jake was somehow her fault. . . .

"No, stop it," Gwen said.

"What?"

"I know what you're doing. Jake made his own choices. I made my own choices. Neither of them has anything to do with you."

Lucky gave her a half smile. "It would kill me if my . . ." Lucky struggled to find the right word. "My curse, for lack of a better word, harmed you and the monsters in any way."

"Lucky, I don't know what I'd do without you. You're my best friend. I'll take having you cursed over not having you at

all.” Gwen perked. “Hey, maybe that’s your problem. Maybe you are *cursed*. You’ve got three godmothers. Maybe they’re *fairy* godmothers and your mother forgot to invite one of the fairies to your christening and she was pissed and cursed you or something.”

Lucky snorted. “Dude. This isn’t Sleeping Beauty. I’m not *that* fair of face. I mean, pretty fair, but not fairy-tale princess fair. Or really fair of disposition either, now that I think about it. Weren’t those the fairy gifts? Plus, I was fine until *him*.”

“Maybe his . . . um . . . moment where he was out of alignment knocked *you* out of alignment. Maybe if you saw him again?”

“That’s the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me. I don’t wish bad things on him, but *oh my God*, how do you expect me to look him in the face after that debacle?”

“He was the one who drove his little car into the wrong garage. What do you have to be embarrassed about?”

Lucky looked up at the ceiling. Her face on fire as she still burned with embarrassment from that ill-fated night so many years ago.

“Look, things happen during sex. One time, Jake was—”

“If we could not talk about this anymore, that would be great. I don’t want to imagine Jake having sex.”

“Okay. Fine. Me either, honestly. But . . . maybe you should talk about it. It doesn’t have to be with me, but I’m sure he’s forgotten about it, too.”

“Unlikely.”

“Oh, hey . . . look. Nancy is still trying to check out.”

Lucky watched as Nancy pulled card after card out of her wallet and none of them worked.

They crept forward silently for a closer look.

“Everything okay, Nancy?” Gwen asked.

“There’s been some kind of mistake,” Nancy said. “All of my cards have been declined.”

"Here. Let me help you." Gwen pulled out one of her credit cards.

"Oh no. I couldn't ask you to."

"You're not asking. I insist. How embarrassing. I'm sure you'd come to my rescue if the situation was reversed. Right?" Gwen said, and handed her card over to the clerk.

Nancy looked down at her phone. "Oh my God. All of my cards are maxed out. There are charges in Hawaii. California. Florida."

"That sucks," Lucky said, helpfully.

Nancy grabbed her tea and darted out of the store.

"That sure worked fast. It's rare that you get to observe karma in action. Usually, it doesn't hit until long after you don't care anything about watching it slap the person in the face."

Lucky shrugged. "Happy to be of service." Then she looked at the teapot in Gwen's hands. "Oh, I need this wrapped and shipped," she said to the clerk.

"Oh, right. You need to get them some tea to go in it, too," Gwen reminded her.

"The Russian Caravan, I think. Petty likes strong flavors. Maybe some blueberry rose as well."

"All good choices," the clerk said, and added them to her order.

Just then, Lucky's phone rang. She pulled it out of her bag, but the screen was cracked and she couldn't tell who was calling. Which drove her nuts. She didn't answer the phone for just anyone. People who called without texting first were savages.

Of course, it was most likely one of her godmothers. She took a wild guess.

"Hello, Petty."

"My sweet little good-luck charm. What are you doing? Are you busy?"

Lucky tried not to snort. Petty behaved as if Lucky didn't

break things everywhere she went. It was rather endearing, honestly, because it seemed like she didn't actually notice.

To Gwen, she said, "I'm going to take this outside. Can you . . ." She nodded to the teapot.

"Sure."

Lucky handed her a credit card and stepped outside the shop, barely missing a shitting pigeon flying overhead. That *was* actually very lucky. Maybe things were about to change.

"I need a favor, darling."

Lucky wasn't sure what she could do for Petty, but most likely she was down for whatever shenanigans the old dear had cooked up. "Sure. Anything."

"Be careful what you agree to, sweet pea."

How bad could it be?

Of course, this was a question that she'd learned not to ask. Or at least, she'd thought she'd learned that lesson.

"I need you to get married. Well, fake married. On Valentine's Day."

"What's that?" Lucky wasn't sure she'd heard her correctly.

"You should get your ears cleaned. Maybe you have impacted wax? I'm sure I spoke quite clearly. I need you to get fake married. All of us do. Fairy Godmothers, Inc. is in the pooper. So is Ever After. We need to draw in more tourists. More business. A high-profile wedding will put us on the map."

Lucky coughed. "Petty."

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you stoned?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that? No, and even if I was, it's a good idea."

"I . . . no. I mean, me? High-profile? You know how I break things."

"Yes, but now you're going to fix it. Trust me. This is exactly what everyone involved needs."

Lucky consoled herself that even if she agreed, there was

no way in hell they were going to find a groom who would fake marry the Master of Disaster.

"Who is the groom?" She laughed when she said it, but a sudden feeling like a wrecking ball smashed into her gut.

She knew before Petty spoke.

But no, it couldn't be.

They wouldn't.

He wouldn't.

"Now, don't hang up on me."

Lucky did just that. She hung up on her godmother.

Of course, Petty called right back. Lucky considered not answering, but she knew better.

"No."

"Darling, yes. And it's time for the two of you to clear the air. Plus, he's our best bet. Heart's Desire Chocolate is the biggest chocolate maker in the world. He uses fair-trade, organic cacao and uses best practices to ensure there's no slave labor, protects the rain forest, and he's America's Sweetheart. The press loves him. It'll be a fairy-tale romance the public can get behind. And getting married in Ever After is just too perfect."

Get behind.

Lucky rolled her eyes. Her godmother was either oblivious or being a raging smart-ass. Lucky wasn't usually sure which, and that was definitely one of Petty's superpowers.

"I think you've forgotten we're *his* godmothers, too."

"Well, that's just incestuous."

"Pish posh. How soon can you get here? And you should bring Gwen and the monsters. They'd get a real kick out of Ever After."

"I'm not doing it, Petunia." She'd used her full name. Petty had to take her seriously.

"We can do this the hard way or the easy way." Petty's tone was sweet, but there was steel under that syrup.

"It's like you forgot who I am. I have to do everything the hard way."

“What if I told you this could fix your little problem?”

“I’d say you’re a shrewd tactician.”

“I am. But I also think it’s the key.”

Petty was usually right about most everything, but Lucky didn’t think she could face him. It had been too long and . . .

“Please, Lucky. Jonquil and Bluebonnet and I just don’t know what else to do. We need you both.”

It was the please that got her. Right in the guts.

“Okay, fine.”

“You won’t regret it.”

“I’m already regretting it.”

“See you soon, lovie.”

As soon as she hung up the phone, another pigeon passed overhead.

And this time, he didn’t miss.

Chapter 2

Ransom Payne couldn't have been more pleased with this quarter's sales predictions.

They were through the roof.

But he knew they would be.

That was the benefit of having not only fairy godmothers, but a tiny sprinkle of fairy dust in the soil of his cacao farms. It gave his chocolate that little something extra. All he'd had to do was promise the godmothers he'd ethically source his materials and take care of the environment. All of those things were important to him, so it wasn't any kind of sacrifice. This was the kind of business he'd wanted to run.

The kind of man he wanted to be.

The fact that it made him richer than Midas didn't hurt, either.

He leaned back in his chair and surveyed his kingdom. Err . . . his office. This wasn't somewhere he'd ever expected to be. Not when he'd first started. Not until he found out his godmothers were actually *fairy* godmothers. The real deal.

He'd started in a garage with some grow lights. Now, he had a penthouse office, more money than he could spend in one lifetime, even with all of his charitable contributions, and he'd crossed almost every item off of his bucket list.

Except a family.

Sure, his best friend worked as his assistant, he had the godmothers. They were his family, but he wanted a wife—a partner. He wanted children.

Roderick, his best friend, stepped inside the double doors. “A Miss Jonquil is here to see you.”

“Did she bring cookies?”

Jonquil toddled in behind Roderick. “Of course, I did, darling. Of course.”

“You’re supposed to wait until I tell you that you can go in,” Roderick said, but his tone was patient and kind.

“Do I ever?”

“No, Miss Jonquil.”

“But I do bring you cookies.” She handed an overstuffed basket to Roderick. “There you go, dear. Now, off with you. I have some important business to discuss with my godson.”

“Important business.” Roderick nodded, but accepted the basket with a grin. “I can be bribed.”

“Cookies are my superpower,” Jonquil said, and handed the other basket to Ransom.

Ransom didn’t even try to pretend he wasn’t drooling for his godmother’s cookies. This batch was the best he’d ever tasted, so he was sure she was going to ask him for a favor.

The godmothers usually traveled as a trio, unless they had a mission. Jonquil and her cookies were the big guns when it came to Ransom. Although, if they ever needed anything, Ransom was more than happy to help them. They were family. He loved them dearly.

Also, *cookies*.

“While I enjoy bribes, you know that you don’t have to bribe me,” he said around a mouthful of cookie.

“You might need it for this favor.”

He stopped midbite and eyed her. Her “grandmother glow,” as he liked to call it, was extra glowy today. Her round cheeks were pink, and her white hair was pulled back into a

bun with a crown of yellow flowers. And her dress was especially starched, swishing when she walked. Yes, she'd gone the extra mile today.

"What is it?"

"So Ever After is in trouble." She took a bite of her own cookie, seemed to think about it before stuffing the rest of it in her mouth. "Not my best work. But I was stressed. Sorry, dearie."

"Tastes fine to me."

"Savage," she said with no real rancor. She handed him another cookie.

"So what is it? How can I help?"

"The town is losing all of its magic. Why, when Bluebonnet tried to bring the cherry tree to bloom, we got nothing."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we need a way to refill it and fast, or Ever After is going to fade away, as will what's left of the magic in the world."

"Do you need money?" He had that in abundance, but he didn't know what else he had to offer them that could help.

"We need something money can't buy. We need love. So we need you to get married."

He proceeded chewing calmly and swallowed before he spoke. "Well, that's all fine and good. I can get married, but I need to do this little thing called falling in love first. Don't think I haven't tried. I've been on some of these dating apps; I even let Roderick set me up, which was horrible."

"You haven't let *us* fix you up."

He cocked his head to the side. "Why do I suddenly feel like this conversation is going to take a turn I don't like?"

Jonquil smiled at him. "Don't you trust us?"

"I know you."

"Of course, you do, dear. Of course." Jonquil smiled a rather large smile. "But you don't have to get real married. Fake married is fine."

Yes, this conversation was definitely taking a turn down an ugly road. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Please explain to me, Godmother, how getting fake married will help restore the love in Ever After?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Jonquil perked. "See, it's a publicity stunt. That's what you call it, right? All the press with billionaire chocolate magnate getting married in Ever After, Missouri, quintessential small-town USA. If you do it, others will do it, too. We have a whole plan. Turn the castle into a B and B, hire a team of wedding planners, magical caterers . . . it will be the best thing ever. People will flock to get married in a fairy-tale town. Especially after seeing yours done right on Valentine's Day. It doesn't get any more romantic than that."

"Don't you run the risk of exposure?"

"That's the genius part. Everyone will just think it's part of the kitsch. People will get the real fairy-tale weddings to celebrate their love, and we'll get to thrive again."

"If I agree to this, I assume you already have a bride picked out?"

"Oh yes. She's beautiful, and it's a perfect second-chance romance."

"*Second chance?*" His eyes narrowed.

"The papers are going to love it."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes."

"No."

"You don't even know who I'm talking about." Jonquil rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I do. *Lucky*." He said her name like a curse.

Jonquil gave a delicate cough. "Maybe you do. But listen. It's time for both of you to forgive each other."

Was it possible she hadn't forgiven him after all of this time? He'd forgiven her for telling everyone about it. Although, he supposed . . .

"I have forgiven her."

"Have you? Then why haven't you spoken to her?"

"To be fair, she hasn't spoken to me, either."

"The last time you spoke, what did you say to her?" Jonquil gave him a stern look with a raised brow.

He'd swear that woman could stare down the worst criminal and make him confess with only that look.

"We tried to let you two work this out on your own. We can't help too much. Especially since we're low on magic, but by the gods, you two are the single most stubborn creatures on earth. I could push a recalcitrant donkey up Everest before I could get either of you to do what I want."

"Maybe what you want isn't what we want."

Jonquil snorted. "Of course, it is. You just have to realize it. I'm the fairy godmother, remember? I know things."

"Well, she said some mean things to me, too."

"She did." Jonquil nodded. "But is that how we deal with being called out on our behavior? Hmmm?"

Ransom sighed. He hated being treated like a kid, but she was right. "You're right. No, what I did was wrong, regardless of what she did. Her actions are a separate topic, and we can address them after I make amends for what I did," he recited.

"Some lessons do stick."

"I just don't think this is a good idea. Why can't Roderick get fake married to Lucky?"

"I heard that," Roderick called back into the office. "Not a chance. You'd murder me in my sleep."

"There is that," Jonquil said.

They were right. Despite everything, he did still have feelings for Lucky. How ridiculous was that after all of this time? After everything that happened, that should've been closure enough.

But the idea of seeing her again . . . of being in the lime-

light, someone would dig up that story and it would explode from the gossip rags like an awful comet.

"You're not that boy anymore, Ransom." Jonquil touched his hand. "You're a grown man with a successful empire. And we need you."

It was the "we need you" that got him.

Ransom made a secret promise to himself when he discovered magic and his godmothers had helped him start his business and make it what it is today. He swore if there was ever any way he could help them, he'd do it without question.

He hadn't expected it would come at such a personal cost. He hadn't imagined any future where what they'd need from him would rip his heart out and tear down the idea of himself it had taken him so very long to construct.

Of course, if one silly mishap from the past could tear it all down, maybe he needed to start over anyway.

"Ransom, one more thing."

He looked up into Jonquil's wide, and kindly, blue eyes. "What?"

"She already said yes."

He coughed. "I didn't say no. I . . ." Saying yes would make it real. Of course he was going to say yes, but Ransom was having trouble getting the words out of his mouth. Making the commitment outside of his own head.

"I know this is scary, but we believe in you."

Yes, the godmothers had always believed in him. Although, he'd always had the fairy dust as a backup. He couldn't fail with fairy dust, right? Maybe they could just dust him for this?

No, he knew there was no magic like that of the human heart. They couldn't make you brave, or change who you were deep inside.

This would be all him.

Roderick had come back inside. "Since I was eavesdrop-

ping, I figured I might as well come in and offer my two cents.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Privacy, man.”

Roderick shrugged. “Whatever. You were going to give me the play-by-play anyway. Is this the woman from college?”

“You just eat your cookies and mind your business,” Jonquil advised.

“Everything Ransom does is my business. I’m his assistant and his best friend.” But he didn’t hesitate to eat another cookie.

Jonquil made a face, but relented. “Yes, it’s that woman.” Then her eyes narrowed. “I suppose if Ransom is getting married, then you should be in attendance. You’ll need to be the best man.”

“Yep.”

“Lucky’s best friend is about to be single.” Jonquil eyed him pointedly.

“No thank you.”

“You haven’t even met the woman.”

“I don’t have to meet her to know I don’t want any part of her.” He leaned against the desk. “I’m sure she’s lovely, but I am not interested in a relationship right now.”

“Doesn’t matter, if the relationship is interested in you.”

“That’s true,” Ransom agreed. “Sometimes, it just happens.”

“No, relationships don’t just . . . happen.” He wiggled his fingers to accentuate his point. “They take planning. Work. Effort.”

Jonquil nodded. “They do at that, but you find yourself doing those things for the right person. You want to do them.”

“Nope, and you can keep your fairy dust or whatever to yourself, ma’am.”

She laughed. “No fairy dust needed.”

“I’m all for fake best man duty. You know I’m always up for an adventure. But the rest of it? No thanks.”

"We shall see." Jonquil grinned. "So you'll do it?"

"Yes, I'll do it. I'll fake marry Lucky Fujiki."

"Good. I'll see you in Ever After, then? We'll have our publicity people get started."

Dread sank like a rock in the bottom of his gut, but he nodded.

Jonquil stood up on her tiptoes to hug him and kissed his cheek. "You're the best godson we could ask for. All will be well. Eventually. You'll see."

"It's the eventually I'm worried about."

Jonquil headed toward the door, but stopped in front of Roderick. Instead of kissing his cheek, she gave it a solid pinch. "Sweet boy, we'll get you right as rain soon enough."

"No more meddling. You're not my godmother."

"I think yours had an accident on her broom on the way to Bora Bora."

"That would explain it." Roderick nodded in all seriousness.

Jonquil waved her goodbyes and after she was gone, Roderick turned to Ransom.

"Does she really believe she's a fairy godmother?"

Ransom studied him for a long moment and considered his next words carefully. "Do you doubt her?"

"I know they gave you the seed money for Heart's Desire, but . . ."

Ransom eyed him.

"But . . ."

He continued to eye his friend.

"You're fucking with me. You don't believe all that nonsense. This fake-marriage thing is just an excuse to get you in a room with Lucky."

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. But you can't deny that the chocolate is good."

"Because you worked on it. You put all of your blood, sweat, tears, and heart into a product."

"I did. But Jonquil, Petunia, and Bluebonnet really are fairy godmothers."

"I'm on some kind of prank show, right? If I say I believe you, a crew is going to come out of their hiding places and—"

Ransom shook his head. "Nope, they're the real deal."

"Where the hell is my fairy godmother, then?"

"Jonquil just told you she's still recovering from an accident on her broom." Ransom laughed. "That's probably why she brings you cookies, too. They're really wonderful ladies. I'm so relieved to finally be able to tell you the truth. I hated keeping that from you."

"Say I believe this. What else are you keeping from me? Are you really a dragon who hoards chocolate?"

"Maybeeeee." Ransom grinned and ate another cookie.

"So Ever After. It's actually magical?"

"Yep."

"Huh."

"You're taking this much better than I thought you would, honestly."

"Yeah, I'm still hung up on Jonquil's prediction for me with Lucky's friend. I don't like it."

"You've never met the woman."

"She's still married."

"But she won't always be. The godmothers know these things. Their specialty is love."

"Don't want it."

Ransom shrugged. "You can't fight fate."

"I don't believe in that crap. You know that."

"So you can accept there are fairy godmothers with real magic, but you don't believe in fate?"

"Considering I met one and, really, it explains so much. The easiest answer is usually the correct one, so I'm just going to roll with it. I figure if you get one over on me, that's fine. You know what you've got coming." Roderick grinned. "By the way, this fake-wedding thing? Consider me still on the clock."

Ransom rolled his eyes. "As if I don't actually pay you a robber's fortune anyway."

"You couldn't live without me."

"You're right." Ransom grinned back. "So, uh, I guess we should get ready to go to my doom."

"It's not going to be that bad. No one is going to call you The Boy Who Missed. They stopped doing that when you made your first million."

"Let's hope you're right about this, too."

Roderick stood. "I'm always right. Obviously. But would it matter if I wasn't? The godmothers need you."

"Right again." Ransom sighed.

Even though trepidation coiled tightly around him, something warm sparked in his chest and Ransom wondered if the flame between them would still burn as hot after all of these years.

And if it could burn through the shame of the Incident.

Chapter 3

As a child, Lucky had spent a few summers in Ever After with her godmothers, and she was thrilled to be able to share some of that magic with Gwen's kids now. Even though it was the end of January, it was a perfect day in Ever After. Unseasonably warm, but beautiful.

The sun shone overhead, the trees were thick and lush . . . come to think of it, the only time she'd ever seen snow in Ever After had been the one Christmas she'd come to visit. Snow on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

She supposed a town named Ever After had to be a little different from the rest of the world. Or at least, that's what her inner child hoped.

And speaking of children, the three-hour car ride hadn't been too awful, and Brittany and Steven were entranced by the little fairy-tale-style cottages, the town square, and the abundance of wildlife that allowed the children to get ridiculously close as Lucky took them on a walking tour of the town.

If Lucky didn't know better, she'd swear all the animals had some kind of silent agreement with the children that they could get close as long as they didn't touch.

Brittany and Steven laughed and squealed when one gray squirrel with a giant, puffy tale threw an acorn at another squirrel when he seemed to take one from the first squirrel's pile. They made sounds at each other that sounded like a laser gun. *Pew. Pew. Pew.*

The children couldn't stop giggling.

"I can't believe we've never come here with you before," Gwen said.

"I totally should've brought you to visit sooner. I'm glad you're here now, though. The kids seem to be having a great time."

"Who wouldn't? This place is so cool. You're so lucky that you got to spend time here as a kid."

Normally, she would've cringed at the use of the word, but Gwen was right. "Yeah, I am."

"I can't believe the godmothers rented a cottage for the kids and me." Gwen shook her head. "I also can't believe that more people don't know about this place."

"They will after the fake wedding."

"When does he get in?" Gwen didn't have to specify which he she meant. They both knew.

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it." She pointed to the edge of town at the castle that looked like it had been plucked directly from the Brothers Grimm. "Look at the castle."

Gwen looked up at the spires rising out of the forest, and a path into the woods seemed to become more visible.

"We're actually in a fairy tale. I don't want to go back."

"Not even for your stuff?" Lucky teased.

Gwen bit her lip. "You know what? Not even for my stuff."

"I'm sure the godmothers could help you out with that, if you're serious."

"Really? You think? I don't know what I'd do here. How I'd pay my bills."

"Specialty baking. You were going to bake three hundred allergy-friendly cookies like it was nothing. I'm sure with a booming wedding industry here, they'll need something like that."

"Yeah, maybe." Gwen was quiet and thoughtful as they wandered down the quaint path.

"Oh, hey. We should take the kids to the fountain. It's on the way to the castle. Come on." Lucky led them through the forest.

The trees arched like a cathedral overhead, and the path seemed to open up for them, almost as if the forest itself invited them to explore her leafy depths.

The sounds of the gurgling water led them onward, and warmth swelled inside her chest. She hadn't been to the fountain since she was little. It was her safe place. Where she went to think, to plot, to be with her thoughts when she thought that the whole world was coming down around her ears.

It was especially amazing during summer evenings when the fireflies danced and flickered long into the warm night.

Except when they emerged into the carefully manicured little park, they were not alone.

Lucky knew before the figure standing by the mermaid fountain turned around that it was *him*. She hadn't seen Ransom in years, but she'd recognize his broad shoulders anywhere, and the way his dark hair curled just under his ear.

"I'm gonna puke," she murmured.

"Auntie Lucky's gonna yark," Steven echoed.

"Shh," Gwen said. "She's fine." But she stopped short and held the children's hands. To Lucky, she said, "You're fine. You're not gonna puke."

"Yes, yes, I am."

"You should listen to a person when they say they're going to be sick," a deep voice said from the other side of the fountain.

"I think I know my friend, thanks." Gwen scowled at the man who emerged.

He looked familiar. Lucky thought she might have seen him somewhere before. He was obviously one of Ransom's friends.

"Do you know her better than she knows herself?" The man arched a dark brow.

Lucky noticed that he was handsome. Not as handsome as Ransom, of course, but there were few creatures on heaven or earth that were.

"I do. Not that it's any of your business," Gwen growled.

Her best friend bristled next to her, and for a brief moment, she was terrified that Gwen's immunity to Lucky's bad luck was going to run out. Lucky was definitely going to be sick. Why was her stomach like this around him? He hadn't even turned around to face her yet.

She considered running back down the path the way she'd come, but Lucky had known this moment was coming since she'd agreed to this charade.

Ransom had agreed to it as well, she reminded herself.

"Of course it's my business. I'm Roderick, the best friend, the best man, and the personal assistant. We can't have little Lucky here puking all over the groom, can we?"

At that moment, Lucky knew that he knew. About the Incident.

That shouldn't have surprised her. Everyone knew. Of course he did. She'd become an urban legend, a cautionary tale they told coeds about the dangers of all the sins to be found on campus. From eating the cafeteria sushi, which she didn't, to drinking, which she didn't, and to having sex. Which she almost gave up on after the Incident.

"Really? You're an asshole." Gwen rolled her eyes at him.

"Asshole," Brittany repeated in her little voice.

Gwen didn't correct her, and she began to sing a song made entirely of "asshole." She skipped around, singing and doing a little dance, stopping every so often to point at Roderick.

"You're not going to correct her?" Roderick drawled, with doubt scrawled across his features.

Ransom still hadn't turned around. Lucky wondered if he was still as embarrassed as she was. That gave her a small measure of comfort.

"I teach her not to lie." Gwen smiled.

"I can't believe Jonquil wanted to set us up. That's the worst idea in the history of bad ideas." Roderick snorted.

Gwen bark-snort-coughed. "That has to be a lie. Jonquil loves me. She'd never saddle me with you. Plus, I'm married."

"Not for long, it seems."

"Thank God for that." Then, a stricken expression crossed her face and she looked at the kids.

Steven hadn't noticed anything, but Brittany stopped and wandered back over to her mother.

"It's okay, Mama. We'll live in Ever After and you can marry someone else. But not *him*." She stuck her tongue out at Roderick.

Lucky slid a glance to Ransom to see that he'd finally turned around.

The years had been overly kind. Not that she expected he'd look like a mole person or anything, but where there had been the first awkward bloom of male youth, there was a man. His jaw had been a sharp angle, but now it was a bladed edge. His shoulders had once hinted at the way he'd fill a space, an outline of the width and breadth of the muscle to come. He moved with the confidence and grace of a man used to power. The only thing that hadn't changed was the depth in his eyes. The warmth and kindness there that made her fall in love with him so many years ago.

Roderick and Gwen, the kids, everything faded away at that moment. It was as if the two of them had been caught in a bubble outside of time and space. The sound of her heart-beat in her ears was like listening to the ocean in a shell.

Lucky didn't want any of the old feelings that surged in her chest. She didn't want to remember how much she loved the way he smelled. How natural it felt to move closer to him, because that had ended so well the last time.

Why did he have to smell so good?

The bastard actually smelled like chocolate.

What an asshole to come to this meeting smelling like her favorite thing in the world.

Worse? He looked down at his feet just for a second before raising his ridiculously blue eyes to meet hers once again. It was endearing. It was devastating.

Then he gave her that half smile that had always given her a case of what Lucky liked to call "Turtle Syndrome." It made her want to throw herself on her back, and stay there, much like a turtle that couldn't seem to right itself.

He was the first to speak. "It's good to see you."

"I didn't expect to see you," she blurted.

"At all?" He gave her a full grin. "Since we're getting married, I'd say you have to look at me at least once."

She pursed her lips. "You know what I mean."

They stared at each other again for a long moment. His eyes moved over her, and his perusal made her squirm. Ransom wasn't gross about it, he wasn't objectifying her or treating her like a fuck doll, but the butterflies in her stomach had started cannibalizing each other. It was getting ugly in there.

Lucky wrapped her arms around her stomach.

"Are you okay?"

"Why, you scared?" She mentally slapped herself. Why was she such a dick? He'd been nothing but gracious and she was acting like a spoiled brat.

Except, he didn't seem to take offense. He actually laughed. "Nah, I've dealt with worse."

Then he winked.

He. Fucking. Winked.

It brought back all the shame and horror from that night, that final night, when everything had shattered around them.

If he hadn't winked, it would've been fine. She didn't know why the wink enraged her so much, but it did. Lucky would've called herself out on her own bullshit and she could have settled in for a nice pretend wedding.

But instead, he'd winked, and her carefully constructed wall that was supposed to keep her safe shattered into a million, tiny, stupid pieces.

"Nope, I'm out." She turned to walk away.

"Oh, hey. Come on. It's either laugh or cry. Everyone else has already laughed. Why can't we?"

She spun on him. "We're supposed to pretend like it didn't happen, Ransom."

"But it did. Have you forgotten it? I sure haven't."

Heat rushed her entire body.

"I . . . When I applied for my first loan to start the business, I heard them talking about me before I went into the loan interview. The Boy Who Missed. If I couldn't figure out how to fuck, I'd never be able to navigate my own business. I didn't get the loan."

"You went in anyway?" Lucky studied him, something like admiration blooming in her chest. Not that it was a surprise he'd go in anyway. That was the kind of guy Ransom Payne was.

But Lucky, she didn't know if she'd have had the fortitude.

"Of course, I did. Screw them." He smiled at her. "And I don't bank there. I advise everyone I know not to. I pulled out of a deal with a distributor because they still bank there."

"Petunia is definitely your godmother."

"Her nickname is Petty for a reason."

She couldn't deny that being here in this same space with him fed something inside of her that she hadn't known was hungry.

He exhaled heavily. "It *is* good to see you, Lucky."

"Yeah, it's good to see you, too."

"See, this won't be so bad."

Of course, that was the wrong thing to say. Those words were to the universe like a red flag to an angry bull. Or so Lucky was sure.

"Don't jinx us." Lucky looked around, trying to spot the

form their destructor would take. No birds overhead to shit on her. At least there was that.

"I don't believe in that."

"Well, you sure did when you said I was a curse."

"We both said a lot of things. It was a high-stress situation. I think we can forgive each other." He took her hands in his. "Can't we? Even if it's just for the godmothers?"

He was right. Plus, it was for the godmothers. That's what mattered.

"Of course. It was a long time ago. I was always more embarrassed than anything."

"Me too," he admitted.

Her mouth was moving before she had a chance to censor herself. "I guess we should spend some time together before all of this goes public. Get to know each other again."

"Are you staying at the godmothers' or the castle?"

"The godmothers'. I guess we'll have to move to the castle when it's time for the show."

He nodded. "I'm at the godmothers', too. Looks like we'll be sharing the attic suite."

"Okay, that's a lot more togetherness than I'd planned on." She bit her lip. "It's so weird. Why didn't I ever see you here when we were kids? How did I not know they were your godmothers, too? Not until . . . well . . . after that time I don't want to talk about."

"I don't know. It's weird, though. Right?"

She nodded. "So weird."

Suddenly, she was aware of the world again. Their little bubble had been popped by little fingers. Brittany and Steven were pulling her away from him, begging to go to their cottage.

"I think I have to go."

He smiled. "Dinner, then? Bluebonnet is roasting a chicken."

"Dinner," she repeated, numbly. "Dinner."

Lucky allowed the children to lead her to Gwen and they

walked back down the path toward the town proper, where guest cottages sat fat and happy, with rounded roofs shaped like red-spotted mushroom caps from a fairy tale.

"That's the guy? Oh my God. His friend is a first-class asshole, but he's . . . Girl. *Girl*."

"Yeah," Lucky mumbled.

"Hey. Guess what?" she said as they continued walking toward the cottage Lucky had indicated was theirs.

"Huh?"

"Nothing bad happened. There were so many opportunities. You had an upset stomach, the woodland animals, the birds . . . so many crows. I thought for sure you were going to get shit on. Again. The fountain could've malfunctioned. It was all fine."

"I didn't see the crows!" She looked up to the sky to make sure she wasn't in any immediate danger before she continued. "No, it was not all fine. He still makes me stupid."

"Why is that bad?"

"It just is." Lucky huffed and stuffed her hands into her pockets.

"I thought we were going to the castle?" Brittany asked.

"We'll go later. We're going to be spending a lot of time at the castle, right, Lucky?"

"Yeah, sure." She was still in a daze.

"Will the buttface be there?" Brittany asked.

"That's not nice. He was an asshole, but we don't insult people with how they look."

"Why not?"

"People can control being jerks. They can't control how their DNA combined to make their face."

Brittany was thoughtful for a moment. "Okay. I suppose."

"It's this one," Lucky said, and came to a stop in front of the largest mushroom structure.

It had a solid wooden door, with a giant brass key on a

long chain sticking out of the lock. Yellow and purple flower buds huddled tightly in their bed, waiting to unfurl.

Brittany stuck her nose on one and sniffed so hard, it almost went up her nostril.

"I hope they bloom while we're here!" Brittany sniffed again.

"Maybe they will," Lucky said.

"I have a sneaking suspicion who we're going to be neighbors with." Gwen nodded at the cottage next to them. It also had a key in the lock. The rest of the cottages were sans keys.

"Yeah, me too. Sorry about that. The least the godmothers could do was wait until you're divorced."

Her godmothers were amazing, but they're meddling was legendary. It all came from a place of love, of course. But it was exhausting trying to constantly thwart their matchmaking efforts.

She really hoped their business would take off. Not just to take care of them and help the town, but to keep them occupied with their version of fairy godmothering and matchmaking other people instead of herself.

"I should tell you something." Gwen leaned on the door for a moment before opening it and ushering in the kids. "Guys, go pick out your beds while I finish up with Aunt Lucky."

Lucky shook off her fugue and kissed the kids' foreheads before they went inside. Then she gave Gwen her full attention. "What happened?"

"I told Jake we weren't coming back."

"You what?" Lucky was shocked, but that quickly melted into happiness. Jake and Gwen were miserable together, and she wanted nothing more than to see her friend happy and fulfilled.

"Yeah, I . . . after what happened in the tea shop, it was satisfying to see PTA Nancy get what she deserved, but why put myself through that? I don't want to be bitter and hate-

ful. So . . . I took the leap. I don't know where we're going to land, but I just had to."

Lucky hugged her friend tight. "It's going to be okay. You're going to get through this, and you know the godmothers will help you. Me too. Anything I can do. You're going to be so much happier. You'll be free."

"Same to you, toots."

Lucky narrowed her eyes. "I hate it when you quote my good advice back to me."

"I know." Gwen laughed. "So what are you going to do about it? I think you should sleep with him. That's when things started going horribly wrong instead of just a little wrong, right? And it doesn't look like it would be a chore, if you know what I mean."

After seeing Ransom again, she wasn't so sure she would ever be free. She couldn't stop thinking about his smile, the way he smelled, his hands . . . oh, his hands.

She'd be lying if she said she didn't want to feel his hands on her body again.

While remembering what had happened the last time was an anti-aphrodisiac, she reassured herself he had to have made progress since then.

Gwen's idea was unwelcome.

Unwanted.

Most likely the stupidest thing she'd ever considered.

But her whole life had gone even more wrong that night when . . . Lucky took a deep breath and realized she had to face it. She had to let the memory bloom fat and ugly in her mind. She couldn't look away. Not anymore.

Ransom had pressed forward eagerly, fumbling in the dark, and had made entry into the exit-only portion of the ride. It had been just the tip, because when she shrieked, he immediately withdrew.

She'd started that awful nickname by screaming he was a loser Harry Potter who didn't know what to do with his

wand. He was The Boy Who Missed. For better or worse, it had stuck.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I do need to go to bed with Ransom.”

“That’s the spirit!”

He was willing to marry her. So it shouldn’t be too hard to get him into bed, right?

Lucky had a sneaking suspicion that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

Especially since she just realized she hadn’t called her mother to inform her of her upcoming fake nuptials.

Chapter 4

The scent of Bluebonnet's rosemary roasted chicken did strange things to Ransom Payne.

It stirred all of his appetites.

Every. Single. One.

He understood why the scent of the chicken made him think of home. It was his favorite dish, and it stirred happy childhood memories. Ransom wanted to swim in them, experience that joy and warmth for as long as he could. A simpler time when all he had to worry about was tracking mud from the creek on the godmothers' freshly waxed floor. It reminded him of summers that seemed to last forever, bedtime stories, and midnight ice cream sodas.

Except now, these memories stirred other longings. He wanted his own children to run and play in the creek, to spend long summers chasing each other and climbing trees. He wanted to help teach them about growing things in the godmothers' garden. He wanted to have to buy the godmothers a bigger table so their giant family could eat meals like this together.

After one bite of the chicken, and seeing Lucky across the table from him as she laughed at something Jonquil said, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief, he wanted those summers, those memories, and those children with *her*.

God, but she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

He was struck by her beauty with the same force as the first time he'd seen her walking across the quad.

Even when she'd tripped over a gopher hole.

He remembered their first kiss. The moonlight had shimmered on her smooth skin, and her lip gloss had smelled like strawberries. Tasted like them, too.

They'd been in the middle of the lake, and he'd planned a candlelit picnic on the rowboat. Drawn together, she'd pinched out the candles almost effortlessly as she leaned in to meet him.

That kiss had been like hitting him with a bat.

Or maybe it was just because their boat had capsized, dumping them into the cool water.

But the heat between them hadn't abated, they'd laughed and swam to shore and made out there, with the fireflies dancing around them until dawn.

Ransom reminded himself that this wasn't what he was here for, and no matter how much the idea appealed, the two of them were not meant to join in that way.

They couldn't be.

They'd tried to complete the deed several times, and each time had been a bigger disaster than the last.

Skinny-dipping in that same lake had resulted in leeches that got much too close to delicate goods.

A tornado had hit the cheap motel they'd tried off I-70 and had ripped the roof off of only one room. (Thankfully, no one was actually hurt.)

When the equestrian team had gone on its fall break, they'd been making out in the barn and as soon as Lucky had asked him if he wanted to have sex, they were charged by feral pigs. Ransom, being determined, had decided they should climb up to the loft, but a mutant wasp colony had taken up residence.

God, they should've stopped after that. But did they? No. They were in love.

They'd gotten close in the back of his car, but then the engine caught fire.

Lucky looked up at him then and offered a soft smile.

That softness on her beautiful face, the way she looked at him, it was all worth it.

For a moment, even as aroused as he was, he wondered if they could have a life together without sex. It wasn't the most important part of being with someone.

He'd fucking miss it, that was no lie.

But he still loved her, still wanted her as a person as much as he had all those years ago.

They could adopt children.

Because sex was always when things had gone bad.

Then he realized that his train of thought was on crazy tracks. They didn't know each other anymore. They weren't the same kids they were in college. Just because she was stunningly beautiful didn't mean he should be building fairy-tale castles in the—

Fairy tale. Castles.

Ransom didn't like the connection that just sparked in his brain. He looked down at the bite of chicken on his fork and raised an eyebrow at Bluebonnet.

"Something wrong with your chicken, dear?" Bluebonnet asked.

"I don't know. *Is there?*" Had the meddling old dears put some kind of love potion in his food? That was the only thing that made sense. He knew they weren't above that kind of thing.

"Whatever do you mean?" Petty asked.

"You know damn well what I mean," Ransom said.

"The chicken tastes delightful, as always, Bon-Bon." Lucky took a drink of her cherry blossom tea.

"Lucky likes it," Bluebonnet said in defense.

"I didn't say I didn't like it. We're already here to help you. Don't meddle," Ransom warned.