

ALAN B. GIBSON



Summer  
THUNDER

MAGIC AT MYERS BEACH : BOOK ONE

# SUMMER THUNDER

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ALAN B. GIBSON



This book is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Sometimes both.

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*To Robert Scott Beard, my beautiful, loving, and supremely  
talented partner of thirty-one glorious years who left this earth  
far too young.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Theos*

*Fairy Dust. No one ever imagined we'd run low. I was strapping on my kitesurfing harness today when my father sent the terrifying message.*

*His advisers had just alerted him to a potential kingdom-wide contamination of our main supply. It was too soon to know who was behind it, or the extent of the catastrophe, and he tasked me to find new sources of the nine elements that we'll need to make new dust from scratch.*

*Like every fairy in our kingdom, I knew how blessed we were that rich veins of those precious elements ran beneath the earth throughout our land. We thought they would last forever, and they should have.*

*My father and all the fathers before him had demonstrated exemplary stewardship, and while they shared our abundance when the other two fairy kingdoms were in need, never did they squander our treasured resource, which makes the impending scarcity all the more heartbreaking and dire.*

*He told me again how proud he was of my hard work that earned me the title of Kitesurfing Champion of the World, and the kick he and my mother still get from reading how my fans labeled me "Theos, the King." Then he added the humorous advice he'd given before: not to let the adulation go to my head. He reminded me that, among other things, I was still only the prince, and he was the king.*

*And as Crown Prince, finding my consort had been next on my To-do list. Given the gravity of this new situation, my father asked me to begin the search the moment I was finished with the Cavalcade of Champions here in Myers Beach.*

*In the meantime, it was a perfect day for a competition.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Thanks to a fortunate marine phenomenon that kept the waters of that small section of the California coast spotless and warm year-round, the sand at Myers Beach was exquisite, and the water was ideal for beach sports. Generous warm and gusty summer winds attracted serious kitesurfers and their fans, assuring the success of beach bars and other businesses that lined the boardwalk.

It was not yet peak season for beachgoers, so it was the kitesurfing tournament that drew most of the visitors to Myers Beach that glorious morning. Vans with satellite dishes lined the boardwalk, and food vendors squeezed into any space large enough to hold their pop-up tents. Lily pointed to the banner on the gigantic tent next to the energy drink truck.

### *Kitesurfing Cavalcade of Champions!*

Because of all the hoopla in the news about the top-flight competitors and the excitement that they'd chosen Myers Beach for their big event, the women took a break from managing their shops to see what the fuss was about.

"I really shouldn't be here," Lily insisted. "Sales are way down, and—"

"Stop!" said Greta. "You need a break, and these are supposed to be the top kitesurfers in the world. Look over there. You can see some of them warming up."

She and her best friend Greta had been so focused on the hustle-bustle on the ground, they hadn't noticed the couple dozen colorful inflatable bow-shaped kites crisscrossing the

sky farther down the beach. Lines connected them to nimble athletes below who skimmed over the water on small surfboards and soared into the air to contort their bodies into flips and twists. The spectacle was dazzling wherever they looked.

Though they'd lived in Myers Beach for years, neither she nor Greta had bothered to learn much about the sport, other than that it somehow combined the techniques of surfing, water skiing, paragliding, and skateboarding. They strolled by the tents of the sporting goods companies where salespersons hawked their boards and harnesses and bragged about their "strut designs," "pigtail positions," and "suicide rings." Judging from the price tags, kitesurfing catered to a well-heeled consumer, and they both gulped at packages of equipment that ran into many thousands of dollars.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Greta asked. "This upscale crowd is going to be around all week, and that should be great for business!"

A voice over the sound system announced that the day's competition was about to begin, and they hustled to the end of the beach to lie back on the sand and gaze up at the death-defying razzle-dazzle from the ones who were still warming up.

They explained to the man and woman next to them that they were newbies to the sport, and the couple told them what to watch for and offered expert commentary as each champion performed their complicated routines. Thunderous applause greeted the last contestant, who waved to the audience as he skimmed across the shoreline. The couple explained that as reigning champion, he was allowed to make the special entrance.

He made a second pass in the opposite direction then unexpectedly pushed his board's tail around and changed tack a dozen times using a different technique each time. He carved into the wind upward, adjusted the bar, and shifted his feet. The pop propelled him high into the sky, and he seemed to float forever. After he touched the water again, he bent his front leg to send his board upward for a series of back rolls.

Even without her newfound understanding of the basics, Lily could appreciate why he was the champion. Aside from his program, which seemed more complex than the others, when this man jumped, he appeared to fly.

“I like the way he floats in the air,” Lily remarked to their mentors.

“Yeah, his hang time is longer than anyone else’s,” the woman replied. “Sometimes it seems like he can stay up there forever, even when there’s barely any wind. Nobody knows how he does it.”

“Amazing. But some of the others looked like they were faster, am I right?”

“In kitesurfing, speed isn’t as important as agility. But he’s the fastest one on the planet. You’ll see.”

After four and a half minutes of breathtaking aerobics, he segued into his finale, which consisted of a mind-boggling series of complex stunts not attempted by the previous contestants, and it ended with a flawless extreme kite loop. With his long hair flowing straight behind him, he raced atop waves the length of the beach and broke his record for speed.

Lily’s heart was still pumping when the crowd began to disperse. “Did you have any idea this sport was so exciting?” she asked Greta. “And this last guy was so graceful. I wish I could watch him do the whole thing again.

“Then you should check out his online videos,” said the woman.

“I will,” she shouted over the cheering. “By the way, who is he?”

The woman scrunched her face. “Are you kidding? That’s Theos.”

“Interesting name. Well, Theos is really good.”

“Good? He’s the king.”

She gave Lily her program, and on the way to their stores, Lily flipped through the booklet to learn more about the man

who had so enchanted her, but beyond his photo on the centerfold and a list of his titles, she could find nothing personal. No short bio. Not even a last name.

Greta grabbed Lily's hand. "With so many tourists here, we should definitely put on our skit."

"Great idea! I can be in costume in half an hour."

---

"Hang on," Lily shouted into her phone. "One of my wings is jammed."

"Can't you just fake it for now? We don't want to lose the crowd."

"Greta, calm down, okay? We're working on it." While Lily fiddled with the catch, her assistant, Julie, gave one final tug, and the wing mechanism snapped into place. "There. Fixed it!"

The doors of their side-by-side shops on the Myers Beach Boardwalk flung open, and Lily the Fairy Queen and Greta the Witch emerged in full costume through the swirling thick carpet of theatrical fog, and took their marks. They generally put on the short drama on weekends to drum up business for their two stores, The Fairy Kingdom and The Witch's Cauldron. That day, though, they made an exception to cash in on the potential of the huge crowds.

Greta's fog machine never failed to draw a crowd. The fake fog was not novel, but what made the effect so unexpected was finding such eeriness on a bright, sunny spring California afternoon. Equally unlikely was stumbling onto an epic battle between good and evil. The show was always the same, beginning with the fairy and the witch staking out the territory. At one point Lily turned her back, and Greta crept behind her and winked at the audience. She let out a loud cackle and threatened to cast an evil spell, but Lily spun around and waved her luminescent wand in great protective circles to fend off the frightful-looking hag.

“Begone, witch!”

“I’ll show you, my pretty,” sneered Greta, imitating the voice of the Wicked Witch of the West. Thin wisps of greenish-yellow smoke circled up like tendrils from an ornate urn she drew from her cloak and shoved in Lily’s face.

Unafraid of Greta’s taunts, Lily continued to sparkle with goodness. Her perfect creamy complexion reflected glints of silver and gold. Thanks to the last-minute technical support, her motorized pink pointy wings fluttered rapidly in sync with her defensive position. She sneezed and scrunched her nose at the odor but waved away the fumes.

“I said, begone! You have no power over me.”

Greta cackled again, shaking her broomstick at the audience as she limped closer. “*Xerbiat Erbidocerim!*” she shouted.

Lily’s glass wand suddenly scalded her hand, and when she dropped it on the boardwalk, it broke in half. To improvise her way out of an otherwise tightly choreographed skit, she reached into her pouch and flung a handful of dust into the air.

“*Sudf!*” she shouted, and all eyes of the audience followed the dazzling pinkish cloud as it filtered down and enveloped the witch.

“Ugh! Fairy Dust! Look what you’ve done!” Greta groaned as she picked the glitter off her cloak. “I’ll get you for ruining my day with your prettiness!” She shook a clenched fist at the fairy one final time before she slouched backward through the fog and disappeared into her store.

“Brava!” shouted someone in the audience, and soon others, many still in their bathing suits, joined in the cheers and applause.

Lily turned to the voice and made her signature curtsy. Because she no longer had a wand, she returned the favor by closing her eyes and waving her bare hand to bestow goodness on her enthusiastic well-wishers. When she opened her eyes and saw that all heads were looking at her rival, her face fell.



Greta had reemerged through the fog and was upstaging Lily with ostentatious swishes of her jet-black cloak. She dropped to one knee and bowed her head like a diva to grand applause. After milking the ovation for as long as she could, she rose and transformed back into her wicked witch persona. Squinting with mischievous eyes, she scanned the crowd until she found her target.

She aimed a long finger at a middle-aged woman in the center of the crowd. “Have no fear, my lady,” she screeched. “I have just what you need...inside.”

The self-conscious woman peeked around the friend she’d ducked behind. “Me?” Her voice was shaky.

“Yes, you!” A thick shaft of black smoke belched from the tip of Greta’s pointed hat as she singled out two others. “And *you*, and *you*. I have what all of you need.”

Still hiding behind her friend, the first woman managed a nervous giggle. “How do you know what I need?”

Greta’s green eyes shot open, and she let out a blistering series of cackles. “Because I can see things! Come inside my shop and I’ll show you my many mysteries.” With a final swirl of her cloak to add a bit of salesmanship, she pointed to her store’s sign and retreated to her shop, The Witch’s Cauldron.

Lily gaped as she watched nearly everyone in the audience push and shove into the store behind her. Generally, their staged skit drummed up business for both stores, but that morning, Greta not only stole the show—she also stole all the customers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Theos*

*My morning kitesurfing responsibilities were behind me, and I decided to check out the area since I would be staying here a few more days. I'm not sure which caught my attention first, the fog that spilled out over the boardwalk or hearing a woman shout the name of one of the elements I'm seeking.*

*Turns out, two women were putting on some sort of theatrical performance. One pretended to be the witch, and the other, one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen, played the fairy. Since it was the fairy who used the word sudf as a spell, I knew it had to be more than coincidental.*

*She had beautiful warm brown eyes and long blonde hair that tumbled over her shoulder as she defended herself from the witch. If her wings hadn't been all wrong and she wasn't waving a silly glass wand like it was magic, she could have passed for a fairy in my kingdom.*

*I was about to leave the show when I saw her throw something into the air that the witch called fairy dust. It didn't look like ours, but I wanted to find out if it was real and if so, where she got it.*

*When the fog cleared, I could read the name of her shop, The Fairy Kingdom. An intriguing name, to say the least.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

Lily poked her head in the Witch's Cauldron, curious why that day was different. Greta's shop looked the same as it always did. A flame from a massive round stump of wax, formed over years of dripping, flickered its greeting from the twisted tree trunk table in the dark vestibule. The lighting in the main area of the store was appropriately dim for a shop run by a witch, yet bright enough to showcase her merchandise.

She crammed things for sale into every nook. Shelves overflowed with vials of herbs and elixirs, curiosities dangled from the rafters, and witch hats, magic wands, and cloaks hung on the walls. Stacks of broomsticks "suitable for sweeping *or* riding" spilled into the aisles.

Lily watched grown women and men grabbing things from everywhere and sometimes even fighting over merchandise. For a moment, she believed she saw things actually flying off the shelves directly into customers' baskets. When she witnessed people paying extra to pose for a selfie with Greta while they stood in the long queue to the register, she shook her head. There was no question that Greta the Witch was a marketing wizard.

She went next door to her own shop to prepare for the momentum she expected would carry those big spenders her way. But while many of Greta's customers did wander through her store and spend, they bought without the same enthusiasm they showed next door. When the last one filtered out onto the boardwalk, Lily sank into her chair behind the checkout

counter and closed her eyes, disappointed that their skit had not created a bigger pop in sales for her.

She knew the decor was not the problem. In keeping with the lightness of her fairy theme, the interior of her shop was the opposite of Greta's but just as attractive. Natural sunlight poured through her all-glass storefront, reflecting on her fairy figurines with a mystical sparkle. She had painted the ceiling in a wash of sunset pinks and purples with wispy clouds at the edges, and she'd strung pink and white LED twinkle lights to create a whimsical feeling and give a fairy-like glow. Soothing forest sounds overlaid with panpipe music emanated from hidden speakers, designed to encourage customers to relax and take their time to browse her fairy wonderland.

The tinkle of the bell above the door jolted her from her thoughts, and when she looked up, she recognized two of her best out-of-town customers.

She put on a winning smile. "Hi, welcome back."

"We knew it was early, but we took a chance you were open, and we can't wait to see what you've got for us this season."

Lily felt her heart sink. She knew the women wouldn't find anything new, at least not any new fairy figurines, which was what they always bought. She hadn't added to her lineup of merchandise in two years, but she wasn't about to tell them why.

Making new figurines, or "crap" as her estranged husband Kelly called them, was crucial to sales, but between their fighting and simultaneously trying to shield their eleven-year-old son from the drama, she hadn't found the time or the psychic energy to be creative. Still, the women had never left The Fairy Kingdom without buying something, so she left them to explore on their own and quietly cleared a space on the counter for their expected purchases.

They paused at the first display—the Arielle, her most expensive figurine. She knew for a fact that they had not bought one of them. Nobody had. Watching them turn the statues over to check the price was encouraging, but after the

brief check, the ladies put them back down. When they breezed through the rest of the store without showing interest in anything else, she stepped in for an intervention.

“I saw you looking at my Arielle figurines.”

The taller one avoided eye contact. “Yes, of course. We’ve both admired them for years.”

“Thank you. Then I wonder if you have any questions?”

The other woman conferred with her friend. “Yes. Do you know if The Witch’s Cauldron is open? We thought we’d check it out while we’re here. Greta always has such fun things.”

Lily struggled to maintain her smile as they headed to the door empty-handed. If those two regulars were bellwethers for the upcoming season, she feared she would face a lackluster balance sheet for the second year in a row. When she overheard one of them gush about her exceptional artistry and attention to detail, she felt better...until the other lady dealt a crushing blow.

“Wouldn’t you think Lily would have something new by now? I mean, she still has that shelf full of overpriced Arielles.”

Lily thought fast and followed them out. “Ladies, I hope you’ll come back soon to see my new collection. I’m sorry it wasn’t quite ready, but I know you are going to love it.”

Discouraged at the lack of a sale, she wandered to her office in the rear of the store and flipped through a stack of paperwork. The week’s average sales would pay the bills, but the prices of everything else were going up, and for the first time, she felt uneasy about her business prospects.

She hadn’t walked away from her husband on a whim. Months prior to their separation, she’d sought expert advice to understand the challenges she would face as a woman seeking a divorce that Kelly was contesting, and her accountant helped her understand the financial risks. Under the terms of the separation, she was responsible for her housing. It was her biggest expense, but she was used to scrimping. When she and

Kelly were together, she could never rely on him to deposit his full paycheck anyway, and she could only guess how he spent what he didn't bring home.

She got lucky when the occupants of the two-bedroom apartment above the store announced they were vacating, and Mrs. Coffey, the building's owner, offered it to her. She and her accountant hammered out the rest, basing their figures on the past three years' receipts and sales projections. If she stuck to her budget, she could keep the store afloat until she generated sales from a new line of merchandise.

But she had no cushion. Customers could be fickle, trends changed, and she was well aware that plummeting store revenue would blow apart her carefully planned budget and quickly turn her financial position upside down. She'd seen it coming in the winter when she predicted her current inventory wouldn't keep her regular customers interested. Because she still lacked an idea for a new line, she attempted a workaround. She took what she considered to be desperate measures and spent more than she could afford on items for resale.

She wasn't proud of the fairy key chains, calendars, and coffee mugs from China, but the markup was good. She hoped the extra fluff on the shelves would make The Fairy Kingdom a one-stop shop for *everything* fairy for those with a hankering for *anything* fairy. But she shuddered at the sight of her best customers walking past the cheap knickknacks without as much as a glance and feared the up-front cost had been more a gamble than an investment.

She walked to the front, making a quick study of her merchandise, and she kicked herself for letting those two women ruin her morning. Her fairy figurines were pretty, and people always loved their cute poses. Aside from the influx of folks who had come to watch the kitesurfing competition, most of the people in town were part-time residents who were returning to reopen their cottages. Typically, they were not her clientele. Nor was the young summer help who worked in the hotels and restaurants. It was the tourists yet to arrive who brought in the money, and in a few weeks, the resort town

would be in full swing. In the meantime, she crossed her fingers that her store would benefit from the coattails of the Cavalcade of Champions.

Her two customers were right about the Arielle figurines, though. She'd used herself as the model and considered them her best work, but they had been on the shelf too long. Several times Julie had suggested reducing the prices to stimulate a sale, and Lily had always resisted. She always thought they should be priced higher, not lower.

Remembering how Greta, the MBA, had often said that the right price was the one customers were willing to pay, Lily took out her pen and slashed through the four-hundred-ninety-nine-dollar price and marked them down by a hundred.

"Hello. Where is everyone?" Greta called. She saw Lily sitting behind the counter. "Oh. You are here. For a moment I wasn't sure if you were open or not."

"Thanks for reminding me how empty the place is. Did you just come by to gloat?"

"Don't be silly. Listen, if you have a minute, I thought we could go over our lines again. You're supposed to say, 'You have no power *here*,' not 'no power over us.' It's what Glinda, the Witch of the North said to the Wicked Witch of the West, remember?"

"Of course, I remember, but we're not putting on *The Wizard of Oz*. Besides, I'm a fairy, not a good witch. And don't we have to worry about plagiarism?"

"You can worry all you like, but I'm going ahead with my lines the way we planned. They're classics, and people go crazy over them. Oh, and would you find something else to throw at me this year? That pink glitter takes forever to get off my cloak."

Lily's lips quivered. "Yeah? Well, I hate your cackle."

Greta came around the counter and hugged her. "Hey, I didn't mean to be so bossy. Forget about the skit. We can change it a million times if we want. And I'm sorry about your wand."

“Thanks. I don’t know why, but all of a sudden it was like a hot poker.”

“Maybe it was my new spell.”

Lily laughed. “It’d be the first time any of them worked. Anyway, the skit is fine. It’s just that I got a little shock this morning when two of my best customers left without buying. It was a terrible way to start a season.”

“Jeez, it’s a little early to be worrying about a season that hasn’t started yet, isn’t it?”

“Well, they got me jumpy. What if nobody else likes my stuff?” She led Greta around the store past the shelves of figurines and pointed to the displays of the imported knickknacks and the leftovers from last year.

“Honestly, I do think your merch could stand some freshening.” Greta picked through the shelves. “I don’t know the first thing about sculpting, or whatever you call what you do, but I do know that people want to see new stuff. How hard would it be to make some?”

Lily had the materials and a studio. What she lacked was an idea. “I’m not sure, but I’d better figure out something fast. I promised those ladies I’d have a new collection to show them soon.”

“Hmm. I’m happy to help brainstorm, but we’ll have to make it after we close. I need to go back to the store. My stuff won’t sell itself.”

“It sure seemed like it when I popped in a little while ago.”

“Well, I’ve been reading up on retail best practices and decided to try the oldest trick in the book. Telling people what they need, even if they don’t realize they do. Hell, it worked for soap, cereal, and toilet paper.” She reached into Lily’s snack drawer. “But I honestly think my mumbo jumbo is what works best.”

“I’d settle for that,” said Lily. “Could you throw some my way?”



“Of course. In exchange for this Mars bar. I still don’t know where you find these.” She pulled off the wrapper and bit off half. Then with a wave of her hand and a mouthful of chocolate, she pointed at Lily. “*Xerbiat Erbidocerim!*”

Lily laughed. “I wish you were a real witch, but thanks for the spell anyway.”

“Of course, any time. And all that aside, I don’t know if I’ve ever told you my theory that you just have to be patient and wait for the right people to show up.”

Lily groaned at hearing the philosophy again. Greta was nearly to the front of the store when Lily shouted after her, “Hey, how long will it take for your spell to send me customers?”

Greta giggled back. “Apparently, no time at all. You’ve got a store full of them.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Lily hadn’t ever seen that many people in her store during the off-season, and she assumed that the audience from the skit had finally come to their senses.

There was another positive sign. Unlike the ladies who had shown ambivalence to her figurines, the new people were examining them. One thing baffled her, though. Glass shelving divided the length of her store down the middle, and everyone had crammed into one side. While it didn’t make sense, she wasn’t going to complain, and she tried not to stare at them as she worked her way to the front.

She was partway up the aisle when the store lights flickered and blinked off. Customers generally panicked when the power went off, but everyone remained calm.

Without the lights, the store was completely dark. Eager to restore the power and not lose her precious customers, she held out her arms and groped forward along the empty side to the electrical panel at the front. “Don’t worry. Stay in place. With all the unseasonable storms lately, the electrical grid has been playing tricks on us,” she explained. “I’m on my way to flip the breaker.”

Her hands collided with a rock-solid, cloth-covered object, and then her fingertips recognized a button and the open collar of a shirt. Horrified that she had slammed into a customer, she blurted her apology, and when she tried to jerk her hand back, a warm hand covered her wrist.

“No. Excuse me,” returned a gentle voice in a foreign accent she didn’t recognize. As she strained to see the man who was speaking, the lights flickered back on, and she found herself eye level with an open white cotton shirt and dangerously close to touching a man’s deeply tanned chest. She looked up and beautiful pale blue eyes stared back from a perfect face. “It was completely my fault.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Thick, luxurious dark hair spilled down to his shoulders. It was wild, yet somehow perfect, the kind of style that would leave her hair a frizzy mess if she tried it herself. Her knees weakened, and when she righted herself, she tipped against him. Embarrassed for a second time, she opened her mouth to apologize again, but only bits and pieces came forth.

“Oh! Er...um.”

Greta would have explained that the man’s powerful aura caused her jitters, and she would have undoubtedly carried on about the man’s colors and chakras. Lily was never that interested in Greta’s metaphysical world and not good at identifying those markers on people, but she did know one thing. Despite the unintentional intimacy of being an inch away from a perfect stranger, she felt oddly comfortable that his hand was still covering hers and now pressed against his chest.

He blinked, and she blinked back when she recognized the rest of his stunning features.

“Oh. Gosh. You’re Theos, the King. I just saw your exhibition an hour ago.”

She wasn’t ready to take her eyes off him, but she regained enough presence of mind to get back to business. She snapped to attention and asked if she could show him anything.

His response was as quick as it was startling. “Yes. I’m looking for fairy dust.”

Plenty of good-looking surfers had hit on her before with better lines of baloney, and experience taught her that he wasn't going to buy anything, superstar or not. She decided that auras and chakras had nothing to do with the earlier hand-holding—which, in retrospect, she considered to be borderline predation. Having seen through him, her words flowed more easily, and she shut him down.

“As a matter of fact, I do have some. I make it myself.” She reached into a bin marked *Fairy Dust \$5 a bag*. “Here.”

She tossed him a pouch and turned away to give her attention to the higher sales potential of the men and women squeezed into the opposite aisle, but when she got closer, a quick check of their faces lowered her expectations. She could tell that they weren't going to buy anything, either. They were ogling the celebrity, pretending to be interested in her figurines. In a way, she couldn't blame them. Theos, the King, was mesmerizing. Still, she had a store to run, so she attempted to break the hold he seemed to cast over everyone.

“Fairies sweep away bad dreams, make worries go away, and grant wishes,” she proclaimed, walking along the aisle. Her canned speech generally stimulated interest, but when heads didn't turn, she added another of her surefire lines. “And they'll bring you luck.”

Theos was poking in the pouch she'd thrown him, but when he heard her make the promise, he walked up to her.

“You're right about what fairies do, but you're wrong about whatever is in this bag that you call fairy dust. This definitely is not it.” He handed back the pouch. “So, where do you keep the good stuff?”

She hoped he wasn't referring to some sort of street drug. He didn't look the type, but one could never be certain. In case he was trying to be funny, she answered with a response that would work either way.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I know what fairy dust is, and I assumed you did, too, considering I watched you throw some in the air a while

ago.” He handed her the pouch. “Thank you, anyway.”

As he passed the checkout counter he noticed a basket of charms, and she watched him pick through them with great interest. After considering them all, he held up a blue oval stone that hung on a simple leather thong.

“What do you call this?”

She had begun making them years ago as friendship pendants for kids. They were easy to assemble, and despite the care she put into selecting the stones, she priced them low and kept them in stock.

“A fairy luck charm.”

He fingered the stone again. “When you say luck, I hope you mean good luck. It never hurts to have more of that kind.”

His take on luck made her laugh. “That’s for sure. And with everything going on in my life these days, I should be hanging all of them around my neck.” She looked away. Celebrity or not, he was a stranger, and she regretted sharing that piece of personal information. She changed the subject. “I made these too, in case you were wondering. And you probably can’t tell, but the color of the one you’re holding matches your eyes perfectly.”

His eyes sparkled. “Then I’ll have to buy it.” He leaned across the counter. “By the way, you look exactly like my mother.” Lily jerked backward, but he didn’t move. He smiled, and his flawless tanned face with the sexy two-day stubble briefly revealed perfect straight teeth that rivaled her tiara for sparkle. “You didn’t allow me to finish. I meant that you look exactly like my mother did *when she was your age*. My father married the most beautiful woman in the land.”

“Oh.” Lily relaxed again.

“Sometimes I do not get my English right. Let me try again.” He took a breath. “I meant that you have very beautiful eyes.”

That made two beautiful sets, his and hers, and when they made contact, he stopped talking. She wondered if he was waiting for her to compliment him back. She managed to

articulate a thank you, but while continuing the conversation should have been easy, she was out of practice and she lost her nerve. Afraid to make a fool of herself, she kept her mouth shut, but after an uncomfortable silence watching him admire his new pendant, she asked if she should ring it up.

“Not yet. I think I will look around some more.”

Those were the words store owners loved to hear, especially when they came from a superstar who no doubt had deep pockets and would likely buy something else.

“You know. I’m not going to charge you for the pendant. I’d like you to take it as a little gift from me to you.”

“Thank you. In that case, I believe I’ll start wearing it right now.” He cocked his head and arched his brows. “Under one important condition.”

She was glad she could speak without being tongue-tied, but assuming that he’d saved his best pick-up line for that very moment, she cleared her throat and swallowed hard again. Then she looked him squarely in the eye and braced herself.

“And what might that be?”

“That you must allow me to give you a gift in return.”

When she agreed, he draped the pendant over his neck and reached to secure it, but after watching him struggle with the clasp, she stopped him.

“Here, let me.” She fastened it easily and let her finger rest longer than necessary on the nape of his neck. She felt a faint but definite vibration, and she wondered if the sensation was coming from him or from her heart that surprised her by beating faster.

She didn’t see the harm. He was a fascinating guy, and she considered this exchange to be practice for when she was a free woman and in the market for a man again. “It’s nice having such a big celebrity in my store. Do you think you’ll ever come back to Myers Beach?”

“It’s hard to say. I’ll be here for at least through the competition. I’m on a mission.” He delivered his original line

with a straight face, and though she paused for him to burst out laughing, he never did.

She tried not to laugh herself. “Yes. To find your fairy dust.”

He put his hand on the spot on his neck where she had touched him. Then he fingered the blue stone. “Say, I was wondering if you would rub this? I find the energy is activated best by the person who gave the gift.”

She was eager to comply, and she dragged the tips of her fingers from his neck to the center of his chest to pick up the stone, accidentally brushing against his exposed skin.

“Of course.” She rubbed it with her thumb and laughed. “And I wish that you find more than you even imagined.”

She noticed him sniffing as though he’d caught a whiff of something he liked. “There’s something in the air in here that I find exhilarating,” he said. She watched him follow the scent around the store. Assuming he’d picked up on one of the essential oils she had on display, she was about to lead him to that section, when he stopped at the table of knickknacks and pointed. “What’s that?”

“Which?” she replied. “Those are keychains, and the other thing is a bottle opener.”

“No. Sticking out on the floor behind the table. May I?” Confused, she nodded, and he pulled the table far enough away from the wall to retrieve a piece of twisted wood. “This.”

She blushed. “Oh. I wondered what happened to that. It’s my favorite magic wand. Thanks for finding it.”

He arched a brow. “Magic?” Without waiting for her response, he lifted it to his nose. He breathed in and tilted his head back, enjoying what he smelled. Lily stepped closer.

“Of course, it’s not magic, but it does have kind of a strange smell, doesn’t it? Is that what you’re picking up on? Not the saltwater smell, but the other one.”

He nodded and took in another noseful. “Yes. I know that fragrance. *Tepa*. It’s a rare mineral. I’m actually picking up a

second one, too—*igdia*, equally scarce. Are you sure the wand isn't a *little* magic?" She didn't think he could get weirder, but then he brought the piece of driftwood to his mouth and touched the tip of his tongue to three spots.

"No, don't!" She reached to take it from him. "This is my personal wand."

"I am so sorry. It was very rude, but I got so excited. Will you please tell me where you got it?"

He relaxed his grip but didn't release his end of the wand, and they played a gentle tug-of-war as she debated whether to share how she came by the unique piece of driftwood. An overtly masculine man with a preoccupation with fairy dust and wands was a definite anomaly in her store, and she decided that his act had gone on too long for it to be a joke. That, and his freakish sense of smell made for a suspicious customer profile that would ordinarily send up a red flag. But when he locked his eyes on hers again, she felt both excited and strangely calm.

"Sure. I was walking on the beach one morning and literally tripped over the thing. The shape and size were perfect for a wand, so I picked it up. Then I got a whiff of whatever we both recognize as unusual, and maybe that's what made me keep it. I guess you could say that the driftwood called to me, if you believe in that sort of thing."

"I do. It called to me, too." His eyes never left the stick of wood. "Which beach, if you don't mind my asking?"

She pointed out the window with her thumb. "Right here. Myers Beach." His eyes followed her finger and he cocked his head, as though waiting for her to be more specific. "Over there, by the jetty."

Theos stared at the ocean quietly for several minutes. The two-hundred-foot-high natural jetty crossed the sandy beach and extended out to the sea, marking the southern end of the boardwalk. The flat top that rose high at the farthest point away from the shore commanded an unparalleled view of Myers Beach and created a temptation to climb that some couldn't resist. Waves crashed and pounded the craggy



outcropping day and night, though, and most people didn't need to read the posted warning sign to recognize the danger.

The other side of the jetty was also off-limits, but for a different reason. As one of the few private stretches of California coastline, the pristine sandy beach was protected on three sides by a sky-high cliff. At the top, dug deep into the rocks, a nondescript concrete industrial building and an ominous cluster of antennae and satellite dishes kept even the most reckless folks from daring to venture onto the property. Most of the cliff was surrounded by a foreboding fence, said to be electrified, and the entire installation was rumored to be quasi-military. Curiosity seekers were, therefore, generally content to gawk from a safe distance.

She whispered, "I confess I found it on the beach that's off-limits, so I can't advise you to look there."

Afraid she'd lost him as a customer, Lily was thinking of words that might convince him to stay and look for something else to buy when they heard a child's voice. Lily snapped her head in the direction of a young girl who was waving a delicate statue in the air, trying to get her mother's attention.

"Please be careful," Lily cautioned the girl. But her admonition was too late. Her jaw dropped when she saw the child fumble the expensive item and heard it shatter on the floor.

She could tell by the child's frightened expression that she expected a reprimand, but her mother hadn't noticed the disaster. Like everyone else in the store, she was focused on the beautiful man. She let go of her end of the wand she and Theos were holding. "Don't touch anything. I'll be right over to take care of it."

As she dashed to her office, she saw Theos shake the wand and slap it against his palm. When Lily returned with a broom and dustpan, he was on his knees where the child had dropped the statue. He handed her a perfectly intact figurine.

"Is this a joke?" Assuming he'd swapped a new statue for the broken one, Lily crouched on the floor to search for

fragments. “That’s weird. I’m sure I heard it break, and believe me, I know that sound well.”

“Your ears must have been playing tricks on you. I didn’t hear anything.” He turned his attention back to her figurines. Still jumpy at almost losing one, she cringed when she saw him picking through them, worried his strong hands might accidentally crush one of her dainty objects. The more she watched him study each one with care, the more she regretted her distrust. Besides, apart from the free pendant, he was technically still her only true customer.

“I don’t see any males in your Fairy Kingdom.”

Again, she had no good answer to a comment that caught her off guard. “We, um, don’t carry any.” He asked where she got her merchandise, and she pointed to the shelves of knickknacks. “Depends. These things I bought, but I made all the figurines myself, you know, by hand.”

“Then you should make men fairies, too. A kingdom needs a king.” Since few people had asked for a male fairy in all her years in business, she had assumed creating one wouldn’t be worth her time and effort, and she could never figure out how a male would fit in with the more precious style of her females. In any case, she wished more men like him would stop by.

“I heard you say that fairies bring luck. Which one of these will bring me the most?”

She laughed it off. “Any of them. All of them. You have my personal guarantee.”

A three-foot figurine caught his attention. Flowing hair rippled over the fairy’s shoulders and down her backside, and a sheer white robe clung to her body, giving the illusion she had just stepped out of a pool of water. Her wings were wispy and dew-covered. He lifted it from the display and Lily stepped closer, pleased that he’d chosen her most expensive piece.

“I see you picked one with long hair like your own.”

He nodded. “Or like yours. Did you make her, too?”

“Yes. I call her Arielle, the Fairy Queen.”

“What a coincidence. That’s my mother’s name, too. Well, Arielle deserves to have a king. If you were a fairy queen, you would want one, too, would you not?” He posed the question with such a straight face that, again, she thought he might be serious. She nodded. “And would not all the fairies in your shop feel the same way?” He tilted the statue into the light and smiled. “She looks exactly like you. Same face. Same body. By any chance is Arielle your name, too?”

She stiffened. While his spot-on observation that she had been the model for the figurine impressed her, she bristled. This pickup line was worse than the one about fairy dust, and she realized that her original opinion of him was probably the right one, after all.

She was about to tell him off when he said, “I’ll take her.”

She gulped from a combination of excitement and regret, thrilled that she’d finally sold one, and sorry that she’d given in to the impulse that morning to mark them down. Despite his jeans and cotton shirt, the man was a world-famous athlete and could no doubt easily pay the higher price.

She smiled. “I’m glad you like her. She’s my favorite.”

“All the more reason.” He cupped his hands and leaned toward her ear. “And if it’s all right with you, I’d also like to buy the statue the child wanted, the one that she almost broke.”

For as long as she’d owned the store, she’d never encountered a customer like him, or a man like him, for that matter, and she sputtered out a reply to his kind and generous offer. “Are you positive? Who would I tell her it’s from?”

“Surely you can make up something. You have a store full of fairies.” He grinned. “Tell her one of them wanted her to have it.”

## CHAPTER SIX

As she carried the Arielle to the front, Lily wasn't certain which of the remarkable events caused her hands to tremble the most: the large cash transaction, the innocence of his questions, or her confusing attraction to him. She untied the tag that dangled from one of Arielle's wings and was about to enter the sale price when she read the figure. Six hundred and ninety-nine dollars. She held the tag closer to confirm that it was in her handwriting.

He noticed her double take. "Is there something wrong?"

"Um. No. We put these on sale, and I was just verifying the price."

"Why would you discount such beautiful works of art? I think you should charge more."

No matter how flattering he'd been, she wasn't about to go into detail about the dynamics of a retail operation. She'd already told him that his figurine was on sale, so charging him the original price wouldn't have been right. And while she made a mental note to reprice the rest of them, she stopped short of entering any amount on her iPad until she reconsidered what he'd said.

"Thank you for that nice compliment. Of course, I agree with you. Honestly, I needed space for the new figurines I'm making, so I lowered the price to sell them quickly." She didn't know why she shared her business strategy or why her heart skipped a beat.

“Hmm.” He looked at the crowd of people staring at him and gave them a nod. “Sometimes, you just have to wait for the right customers.”

She bit her tongue at the advice and wondered if he and Greta had run across the same internet meme. She had to admit that she found him incredibly attractive, but until the court finalized her divorce, dating was not an option, so she took extra caution to avoid looking directly into his eyes when she asked if it was a gift.

“Yes,” he replied. “For someone very special.”

She pulled out one of her best gift boxes and cut a length of ribbon that came close to the blue of his eyes. Out of habit she’d checked his hands and hadn’t seen a wedding ring, and while she couldn’t expect a guy like him to be single, she was crestfallen to hear he had someone special in his life. She worked the ribbon to make an elaborate bow.

“Your girlfriend, perhaps?” She held her breath.

He laughed. “No. Me. And I insist on paying the full price, because I’m worth it.” He eyed the other people in the room again. “Who wouldn’t want to?”

She found it charming that this unlikely prospect wanted to purchase both her most and least expensive items. He’d been her best customer that day, that year, probably ever. Finally, she spun the tablet around and showed him the total. “I really appreciate the sale. My name is Lily, by the way.”

“You gave me the impression earlier that things weren’t going so well for you, Lily, and I wondered why you wouldn’t ask one of your fairies to help you out? You said they granted wishes, and they look receptive.” She raised her eyebrow at the silly suggestion, but he persisted with his argument. “I am serious. What would you wish for?”

“Easy. I’d wish for a few more sales like yours. A small store like mine can be a struggle.”

“Well, then since you won’t ask them, *I’ll* grant that wish for you.”

Lily laughed and handed him her wand. “Okay, but you may need this.”

“Oh, gosh. Not that one.” He pushed it aside and tapped her on the forehead. “Poof! Glad I could help.”

She thought if she stopped talking long enough, he might ask her out, even if she couldn’t go. When he didn’t, she thanked him again anyway. “Well, listen. I hope you enjoy your Arielle.”

“I’m sure I will.” He turned to go but stopped. “And I promise to give you luck back one day, the good kind.”

His unexpected and charming remark disarmed her. One by one he was proving her assumptions to be misconceptions, and she reacted quickly. “In that case, I also accept.” He had so enchanted her that she hadn’t noticed that the gawkers who had been standing on the other side of the aisle had formed a line behind him at the checkout counter. She caught her breath when she saw that each one was holding an Arielle. “And it appears you already did.”

“It’s only fair. Your good luck pendant already brought me some.” She didn’t understand the comment, but she wanted to continue the conversation, and she asked if he’d wait around until she’d rung up the remaining customers. He stepped back to allow the line to move. “I’d like that too. Do you mind if I wait over there by the window?”

He walked to the wall near the front door and turned to face her. Between the million-dollar smile he flashed every time she looked up, and the euphoria of seeing tags that all showed the same higher price, she thought she was dreaming.

She found it impossible to resist staring at him between customers. It felt good to see him waiting, and she experienced an exciting jolt of pleasure every time he grinned back. With each peek, their smiles grew wider, and after she caught him snickering, she knew he was flirting.

While her customers continued to ogle him shamelessly, she tried to keep her looks surreptitious. He returned their gawks with smiles and winks, not as though he knew them, but

rather because he seemed used to the adulation. When each customer reached the register, they bought a pendant as well, though they didn't appear to be as invested in the color of the stones as Theos.

The windfall revenue would bring her a financial peace of mind she hadn't experienced in a long time. Still, amid her deep gratitude for the biggest sales day in the history of her store, she was eager to pick up where she had left off with the stranger.

A flash of lightning streaked along the beachfront. She knew from experience that when customers sensed a storm coming, they tended to drop their purchases and make beelines back to their hotel rooms. But even after the horrendous crack of thunder that she thought would split her store in half, her customers remained in line and patiently waited their turn to pay. She felt a tinge of stage fright after she rang the last sale. Except for the banter between them earlier, engaging in a real conversation with an attractive man was territory she hadn't explored in a dozen years, and she felt grossly unprepared.

She locked the cash drawer and attempted to start the inevitable small talk. "Is it still raining?" When he didn't respond, she looked up. Her heart sank. Theos, the King was gone.

After a quick scan of the empty aisles, she bolted out the front door into the downpour. A few poor souls were running to escape the deluge, and she saw others waiting under storefront overhangs for the storm to pass, but he was not among them. She didn't waste time questioning her motive as she dashed to look for him next door.

"Is he here?"

"Who?"

Greta's customers had left her store, too. "Oh, nobody. Never mind."

Greta gave her a poke. "I know who you mean. I couldn't resist peeking when I saw him go in your store earlier. Who was that hunk?"

Lily shook her head. “Theos. Remember, from this morning?”

“Oh, yeah. The kitesurfer. I didn’t recognize him up close. Did he give you his phone number?”

“Of course not. You know I can’t see anybody yet.”

“What a waste. That divorce can’t come soon enough.”

Lily agreed. She didn’t intend for one bad marriage to ruin the rest of her life, but she couldn’t jeopardize her divorce over a fling. Besides, she was no match for someone like him. And champion athletes were rumored to have women in every town. Men, too, for that matter.

Greta and Lily had been close for so long, they could practically read each other’s minds, and when Greta nodded to the back of the store, Lily knew to follow. “Wings!” shouted Greta, and Lily pushed the button on her belt. She’d forgotten to collapse her wings more than once before, and their sizable span had knocked merchandise off Greta’s shelves.

They flopped on her couch, and Greta popped open two beers. “So, was he only there to hit on you, or did he buy anything?”

“From some of the lines he threw at me when he first came in, I thought he was like all the others. But then he said some of the sweetest things, even if they were a bit odd. Get this. He said his mother was the most beautiful woman *in the land*. I mean, who uses that expression?”

“He sounds dreamy.”

“Yeah. And he also bought my most expensive figurine.”

“Better yet. Which one’s that?”

“Arielle, the tall one that looks like me. But something really weird happened. After those ladies complained that they were overpriced this morning, I marked them down a hundred dollars. But when he came to the counter, the price on the tag was a hundred bucks *more* than the original price.”

“Obviously, you messed up. I remember how weak your aura was earlier, but I don’t blame you. Marking down my



stuff makes me uncomfortable, too.”

“No. I distinctly remember the sinking feeling when I slashed through the old price with my marker.”

Greta took a sip of beer. “You should feel lucky that he didn’t pick up one of the ones you changed correctly. Anyway, it was good to see your store on fire. Mine was dead for a while after that first rush.”

“It gets better. Today was my biggest day ever, all because of him. All these other people came in when he did. At first, I think they came in to stare at him. They even pretended to be interested in my stuff. Maybe they were his friends, but he sure didn’t act like it.”

“So, did they buy anything?”

Lily gulped her beer. “They bought exactly what he bought. I was glad I had thirteen Arielles. I hadn’t sold any until today, and now I’m out. It was magical.”

“There you go with the magic thing again. Like I always say—”

Lily didn’t let her finish. “No, it really was. The other tags showed the higher price, too. I wonder if Kelly had anything to do with it. You know, changing the price higher so nobody would buy them. You haven’t seen him sneaking around the store, have you?”

Greta held her finger to her ear and made the cuckoo sign at Lily. “Whatever. We both had a good day.” She jabbed her friend on the shoulder. “Good going, Lil.”

Lily took a long drink. “So, you agree, he was cute, right?”

“Cute? No. Gorgeous, yes. Since you didn’t get his number, give me his credit card receipt, and I’ll find out everything about him.”

Lily looked down. “He paid cash.”

“Too bad, but I saw the way he was checking you out. He’ll be back. To make sure, I’ll cast a little spell.”

“Thanks, but before you do that, I want to make a couple of wishes.” She picked up one of Greta’s wands and pointed it at her. “I wish that you were a more effective witch, and I wish you’d get your own supply of Mars bars.”

Greta laughed. “That’s so cute seeing you pretend to have magic power. But I’m not done.” She circled her wand over both their heads. “I wish that both our stores have another day as good as today.” They opened two more beers and laughed at their anticipated good fortune.

“Wait!” said Lily. “What did you say a minute ago?”

“Um, that you were cuckoo?”

“No. Before that. You said I was lucky.”

“Well, duh. Yeah. You were.”

“Yes, but it’s strange, because he promised to give me good luck.” She leaned back on the couch. “And I can use some because I need new stuff to sell more than ever. Like right away.”

“That’s generally a nice problem to have. Can’t you make more of the Arielles? You still have the mold, or whatever you call it, don’t you?”

She did, and now that she had the cash, she could afford to have the foundry cast more, but that wouldn’t solve her problem. She’d have new old stuff on the shelves. What she needed was something *new*.

“I said I’d help you brainstorm, so here’s a wild idea. Promise not to judge?” Greta pulled off her witch hat and cloak to reveal her standard tube top and shorts. “Have you ever thought of making a figurine of a man fairy? I mean they have to exist, right? Otherwise, how do they...you know.”

“Funny you should mention that. A male fairy figurine is exactly what the guy said he wanted.”

Greta took Lily’s hands and made her voice sound serious. “Um. Okay. You do know that means he’s gay, right?” She fell back and laughed. “And to think only a few minutes ago you were chasing him.”

“Oh. Gee, I don’t think he is. But I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Come on. Fairies? He definitely is. Turns out that a lot of jocks are. But it doesn’t matter. That doesn’t change my idea.”

She hunched over to put her face closer to Lily’s and felt something behind a throw pillow. She stood and tossed the pillow aside, revealing a new full bag of Mars bars. “Oh, that’s why you made the wish. When did you hide these?” Lily denied having anything to do with it, but Greta wasn’t listening, and she put the cushion back. “Where was I? Oh, yeah. My idea. Why not make one that looks like Theos? I mean, you must have seen his aura.”

Greta wasn’t the first to come up with that suggestion. Neither was Theos. But they were the first to bring it up in a long time.

“No, no.” Lily waved her beer. “He looks nothing like a fairy. His size, his shape...it’s all wrong. I should know.”

“Does that matter? Think about all those people following him around making goo-goo eyes and buying whatever he bought. It’s his charisma. I bet that if you made figurines that looked exactly like him and you captured his mojo, those same idiots would run out and buy one that they could stare at all day...and all night.” She gave out one of her cackles, forgetting that Lily hated the sound.

“When you put it that way, your idea does make sense. Actually, it’s perfect. He’s perfect. I can do this.”

Greta lifted her beer in a toast to herself. “Sometimes I forget just how smart I am.” She waved her hands in the air and mimicked Oprah Winfrey’s voice. “I see dollar signs!”

“Hold that thought. I’m ditching my costume, too.” Lily unbuckled her wing harness and peeled off her dress. And when she propped up her bare feet she wondered if it was the fairy princess getup that attracted the guy, or if he’d be as interested if he saw her like that: jean shorts, band T-shirt, and all. She sank back into her chair. “So, why the hell do you think he left without saying something?”

Greta pushed herself deeper into the cushions as she searched for the right answer.

“But anyway,” Lily went on, “I’d forgotten what a rush it was to have a man flirt with me. At least I thought he was. Looks like I’m going to have to relearn how to flirt back.”

“You’re just out of practice.”

“Maybe.” Lily looked down at the shorts she’d worn for years and the faded tee. “You know, my merchandise isn’t the only thing that’s stale. If I’m going to put myself out there again, I’ll need some new clothes. Luckily, after today I can afford to do a little shopping.”

“I had an excellent morning myself. Let’s go to the mall.” Greta took a long drink and looked down. “Not to beat a dead horse, but Theos really had some powerful mojo. I could feel it all the way over here.”

“Greta, please. Enough with that stuff. I’ve already forgotten him.”

“Don’t forget too much. Understand that the statue I’m talking about can’t just be some beautiful man fairy. You’re doing this to tap into his power, so they’ve got to look *exactly* like Theos, the King, okay? Details are crucial.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Lily tossed her empty can into the waste basket. “I memorized every feature.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Theos*

*It was a stroke of luck that I stumbled into The Fairy Kingdom. Despite the awful mess she pawns off as fairy dust, Lily, the owner, makes the most exquisite figurines that bear an uncanny resemblance to the fairies of our kingdom.*

*And how lucky that I picked up on tepa and igdia from her wand. By the depth of the scents, I believe they must have come from strong and hopefully plentiful sources, which would be amazing since they're the ones we need in the largest quantities. I wonder if this good fortune came from my new pendant?*

*I hated to dip into my personal stash to fix the wand and toss it on the people in the store, but I considered both uses to be emergencies.*

*To remind me of home and the trials they are going through, I bought one of her fairy statues. While the name Arielle seemed more than coincidental, the name wasn't what made me choose that one. I picked it because it looked like her. She intrigues me because she could recognize the scent of the elements like me, and while she claims to know what powers fairies possess, she doesn't quite believe in them. I was hoping to get to know her better, but that godawful thunderclap knocked the breath right out of me, and I needed eighteen hours to recover.*

*I hope she is not angry that I had to bolt. Of course, I can't tell her why, but I intend to make it up to her when I go back.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Lily ended the day with the two things that had been blocking her forward movement: cash in the bank and a brilliant idea for a new line. Being hit on by a gorgeous guy was an unexpected bonus, and though he'd ditched her, her morale got a nice temporary boost.

Greta had helped pick out some great tops and jeans, and Lily snagged an appointment with her former hairdresser, who always made her look terrific. She tossed and turned into the wee hours, and for the first time in a while, it wasn't from fearing the approaching season. It was from feeling giddy and inspired.

The morning came quickly, and she wished she'd gotten more sleep. Ticking off the items she'd added to her to-do list during the night would take more energy than normal. Besides, after she picked up Jamie from school in the afternoon, she could finally spoil him. They'd start with dinner at the Sea Catch and then slip next door where she would buy him the expensive skateboard he'd wanted so badly. Before she started splurging, she made a quick trip to her office downstairs to pay off everything she owed. The luxury of a healthy bank balance made writing checks satisfying and added to her confidence.

When the upstairs apartment had become available, its location and price were not the only attractive features. It had a closed-in porch that was more than enough space for a studio. Buoyed by a new sense of purpose, she ran back upstairs to set it up. She dug out the table and her sculpting armature that she'd stashed in the back of a closet. It had been

ages since she'd made anything, and she had fun unwrapping the modeling tools she'd kept packed in boxes for so long. Bringing out the clay she'd stored was not as joyous.

She hadn't planned to sculpt right away when she moved, so she'd locked the modeling clay in the small attached shed behind the store. When she went out to bring up a bag, she noticed the door was ajar, and she made a mental note to remind Jamie to lock it each time he put his bicycle back.

She kept the bags in protective plastic bins to keep them safe from the elements and stashed them in the back. A bag was heavy, and the bins made it easy to drag across the floor and up the stairs. As she slid the first one out, she heard the bag thump against the side of its bin and knew something was very wrong. She tore it open, and her face fell when she reached in and discovered that the clay had turned to rock.

A quick examination of the others proved the disaster was not an accident. Someone had deliberately slashed the bottoms of all four bags and poured water in the bins. Only one person was that spiteful. She double-checked the latch, and when she saw the broken lock on the ground, she called Kelly.

"Oh, I was looking for the hedge clippers. I thought you had taken them, you know, by mistake," he explained. "And I may have accidentally scraped one of the bags with my hunting knife, while I was looking for it. It was totally an accident, and you can't prove it wasn't." He knew damn well how important clay was to her business, and even over the phone she could see his smirk. He'd never clipped their hedges.

"Do you have any idea how much this will cost me to replace? And my lawyer will love hearing about this little breaking-and-entering number. Our day in court can't come soon enough."

"Stop with the lawyer talk, Lil. You know you still love me. If you would just come back, you wouldn't have to worry about money anymore or mess around with that little business of yours, either."

“Is that your idea of seduction? Listen carefully. Stay away from my house, from me, and my store. Next time, I’m calling the police!”

She hung up the phone and leaned against the door. His sabotage was a setback for sure. Her windfall the day before would only carry her so far, and the clay she used was pricey. And heavy. Shipping charges alone made it prohibitive to buy online, and the alternative was a two-hour drive each way to her supplier in Overdale. Julie was her only employee during the off-season, and unless she was available to fill in for her, running an errand like that meant closing the store while she was gone. Lily gave her a call, hoping she’d take Lily’s shift.

“You’re a real lifesaver, Jules. If I leave now, I can be back in time to pick up Jamie after school. By the way, nice move hiding those Mars bars in Greta’s sofa. When did you have time to do it?”

“Huh? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Anyway, I’ll come right over. Hey, I thought you had plenty of clay.”

“It’s a long story. The short version is that Kelly got in my shed and destroyed it. All of it.”

“Crap! I wish he’d leave you alone. But, on a lighter note, does needing clay mean we’ll have something new to sell?”

“Sure does. I’ve got a whole collection in mind, and I want to start working on it while the images are still dancing around in my head.”

Traffic was moderately heavy, but her upbeat mood helped the two-hour drive pass quickly, and she bought enough clay from the foundry to make three dozen new figurines. While she was there, she put in an order for another ten Arielles. The transactions brought her bank balance back down to where it had been before the great windfall, but it felt good to pay for everything in advance for a change.

She was about to stop for lunch on her way back when Julie’s picture flashed on her phone. Talking on a cellphone while driving was a serious offense, but she worried that something might be wrong in the shop, so she took the call.



“You won’t believe the crazy busy morning we’ve had,” said Julie. “Another day or two like this, and we’ll be out of everything. Greta even noticed all the activity when she stopped in. She said she wanted to take the credit because of the spell she cast for you yesterday.”

Lily laughed. “She did, if you count her mumbling something stupid with half a Mars bar in her mouth.”

“Maybe so, but I see you had a big day yesterday, too. Nice going, selling all the Arielles, by the way. I guess it was a good idea to mark them down, huh?”

“No. Turned out everyone paid full price, actually higher. It’s a weird story I’ll tell you later.”

“That is so random,” Julie replied. “The same thing happened to me. It was gutsy of you to raise the price on the Selenas, but I sold them all, anyway. Can you believe that we’re out of all the high-end stuff?”

Lily did not pursue the subject of the prices. She hadn’t changed the tags on the Selenas, and since she didn’t understand how it happened, she could hardly explain the changing amounts to Julie. The thought that Kelly was sneaking into her store and meddling with her business made her hands shake, so she balanced the phone on her lap and put the call on speaker before she asked Julie to elaborate.

“It started when this super-hot guy walked in. Long hair, pale blue eyes. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t place him. Believe me, he made switching days totally worth it, thank you very much. You waited on him yesterday. It was the same guy who bought one of the Arielles. Anyway, he said the cutest thing. He said she was lonely, that he stopped by to pick up another figurine to give her company. He paid cash, so I didn’t catch his name.”

Lily tried to sound nonchalant, but her heart’s drumbeat suggested otherwise. “He’s got a weird name. Theos.”

“You’re not talking about the kitesurfer Theos? My God, I can’t believe I waited on him.”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Who hasn’t? I’m going with friends to see him compete this weekend.”

“Was he, um, alone?”

“He came in by himself, but the store filled up with customers almost immediately, and it was weird. Everyone ended up buying a Selena, too, which is how we sold out.”

Lily mentally did the math. While a second windfall was exciting, she was disappointed that she missed the chance to wait on him. She blamed it on Kelly. She’d gotten into the habit of blaming everything on him, regardless of whether he was at fault. This time, though, having to make the drive to Overdale really was because of him.

“But I didn’t tell you the best part. Get ready. He was wearing a bathing suit and flip-flops. No shirt or anything else, and he was still dripping wet, like he just got out of the water. What a body. You should have seen him.”

Lily gritted her teeth and pulled over to the shoulder. “Did he say if he’d be back?”

“He said he was leaving town soon, which is why he wanted Arielle to have company while he was gone. Isn’t that the cutest thing ever?”

Lily ignored the comment. “Did he mention where he was going, or like, if he was coming back to the store before he went away?”

“Hey, what’s with all the questions? Are you interested in him? I wouldn’t blame you if you were.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Are you kidding? Not a chance. Hell no.”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Sounds like you’re trying awfully hard to convince me that you’re not.”

“Actually, he was quite rude.”

“Odd. He was super nice to me. Man, he had the sexiest accent. Do you know where he’s from?”

“Why are you asking me? You seem to know him better than I do.”

“Geez, Lily. You sound jealous that I got to wait on him and not you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Lily leaned back in her seat to consider how the timing had been so right the day before and so off now. “Sorry, I’m still on edge from Kelly doing that number on me this morning.”

“He’s wrong for you, anyway,” Julie said “He mentioned wanting a male fairy statue, so he’s obviously gay, right? But to answer your question, he might be back. He said if Selena and Arielle weren’t compatible, he’d need to pick out a different one. Crazy, huh? Anyway, I told him you were out all day, but I’d be here.”

Lily flipped off her parking flashers and was pulling onto the highway when she saw a police car’s chaotic lights in her rear-view mirror. The blip of the siren confirmed they were stopping her. She tossed her phone onto the passenger side floor.

“Can’t you read?” scolded the patrol officer when he got to her window. “No stopping or standing.” She handed him her license and registration, and between filling out paperwork and enduring his endless lecture on driver safety, she lost close to an hour. Still, she felt lucky to get off with a warning.

“And don’t let me catch you talking on the phone when you’re driving. I saw you throw yours on the floor. Next time I won’t be so lenient.”

As she nodded in obedience, she was already planning her next two acts of civil *disobedience*. She would floor it back to the store, and while she was speeding, she’d risk another ticket by calling Julie. On the off chance that Theos came back to the store, she wanted to ask her to ask him to stick around until she got back. The cops foiled both plans when their squad car pulled behind and followed her all the way to Myers Beach, forcing her to obey the speed limit and resist touching her cellphone.

She was breathless by the time she burst through the back door of The Fairy Kingdom. “Is he here?”

“Who?” asked Julie.

“Theos. You said he might come back.”

“Well, he didn’t. And now I remember why. He said he had to fly.”

Lily dashed out to the boardwalk and scanned both directions, wondering what she meant by that. Julie followed her out.

“What am I missing here? I thought you didn’t care about him.”

“Well. I lied.” She glanced at the fairy wall clock. “But it doesn’t matter. Now I’m the one who has to fly. I’ve got to pick up Jamie and I’m late.”

## CHAPTER NINE

She was maneuvering into the student pickup lane when she got the disturbing text from Principal Peele asking her to meet in his office. She considered pulling to the curb and parking there since the change in plans would mean an extra fifteen minutes searching for a spot in the lot behind the building. Multiple signs warning against stopping or standing brought back the nightmare of her earlier scrape with the law, and she chose not to press her luck.

She was still thinking about Theos and determined to spend the next day in the store, so if he stopped by the store for a third time, she'd be there to wait on him. She was considering what to wear when she stepped into the principal's office and saw the bruises.

"Your son instigated an altercation with two other boys," said Principal Peele.

She glared back at the man she'd always considered pompous. "These marks look like they came from a fight, not an altercation. And that does not sound like Jamie. Are you sure?"

"Oh, I'm certain. He claimed that the boys were making nasty comments about him on social media."

Jamie sat with his head bowed, picking at a scab on his knee. She put her hand on his shoulder. "Is this true?" He nodded without looking up. "Will you show me what they were posting about you?"

His refusal came as a shock. She'd raised him to speak his mind, and he had never just shut down. At that moment, she wasn't sure if she was proud of him for standing his ground or irritated that he did. He was grinding his teeth, and she worried that he might be hiding something from her. Or lying, which would have been the first time.

The principal continued. "Missus Harper, if this happens again, I'll have no choice but to suspend him. In the meantime, since he was the one who started the fight, I'm giving him detention for a week."

Jamie slid down in his seat, defeated by the reprimand and isolation from his friends. Lily scowled. Besides being a prick, she found Peele apathetic and indifferent. With this new exchange, she added "harsh" to her list of his shortcomings. She stood and asked Jamie to wait outside while they discussed the matter.

"Detention? Really? They were bullying him online, and Jamie's the one who gets punished? I hope you understand that this makes no sense."

He looked over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. "What happens online is not part of the school's jurisdiction, as I'm sure you can understand."

"What about the other two? I assume they're also getting the same?"

"Missus Harper. You may not have heard me correctly. Jamie is the one who started the fight."

"It sounds like they started it first, online, and he was defending himself. Can't you at least consider less harsh punishment? It's clear from those bruises that someone grabbed him awfully hard."

"Experts might say that the attention-seeking behavior he exhibited in the schoolyard is a reflection of being neglected at home," Mr. Peele suggested. "Or should I say *homes*? Perhaps you might try to ensure a better environment for your son. My decision is my decision, Missus Harper. And unless you'd like

me to extend his punishment by antagonizing me further, I'd suggest we leave it at that."

She stormed out of his office, fuming that he would treat a parent like one of his elementary school pupils. The ride home was tense. She asked Jamie to explain, but other than admitting that he started the fight, Jamie was uncommunicative. When they reached their apartment, he headed straight to his room.

"Where are you going?" she asked sweetly, hoping for a chance to turn the evening around. Long ago they'd made a pact not to go to bed angry. "I made plans for us."

"I just want to be alone."

## CHAPTER TEN

For the rest of the week, Lily woke with fresh resolve and a new ball of clay, and by six o'clock in the evening she'd smash what she'd made back into a lump. Either the proportions were off or the facial features didn't look right. She couldn't settle on whether to make this male look strong and fierce, or soft and sweet like her female statues. Ideally, she'd make several, but she was having a difficult enough time creating one.

She couldn't blame her lack of progress on not having time alone to concentrate. Jamie was in school during the day, and Julie was saving for a new laptop and was eager to put in more hours. So, while Julie covered the store, Lily had her studio to herself. Now that her hands were working the clay, she realized she didn't remember as many details about Theos as she expected. He hadn't been back in the store, either. She was still optimistic about the project, but that mojo thing wasn't happening.

At least Jamie had calmed down, and their relationship was somewhat back to normal. She had wanted to talk about the scene in the principal's office, but when he woke up happy the following morning, she tabled the discussion rather than risk ruining their time together.

Her alone time in the studio came to a halt when Julie announced she'd picked up a nasty bug and couldn't work for the next few days. Since they still hadn't staffed up for the season, it was left to Lily to run the store by herself, and since



she'd already wasted the week getting nowhere, she felt a sudden wave of panic.

She brought everything downstairs to her office, so she could work during downtime when there were no customers. While the setup wasn't ideal, it made her feel like she was moving forward. Disruptions turned out not to be a stumbling block. Heavy rains had pummeled Myers Beach the day before, all but eliminating foot traffic on the boardwalk. And the forecast for the next few days was dour, too, putting those tourists who had booked a week of beach time in bad moods. Even during the rare moments between downpours when people ventured out, they didn't spend money.

The lack of store traffic gave her more time to work but she forced herself to accept a simple truth. She wasn't making progress because there were too many gaps in her memory. Greta's insistence that the figurines look *exactly* like Theos added to the pressure. She pushed her tools to the side and brought out her sketch pad. In art school, she'd been excellent at drawing portraits, and she thought the change in the medium might jar her memory. Sculpting from a sketch would be easier, too, and she thought she could make up some time. Things fell into place quickly and by the end of the day, she had enough sketches to get Greta's opinion. Greta leaned in to study the proliferation of drawings taped to the walls.

"Wow. When you told me you were going full out, you were serious."

"Full out? Are you making fun of me? I spent a whole week and a half getting nowhere. I did all these today."

"Well, I'd give you an A for effort. And these are nice, Lil, but they're not him. At least, not the way I remember. On the other hand, he wasn't making goo-goo eyes at me, so I'm probably not the best judge. I mean, you've sketched a handsome guy, for sure. I see his eyes, and you got the hair right, but something else is still off."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Lily's lower lip quivered.

"Don't get me wrong, Lil. I'm sure that statues looking like this person would sell tons, but Theos' electricity isn't

coming across.” She took another look. “Yep. It’s his aura that’s missing.” Lily rolled her eyes. If she hadn’t been so stressed, she would have laughed out loud. But under the psychobabble, she knew Greta was right. She hadn’t captured his power.

Greta continued, “And listen. All these sketches stop at the shoulders. Do you think if you quit focusing on his face for a while and worked on the rest of the body, maybe the other details would come back?”

“You have no idea how many times I tried. You see, there’s another problem. To fit in with the female fairies, he needs to show a lot of skin, and I’ve only seen him once, and he was wearing pants and a shirt. Believe me, nobody will buy a figurine of a fairy dressed in jeans.”

“I suppose not,” Greta admitted. “But man, don’t you wonder what’s under all that? I did.” Lily didn’t answer. She had undressed him a million times in her head, which was fun but didn’t help. “I’m really surprised he hasn’t been back,” Greta went on. “I’m not usually wrong about these things.”

“He did. He came by the next day. Julie waited on him, and get this. All he had on was his bathing suit. He wasn’t even wearing a shirt. I could kick myself for being gone. If I had seen him like that, I wouldn’t be having these problems.”

“Is that all? Sounds like you might have fallen for this guy a little.”

“Hey. You know I’m talking about him only as an object. Let’s not forget that he was a jerk.”

“Uh-huh. I don’t believe you. And I’m a witch, so, let’s not forget I can read minds.”

Julie had tried to give her details, but she was no help. Her idea of a description consisted of vague words like “awesome” and “gorgeous.”

“So, obviously, you need to see him again, firsthand,” Greta insisted. “You said you weren’t counting the day Julie waited on him. Why not? Isn’t it possible he stopped by to see you?”

“He didn’t ask for me, and considering the way he ditched me, I doubt it.”

Greta put her hand to her temple and closed her eyes. “Hmm. I disagree. I see him clearly in your future.”

“Thanks for trying to make me feel better, but we both know you’re as much of a witch as I’m a fairy.” She stood. “I’m scared, Greta. Aside from those two big days when he and his groupies spent a lot of money, sales are back to being flat. I’m running out of time to get this new line made and it’s stressing me out.”

Greta rolled back her office chair. “Then it’s probably not the best time to ask what’s going on with your building, is it?”

Lily spun. “What about it?”

“Oh crap, you don’t know. The scuttlebutt on the beach is that your building might be for sale. Of course, the first thing I wondered about was how it would affect you.”

Lily sat back down. “Why would it be for sale? Missus Coffey and I had a nice talk only two weeks ago when I dropped off my rent check. She told me how happy she was to have me as a tenant. Then she said what she always says—that she would hang on to the property until her dying day.”

Greta coughed. “Apparently, that was yesterday.”

Lily’s eyes teared up. “Oh, no. I loved that woman. She’s the one who encouraged me to start this shop. She was a mentor, a grandmother.”

Greta put her arms around her friend. “A heart attack, apparently. There haven’t been many details about that, but the rumor mill about the fate of her property has kicked in. I’m sorry.”

Lily kept her head on Greta’s shoulder. Missus Coffey was one of those people you expect to go on forever. Lily pulled away from Greta and her thoughts turned back to her building.

Though she was only the tenant, she had gotten in the habit of calling it *her* building. The location in the center of the boardwalk was prime, and she knew it was probably worth

millions and therefore out of her reach. And while she hoped the new owners would let her stay, she'd been erratic in paying the rent. For some reason, Mrs. Coffey didn't care, but a new landlord might not be as flexible.

Moving her shop to a location off the boardwalk was unthinkable, and she leaned back and crossed her arms, wondering how much time she had before they put it on the market.

“Crap, Greta. I really didn't need the Universe to throw this at me right now.”

“Yeah, Julie told me about what Kelly did. I told her I'd cast a spell to make his life miserable. I hope you don't mind.” She patted Lily's hand. “I'm sorry. Since I'm not in your shoes, it's easy to tell you to look on the bright side, but these things always take time, so I can't imagine that anything will happen to the building right away.” Even if it wasn't true, Lily appreciated hearing something positive.

“But I do have some good news,” added Greta. “The wind is blowing this crappy low-pressure center out to sea. They say tomorrow will be beautiful, and that means customers for both of us!”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Greta's prediction had been right. The day was perfect, and it became even more glorious when Julie called to say she was over whatever had kept her bedridden and that she was desperate to clock some hours in the store. Lily was grateful for a day away from her shop and her project, and she roused Jamie awake with the promise of spending the day together at the beach until it was time for his father to pick him up for his monthly visitation.

Jamie touched her wrist and brought up the school incident again, and he explained that he had been fighting back because some of the kids had been making fun of The Fairy Kingdom.

"They call your fairies stupid and dumb."

"It's sweet of you to stick up for me, but I can take care of myself. Promise you'll stop?" She gave him a poke and changed the subject. "Hey, today's the last day of this big competition going on with the top kitesurfers from all over the world. Let's go watch."

They got silly and Lily let him eat junk food for breakfast. When they couldn't eat another thing, they pretended to waddle down to the beach where they lay back on the sand for the next hour and watched the Cavalcade of Champions perform their death-defying feats.

The handover to his dad went as she predicted. Kelly made his usual pronouncement that they had to rush home to catch the Reconnaissance lap of the afternoon's car race, and there were tears when he refused to let Jamie stay for the rest of the

kitesurfing competition. Visits with his father typically started and ended with him in a foul mood, and when he got back with her, it often took a day or two for his personality to return to normal.

She dreamed of a day when a judge would award her full custody, putting an end to the shuttling back and forth.

She was on her way back to the store when she spotted a loose program from the Cavalcade of Champions, and when she remembered the centerfold, she picked it up. Referring to his picture would make her job much easier, and her mind envisioned the finished figurines finally lining her shelves in time for the summer season.

She'd assumed that, being a superstar, Theos would be an asset for the project, but when she stepped onto the boardwalk an uncomfortable reality hit her. What if that same status was actually a liability? It was stupid to think he would allow someone to make a fairy modeled after him, when store shelves were undoubtedly jammed with Theos action figures. If she hadn't been so clueless about pop culture she'd have known.

She kicked herself for being foolish enough to believe he could be interested in her. From the moment she'd set eyes on him, she knew she was out of his league, and she should have taken the hint when he left without saying goodbye. He'd been flirting, nothing more.

When Lily got back to the store Julie informed her that Mrs. Coffey's lawyer had tried to reach her. He hadn't left a message other than saying it was important and that he'd call back first thing in the morning. Lily frowned.

"Uh, oh," Julie said. "You're in a bad mood. Let me guess. Kelly picked up Jamie today. That always rattles you."

"Of course, Kelly was an ass, but it's not just that," Lily explained. "It's people, in general. I learned that Jamie is getting bullied at school, and I'm still mad that his idiot principal gave him detention, and not the actual bullies. Mrs. Coffey's daughter is trying to sell the building out from under us. That's what the pompous lawyer wants to speak with me

about. Oh, and did I mention that using Theos isn't going to work out as a model? I really don't know what I was thinking." She ripped the centerfold into pieces and tossed it in the trash can.

"Yikes! Go on upstairs," said Julie. "I'll close up today."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“It’s me. Get up.” Between the pounding and Greta’s yelling that wouldn’t stop, Lily opened her eyes and dragged herself to the front door. “It’s eight o’clock,” said Greta. “And my plans for tonight include you.”

Lily groaned. “I’ve had a terrible day. I’m not really up for going out.”

“Well, then things can only get better...especially your face. I’ll give you ten minutes to get yourself fixed up.”

Greta had a history of talking Lily into doing things she absolutely positively didn’t want to do, like the night she’d made her sing *My Heart Will Go On* at karaoke night in front of practically the entire Myers Beach. She’d been off beat and out of tune and wasn’t eager for another night like that.

“Can you at least tell me where we’re going?”

“To party!”

While Lily got ready, Greta stood outside her bathroom door and informed her that with all the extra folks in town for the Cavalcade of Champions, her store had a gangbuster day, and in case Lily hadn’t heard, The Fairy Kingdom had a big day too. To celebrate, they were going to the Tiki Hut, Greta’s treat.

Greta made Lily change twice, once out of a brightly printed calf-length floral dress, and once out of what Jamie called “mom” jeans before she met with her satisfaction. Somehow, Greta had managed to dig an A-line dress out from the back of her closet and she held it up to the light. Lily rolled



her eyes. She'd relegated it to the back for a reason—she hadn't worn it since before she'd had Jamie. Still, she let Greta talk her into wearing it. The dark blue chiffon and plunging V-neckline was thin where it was covered in lace, but not see-through. Greta assured her the mini skater dress would show off her natural assets and was perfect for a girls' night out.

Greta liked to say that when you could hear both of the Tiki Hut's daiquiri blenders screeching over the sound of live reggae music, you knew the evening had promise. True to her theory, the place was jammed, but after she made eye contact with the bartender, the rings of customers two deep clamoring for drinks around the bar was not a problem. By the time she'd elbowed her way to the front, he'd already mixed their rum punches.

Greta and Lily snaked through the crowd to a spot under the large, thatched dome that was Greta's favorite place to see and be seen.

She nodded to the clusters of bronzed men and women with perfect physiques and Hollywood smiles. "Can you believe the eye candy tonight?"

"Yeah, and I saw plenty of them earlier today. Trust me, these guys want nothing to do with us mortals."

"How do you know, and why do you have to be so negative? Sure looks like they're having fun to me, which is what we both should be doing, by the way." Suddenly, she grabbed Lily by the shoulders and spun her around.

"Hey, isn't that Theos at that table over there?"

Like a true king surrounded by his adoring subjects, Theos personified charisma. He was obviously recounting something that was making everyone laugh, but Lily recoiled at the sight. She didn't know why she imagined that he was telling them about his trip to The Fairy Kingdom, but she couldn't help it. She assumed the hilarity came from his belittling comments about her and her cheesy merchandise. She didn't want him to catch her staring and provide another punchline. She turned away to avoid further humiliation.

“He’s way hotter than I remember,” said Greta. “What do we know about him?”

“Who cares?”

Greta poked Lily. “Well, I do, and you can’t fool me. I know you do, too.”

“Come on, Greta. You know as well as I do that he’ll be gone in a few days with all the rest of them, along with my dream for the figurine.”

Greta shook her head. “First of all, I don’t believe anything you just said, but look. If you’re not interested, do you mind if I take a shot? He looks like he could use some female companionship.”

“He’s all yours. Maybe you’ll have better luck. I’m getting out of here.”

Greta grabbed her wrist. “No, because second, I’m getting us each another drink, and then I’m dragging you out to the lanai where I plan to enjoy mine while you explain why you’re acting so stupid. Then we’re both coming back in here to party.” She got the drinks and commandeered two chairs under a thatched roof away from the main area. Then she dug her toes into the sand, leaned back, and looked at Lily expectantly. Lily knew her friend wouldn’t speak until she spilled her guts, so she let it all out.

“And that’s why I’ll never get close enough to him again to get the details you seem to think are so damn important,” she finished. “Besides, his agents and lawyers would never let him be a model for my rinky-dink store. Even if they did, a session with him would cost an arm and a leg. So I’m not even going to ask.”

Greta took a slug from Lily’s untouched cocktail. “Okay. Have you thought of taking up writing fiction? Your sob story sounds like the plot from a romance novel. Beautiful, super shy and insecure, soon-to-be-divorced woman is smitten by handsome celebrity. Envious that he may prefer her younger employee, she creates an elaborate and fictitious scenario in

her head and a million reasons why she's not worthy, sabotaging the relationship before it has a chance."

Lily grabbed her rum punch back but kept listening. "Look, I never said using him would be a slam dunk," Greta went on. "Of course there will be a few hoops to go through, some probably legal. But that's just business, and it shouldn't stop you from trying." She reached over and took Lily's hand. "At the very least, couldn't you swallow your pride and go over to him now and memorize the rest of the details you need?" She laughed. "He's wearing shorts, after all, and you wanted to see his legs."

"Yeah. Why not?" She looked over to his table, and when she saw that he wasn't there, she pounded her fist against the chair. "Okay. I tried! The creep left again."

"Gosh, Lily. Cut him some slack. Even Theos, the King probably needs to pee now and then. Give him a few more minutes. I promise his magic will be worth the wait."

"Can you stop with the magic nonsense? It's my bank account that holds all the power."

The band was finishing up a set, and their big crescendo drowned out their conversation. Greta asked Lily to repeat what she'd said.

"I said, *screw Theos!*"

The tongue-lashing came at precisely the moment the band stopped playing and the restaurant had gone silent, and everyone in the bar craned to see who it was that had slammed the biggest celebrity ever to enter the Tiki Hut.

"Did I just hear someone mention my name?" The unmistakable accent sent Lily a shiver, and she blushed. "I hope I am not intruding, but I came over to tell you how much I love my two fairies. Oh, and in case you were wondering, they are getting along fine."

Greta watched Lily swallow the lump in her throat, and she squeezed her hand as a reminder not to say anything else that stupid. But Lily pulled her hand away and clenched her fists. Then she stood.

“Will you please stop making fun of me?”

Theos blinked and jerked his head back. “Why would I make fun of you?” He was wearing the pendant she’d given him, and she felt foolish when she noticed that he’d picked a shirt color to match its blue stone. He gently touched her arm, and she felt the same slight disarming electrical tingle she had when they collided in her store. “By the way, I’m surprised you’re here.”

“Er. Um. Why?”

Greta slipped to the empty chair next to her and gestured for him to take hers.

“Because when I stopped by your store to see you today after the exhibition, your assistant—sorry, I forgot her name—told me you weren’t feeling well and didn’t want to be disturbed.” His hand didn’t leave her wrist, and he continued to look deep into her eyes.

“Yes. That. I had a crazy afternoon. Um, what did you want?”

“First, I wanted to see you, and second tell you that my two girl fairies have been begging for some male companionship. I was hoping to try again to persuade you to make a male figurine. I am sure making art as beautiful as yours isn’t easy, but—”

Greta sensed an opportunity. “Look, Theos. Lily could make you what you want in a nano-second if you would agree to model for her.” Lily kicked Greta’s foot. She was still flustered that he and everyone else had heard her insult, and Greta was embarrassing her further. “I’m Greta, by the way, Lily’s friend. You know, from the store next door to hers. The Witch’s Cauldron? Stop in anytime.” She handed him a business card with a bubbling cauldron logo.

“I’ll make a point of it.” The card gave out a cackle when his fingers squeezed it, and Greta laughed and poked his arm. While Lily’s eyes quietly sent her daggers, he took her hand. “If that’s all it would take to give your kingdom a king, I am

more than happy to help. Why didn't you ask me when I was in the store?"

"I wasn't looking for a model then. But after we saw you in the store, Greta and I got to thinking you'd be perfect. Then after I learned who you were, of course I assumed you wouldn't be interested."

"And who do you think I am?"

"Well, according to the program and everyone else in the world except me, apparently, you're Theos, the King."

He laughed. "Yes, my kitesurfing persona comes across as quite large, I admit. But the other Theos, the normal one, is very interested in your project." He turned to Greta. "Believe it or not, I have done some modeling in my past."

She snickered. "Who would have guessed?"

"Um, but what about your agent?" asked Lily. "Will there be a problem?"

"Who said I had an agent?"

She had thought all the stars did, and she wondered how someone that big and famous wouldn't have a team behind him. But she let that go. Her biggest impediment wasn't a hurdle anymore, and she was thrilled that the pieces of her project were finally falling into place. All that was left was to set a schedule, and she hoped he was available. After all the delays, she had even less time to lose.

"I can be available now for a few days, but then I must leave on urgent business," he said. "I hope that's enough time."

"We'll make it work. Mornings are best because the light in the studio is perfect then."

Greta jumped up. "Okay. Now that we've got that all straightened out, let's dance!" A strong cool breeze rattled the palm trees and swept through the open-air structure as she led them to the dance floor at the center of the palapa. And while the cooler temperature it brought delighted the crowd, a stronger wind soon whipped up, followed by a distant rumble.

Lily didn't care. She was in the mood to celebrate, and she wasn't about to let the rain spoil her evening. They hadn't exchanged contact information or set a time, though, so she wanted to get that out of the way. She held out her phone to take his number, but he'd disappeared. She and Greta scanned the crowded dance floor. "Where did he go? He was standing right here next to me." The music picked up, and to avoid the expected downpour, more people crowded under the dome, making it difficult to see where he'd gone.

"Don't worry. I'll find him," Greta assured Lily. "Even in this mob, I can recognize his butt."

Lily wasn't so sure they'd find him, and she wondered if she should have trusted her first instincts after all. Maybe he was a serial charmer, one of those guys that couldn't help it, and he had been leading them along with his sweet words. "Do you think he disappeared on purpose? He did it on me before."

"Come on. It's starting to rain. He probably left his car windows down or something and went to the parking lot." She pulled Lily over to dance with another group of guys. "He'll come back."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Theos*

*I hated to run out on her again. She probably thinks I'm a flake, but the havoc this thunder wreaks on my body is getting more painful and debilitating with each new strike. Fortunately, I was only a few steps from the ocean and could wait out the storm underwater, and I didn't have to bury myself in the sand under the boardwalk like the last time.*

*I still have a few more days here, so it didn't make sense to turn her down. I love the idea of being alone with her and exploring what I see as her strong connection with fairies. Besides, I have another motive. I'll get a male fairy figurine out of it, and the Fairy Kingdom will finally have a king.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lily and Greta were the last to leave when the Tiki Hut closed at three a.m., and she was out cold when the lawyer called at eight-thirty the following morning.

“I hope this is not an inconvenient time to call, but I wanted to apprise you of the situation regarding the disposition of Missus Coffey’s estate. Specifically, the short window the heir has given us to sell the building that you occupy.”

The steady stream of rum punches she’d drank to numb herself from losing Theos again had caught up with her. She’d lost her taste for alcohol long ago when her husband was drinking enough for two, and the head-pounding hangover reminded her why she generally allowed herself no more than a couple of beers. She was glad she had her coffee maker set to automatic.

On her way to the kitchen, she asked the pompous man on the other end of the phone to repeat himself. She thought she’d heard him clearly, but the information he conveyed was crucial, and she wanted to be sure she hadn’t missed anything.

The lawyer made an audible sigh. “I said, the heir of your former landlord, Miss Coffey, is eager to liquidate her mother’s considerable holdings as soon as possible.”

The hot liquid scalded her tongue and she took a swig from a bottle of water to soothe the pain. “By holdings, you’re including my building?”

“Yes. The building you currently occupy is one of them, as I believe I said earlier.”



“How soon is soon? Are you saying there’s a buyer already?”

“Not technically.”

She rubbed her temples. “What does that mean, not technically?”

“The estate can’t accept offers from the public at the moment, the reason for which I will explain shortly. But rest assured there will be many interested parties. As you know, her building is prime real estate.”

Lily stared at the brown liquid in her cup. The word *coffee* had suddenly become an ugly word. “And how will that impact me? Will they let me and my store stay?”

“That will depend upon the wishes of the new owner. By law, they must permit you to stay through the end of your lease.”

“And after that?”

“You understand that I can’t make any representations regarding your lease or relationship with a new owner. Any transaction would be at their discretion.”

Lily knew when her lease was up. She had exactly three months left. Mrs. Coffey would have renewed it without a thought, but she shuddered to think of her chances with new owners. The hangover was behind her, and the new head pounding came from the horrible news. She swung her legs around and stood into her slippers.

“You can’t imagine how upsetting this is to hear. Closing my shop and moving from our home would be devastating for me and my son. Do I have any other options?”

“Yes. Though it’s a path I doubt you will find viable. Missus Coffey was fond of you, apparently, because her will stipulates that should you be interested in purchasing the property, you would have the first right of refusal.”

Lily had heard the term, and while she wasn’t sure how it applied to her, she was pleased by Missus Coffey’s kindness and what might be a glimmer of hope. She excused herself for

a moment and ran downstairs to her office to look at her copy of the lease. While she went through her files, she put the phone on speaker and heard him drumming his fingers. When she heard his loud sigh, which she took as both intentional and annoying, she stuck her tongue out at the phone.

The lawyer didn't wait for her to make the next move. "The first right of refusal gives you the opportunity to buy the building, before it's offered to anyone else, in case you were unclear about that term."

She rolled her eyes at the man's continued condescension. Before she asked him his estimate of the selling price, she nestled into her office chair. When he gave her the staggering figure, she was glad she'd popped for the super ergonomic one with multiple levels of support.

"Missus Coffey's daughter has given you two weeks to decide if you wish to go forward with an offer to purchase, which is why it was necessary to speak immediately. If your decision is to attempt to buy the property, further generous terms of the will give you another sixty days to provide the bank with earnest money in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars. You would then have an additional thirty days to close."

Lily steamed at his use of the word *attempt*. "Let me be clear. You're giving me sixty days to come up with one hundred thousand dollars?"

"Yes, though technically it's not I who is giving you anything, nor is the heir. This opportunity is solely based on the terms of Missus Coffey's Trust and the directives stipulated in her Last Will and Testament." He paused. "Under the circumstances, I'm sure you can appreciate that her insistence on offering it to you below market price together with the other terms borders on the philanthropic."

The philanthropic price was still in the stratosphere, and this time she gave the phone the finger.

"One more thing. The will had included an unusual codicil. Are you familiar with that term?"

Lily had become so used to his patronizing manner that she was no longer offended.

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. Then I won’t have to waste time educating you. The codicil states that Missus Coffey’s estate will match your one hundred thousand dollars of earnest money for a total of two hundred thousand, which she calculated would be enough to satisfy any bank’s requirements for a down payment. I suggest you think about it and get back to me in writing as soon as possible, within the two-week window that begins with our conversation today.”

Lily’s head went from pounding to spinning. The unexpected turn of events with Missus Coffey had just upended her entire schedule for the next three months, and she’d now need to redirect her thinking toward the single goal of staying in her building. It wasn’t like she could simply postpone anything already on her to-do list, because everything was connected. Nothing could take a backseat to finishing her collection, her only strategy for cobbling together the earnest money. And if there wasn’t enough to satisfy the terms of the loan, she’d still need plenty of money to secure another space for her store and find another apartment.

Her first stop that day would be at the bank to assess her options. More than anyone, they’d understand the value of her business to the fabric of the town. Fearful that the smallest parcel could end up in the hands of a developer, residents long ago resolved to sell their property only to other residents. The unspoken pact wasn’t legal, but no one had ever broken it.

The town was smart to understand that a brisk local economy required the right mix of businesses, which had been the motivation to build the boardwalk. The eight-block strip of small shops and fast-food restaurants was interspersed with weathered guest houses and two hotels. She had another advantage as well: to minimize store turnover, the town insisted that boardwalk property owners offer shopkeepers cheap rents and reward tenants who consistently paid on time with renewed leases.

She threw on a blouse and a pair of jeans, appropriate attire for the short walk to the low-key Myers Beach State Bank, where she had a solid six-year working relationship with the manager, Kenneth Wilson. He'd arranged the original loan to set up her business, and thanks to the bank's small-town sensibilities, he'd been able to complete the financing without the need for multiple levels of approval. Because she'd handled the debt responsibly, he also made possible the modest business line of credit, which had come to her rescue more than once after her separation from Kelly.

The mortgage she had in mind for the upcoming meeting was far beyond anything she'd taken on before. She was realistic and knew Mr. Wilson wasn't a miracle worker. Still, she trusted him to give her the best advice possible. At the least, he would tell her she was crazy for trying.

One of the advantages of working with a small-town bank was being able to drop in without an appointment, but out of courtesy, she phoned when she was three blocks away.

The cheerful voice lifted her spirits. "Thanks for calling Your Bank. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to speak with Ken Wilson, please. Tell him Lily Harper—"

"If you'd like to know our address and hours, please press one. For balance information, please press two." Lily felt stupid talking back to a robot, and she was surprised that the local bank's automated system was so up-to-date and sounded so realistic. After jabbing the zero key several times she managed to get a real person.

"Thanks for calling Your Bank. How may I help you?" The live person was not as cheery as the robot, and the woman put her on hold while she searched for Mr. Wilson, a person she didn't appear to recognize. After several minutes, a different woman returned to the phone with the unsettling news that he was no longer with the bank, and she suggested that if Lily needed anything further, she consult their website for frequently asked questions.

"Oh, dear. When did he leave? And where did he go?"

“I’m not at liberty to say, except that he left after the merger.”

“Merger? Wow. I’m way behind. My assistant makes our cash deposits, and we do everything else electronically, so I haven’t been by in a while.”

“Don’t worry. Your confusion is understandable. The merger was very recent.”

Lily wondered how many other changes she should know about. She was relieved that at least they referred to themselves as her bank and recognized her as a customer. The woman explained that being part of a bigger banking family would give Lily access to more resources and tried to reassure her that everything else would be the same.

“So, you see, the merger is a win-win for everyone.”

The news did not improve Lily’s headache. Without Mr. Wilson, plenty had already changed. She learned that his accounts had been split up among the new loan officers, and she was put on hold while the woman checked to see who they’d assigned to hers.

Despite the upbeat jingle that repeated every twenty seconds and touted all the good things the new bank was bringing to her neighborhood, Lily was not looking forward to explaining her business and marital history from scratch with a new person. Mr. Wilson was a local man who had understood her niche market and the dynamics of retail business on the boardwalk. He also knew she was good for her word.

She was still on hold when she entered the lobby. Colorful pop-up posters greeting her from every corner showcased the multiple advantages she should expect from her new relationship with Your Bank. The remodeled open floor plan and new arrangement of furniture confused her, and since none of the desks were occupied and she didn’t see any familiar faces, Lily went to a teller for information. After standing at his window for what she considered to be too long, she rapped on the glass to get his attention.

“I hope you can help me. I’ve been on hold for almost twenty minutes with a woman who said she was looking into who the person is who’s taking over Mister Wilson’s accounts. Can you point me in the direction of their office?”

The teller chuckled and pointed out the window. “Minneapolis. All the calls to the bank go there first. Without a name, I can’t help you.” When he looked back down at his computer screen and didn’t look up again, Lily was glad she was still on hold.

The smiley voice returned to her phone. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Your Bank is experiencing a much larger call volume than usual. Your new loan officer is a Miss Katherine Needham. Would you like me to transfer you?” Lily declined her offer and didn’t bother to explain to the nameless person in Minneapolis that she was already in the bank. The voice signed off. “Thanks for being a valued guest in Your Bank.”

Lily got the teller’s attention again and asked where she could find Miss Needham’s office. Hearing her name, he rose from his stool and spoke with a more professional tone. “Miss Needham is the vice president of Your Bank and our new manager. Her office is at the end of the hall.”

The news was encouraging. Surely a woman would understand her marital limbo and might be more sympathetic to her entire situation. She was glad she’d opted for an in-person meeting, after all. And as the manager, Miss Needham would be in a position to give Lily the big leg up she needed.

“You’re in luck,” said the vice president’s assistant, another new face. “Miss Needham is not only one of the most senior members of the Your Bank regional chain, but she also serves as the trust officer for the Coffey estate. After you fill out this form, I’ll tell her you’re here.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Theos*

*The situation at home has become extremely troubling. It turns out that our principal reserve of fairy dust has somehow been contaminated, and they're now attributing several deaths to the poisoned dust. I feel paralyzed here in Myers Beach. I'd love to drop everything and go home to help, but I can't. Dad's advisers are suggesting that the kingdom could be in the beginning of a pandemic and that the lethal effects they've already witnessed could be contagious. Given that I am heir to the throne, court protocol dictates that I am not permitted to return until they determine that my safety will not be at risk.*

*Apart from the frequent thunder and lightning, at least Myers Beach is an appealing place to wait for the all-clear signal from home. Now that I will be here for longer than I'd imagined, I can go back to the ocean and track down the igdia and tepa. I also want to check out something I smelled in the air. I think it's danog. Wouldn't that be amazing if three of the nine elements we need end up being right here?*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In contrast to the cold contemporary floor plan of the lobby, the rich dark paneling of the vice president's suite was a throwback to the traditional old days, and Lily found the space warm and inviting. She sat on an upholstered wing chair and smoothed the paper on her knee. The two-page form asked for detailed answers to more questions than Lily felt they needed, and in the space at the end she was expected to compose a short paragraph or two explaining the reason for the appointment.

After she turned in her form, another thirty minutes passed before the assistant ushered Lily into Ms. Needham's imposing office and introduced her to the formidable woman in the no-nonsense business suit. One rarely came across stiff attire in the laid-back Myers Beach community, and the abrupt change in the bank's corporate culture caught Lily off guard. It didn't help that Needham's angular facial features and prominent crooked nose reminded her of the Wicked Witch of the West.

Lily stuck out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Miz Needham."

"Miss, actually." She rose but did not offer to shake hands, and Lily let hers fall limp at her side as she felt the woman's scorching eyes scrutinize her casual appearance.

"You know, I was expecting to see Mister Wilson, and I suddenly feel underdressed," Lily offered with a laugh, attempting to break the ice. "As you may know, raising a child and running a business doesn't always allow for much me-time." She looked up at the woman, but instead of the



empathetic smile Lily hoped for, Ms. Needham ignored her comment and let out the same sigh of impatience as the bank's lawyer. Lily wondered if they studied customer relations at the same school. The vice president gestured to a stiff chair. "Anyway," continued Lily, "I appreciate your seeing me on such short notice."

Ms. Needham's thin lips formed a smile Lily took as insincere. "You didn't give us notice at all, so I hope you understand our time together will be limited." Lily sat on edge of the silk-upholstered side chair in front of the polished walnut desk and felt a chill as she watched Needham's gray eyes and pinched face scan the two-page form.

"It says you'd like to purchase the Coffey building."

"Yes. This morning I learned from the estate's attorney that before my building goes on the market, I have the first right of refusal. So, yes. That is my intention." She hoped using more formal speech in some way might compensate for her casual appearance.

She tracked the vice president's eyes that seemed to ignore Lily's thoughtfully written answers, and Lily wondered if she should interpret that as disinterest. The woman confused her further when her eyes fixated on the *This page intentionally left blank* page, as though she was searching for information that Lily had failed to add.

Needham sighed and set the paperwork aside. "I see this so often. Wanting to buy and being able to are quite different things." She reached for a fountain pen without looking at Lily. "Since we have so little time, let's get straight to the point. Tell us what you make and what you spend if you would, please. Estimate, if you must."

Lily had prepared the figures she expected the bank would require and recited them to the vice president, who despite holding a pen, didn't bother to write them down. Needham's lips moved slightly as though she was doing some quick calculations in her head. Lily feared that she'd suffer a disadvantage if the woman didn't understand the full picture,

so she launched into an explanation of the nature of her business and her extenuating circumstances.

Needham cut her off. “I’m frankly surprised you bothered us with this matter. It would be obvious to anyone that your debt-to-income ratio could not possibly meet our threshold to qualify for a loan of this magnitude.”

She’d known it was a long shot. Mr. Wilson would have probably agreed, but it wasn’t the bad news that annoyed her as much as the woman’s dismissive tone and the enjoyment she seemed to get from turning her down. It took all of her patience to endure the uncomfortable silence as the woman picked up the form again and pretended to reread the paperwork.

“There’s nothing I can do to change the past,” Lily pressed. “But I’m introducing a new line of merchandise in a matter of weeks, and I’m confident in my sales prospects for this season. What else would you suggest I do to make my application more favorable?”

Needham looked up. “A new line. Charming.” She coughed. “So, typically, when someone with an inadequate balance sheet such as yours seeks a mortgage, they attach someone responsible to cosign the note.” She raised her eyebrows. “A husband, for example. It is *Missus* Harper, isn’t it?” Lily ignored both her question and her insinuation.

“Miss Needham, under the terms of *Missus* Coffey’s will, the estate will match my earnest money to create a down payment. If I bring you the one hundred thousand within the stipulated time, my qualification would not be an issue. Is that correct?”

“Naturally, we must honor *Missus* Coffey’s request, but judging from what you’ve provided here, I really wouldn’t see how—”

“Thank you. Then *we* will be back in sixty days with *our* one hundred thousand dollars. It’s been a pleasure.” She extended her hand to shake, and the disarming move required the vice president to stand and return the handshake with an awkward reach across her desk.

Lily threw back her shoulders and strode out to the bank lobby sporting her best retail smile, and she waved to the teller, the only helpful employee at “*her bank*.” But when she reached the street, her shoulders drooped.

“What have I just promised?” she moaned to Julie when she got back to the shop. “I’m weeks away from producing anything that can bring in that kind of money.”

“What about Theos? I thought he was going to model.”

“He’s coming tomorrow, I think. He never actually confirmed. In the meantime, I’ve lost another two days.”

“Maybe you should level with him about how under the gun you are.” The last thing Lily wanted was to come across as desperate. She and Theos hardly knew each other, and she felt grateful he was agreeing to help her at all. “In the meantime, I got us all set up with a shopping cart on the website so people can order Theos, the king figurines online as soon as they’re out of production. I also arranged to have the foundry drop ship the orders directly to our customers, so we don’t have to bother with that part. Everything is subject to your approval, naturally.”

“That’s wonderful. Once again, I’m the one who’s slowing us down. We should get on the foundry’s schedule, so if I ever can get a piece made, they’ll be ready to start production.”

“I’ve already got them on the alert,” Julie reported. “I’ve been developing a cool relationship with one of the guys.”

“Terrific. Then the only thing left to do, after I actually make them, will be figuring out how to sell a hundred thousand dollars’ worth.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two days passed and Theos still hadn't shown up to model. She had her doubts that he'd appear that morning, either. Disorganization and uncertainty made her fidgety, and since they hadn't set an exact day and he'd left her at the Tiki Hut without an explanation, he hadn't inspired confidence in his reliability.

She remembered that he'd mentioned something about having only a few days available to model before he left town, so she laid out an aggressive production schedule with no room for contingencies, other than Theos being late. She hoped he was only late. Superstars had that reputation. Better late than a no-show.

When the doorbell rang at close to noon, she assumed it was a delivery for something she'd ordered online. She was still in an old pair of sweats, putting the finishing touches on her eye makeup before she gave up on him to run errands. On the way to the door, she checked herself out in the hallway mirror, and she was thankful at least to be wearing a bra and a semi-presentable, albeit oversized, T-shirt. Her hair was a bit messy but passable, even if her outfit left something to be desired.

When she opened the door, he looked perfect, the bastard. A cream-colored V-neck T-shirt ended a provocative half-inch above his fitted jeans. His magnificent hair tumbled loosely onto his shoulders, and his eyes sparkled mischievously.

"You look beautiful," he said.

She blushed. “You’re hilarious.” She stepped aside to let him in.

“No, I mean it.” He reached out a finger and poked at a hole in the shirt just above her navel. “And soft.”

Her stomach twitched nervously at his touch, and she instinctively backed away. The gesture coming from him was flattering, but she wondered if she would need to set some boundaries. Working with a star would be a delicate balance between being grateful for his help and coming across as prudish or bossy and potentially turning him off to the project. She thought twice about what she said next.

“I wasn’t really expecting you this morning. In fact, I wasn’t sure you’d come at all. Unless I’m imagining it, disappearing on me seems to be a habit. First at my store, and then at the Tiki Hut.”

“Really? I thought I mentioned having to leave. Maybe the music was too loud, and you didn’t hear me.”

“You’re right about the music. The band was really kicking it, and I guess with the thunder and all, maybe I didn’t. But since you left before we got around to setting a day or a time to start, and then you didn’t come back, I assumed that you changed your mind.”

“I apologize. If today is not good, I can come back another time.”

“No, no, no. I’m glad you came. Now is perfect. By the way, how did you know where I live?”

“Easy. Remember, your store manager told me the day I stopped by to ask for you? She said you were in your apartment upstairs and did not want to be disturbed.”

Lily remembered and changed the subject. “Would you like something to drink before we get started? I just made a pot of coffee.”

“I would love some tea, if you have it.”

“I’m sure I do,” she fibbed. It wasn’t that his requesting tea was so unconventional. It was that she hated tea and knew she

didn't have any. She pretended to go through the motions, anyway. She pulled out a stepstool and hoped she was wrong as she rummaged through the top shelf of a cabinet until her fingers found her grandmother's unused aluminum canister set. The smallest can read *Tea* in red letters.

"Found it! Told you I had some." She swung around to show him the proof, but she moved too fast and wobbled on the stool. Her self-satisfied grin turned to panic as she teetered to one side.

Theos caught her before she fell. "Whoa, careful there. No need to kill yourself, just so I can have one of...um." He held up the lone dried-out bag from the canister. "These."

She felt like a fool and knew her face had to be red, both for her ineptitude on the stool and for owning something as uncool as a *licorice mint beverage alternative*. Standing on the stool put her head at the same level as his, and she was about to give him a long explanation that the tea bag belonged to her grandmother when his calm eyes melted away her embarrassment. Stopping her fall was the second time he'd touched her in five minutes, and the strong arm around her waist felt surprisingly good. When he released her, she started to breathe normally again.

"Um, sorry. I guess I can't give you tea, after all."

"No problem. I'll try your coffee. First time for everything, right?" He pointed to a kitchen chair. "You look a little spooked from the near fall. Why don't you sit down? I can find everything I'll need."

Her brow wrinkled in a delayed reaction. "First time? I can't start the day without coffee."

"Maybe that's why you're so short." He laughed and when he pulled out the chair for her, he grazed against her wrist. A third touch. Her body still tingled from the other two. Was he coming on to her or was he one of those genuinely affectionate people? "My parents didn't drink it, so I guess I never developed an interest."

He poked around in another cabinet and found a mug and her sugar, then he located a spoon. Milk was the easiest to find, because it was one of the few items in her refrigerator. “Wow. It’s empty in there. Don’t you ever eat?”

“Of course. I wish it was full, but I’m behind in a lot of things, and this morning I had to choose between housework and shopping.” She waved her hand at the apartment. “And I hope you can see that I chose to clean.”

He closed the door and shook his head. He raised the cup to his lips. “Here goes.” His reaction to the taste was both intense and comic. “It’s *horrendous!*” He spewed out a mouthful in a spray so powerful that it splattered on her shirt and the kitchen counter. He grabbed a paper towel to wipe the mess. “I’m so embarrassed. This is not like me. But I couldn’t help it.”

Lily couldn’t control herself either, and she bent over and convulsed in laughter until she hurt. “I’m sorry—I just—your face!”

“But I ruined your lovely T-shirt. I’m sure it was very costly.”

Despite the sarcasm, she could tell by his smile she hadn’t put him off with her teasing. “Nobody’s ever had such a bad reaction to my coffee before, but I may have made it too strong this morning.”

He dumped the rest down the sink. “Thanks, but I think I’ll take your word for it.”

The slapstick exchange broke the ice, but there followed a moment of tense silence as they studied each other, wondering what to say next. Lily sensed his mysterious magnetism washing over her again, an altogether satisfying feeling she didn’t remember ever picking up from Kelly, notwithstanding the fierce passion that marked the beginning of their relationship.

She changed the subject and suggested they go to the studio. Stepping over action figures and puzzle pieces on the way meant explaining the existence of her eleven-year-old

son. She chose a not-so-veiled attempt to self-identify as single and asked him to excuse the mess.

“My son is staying with his father for a few days and didn’t put his things away before he left. I want him to learn how to take care of himself, so I refuse to pick up after him, and instead, I clean around it.”

Theos seemed unfazed by the mess or the explanation. “So how does this work?” He eyed the easel. “People have photographed and painted me, but I’ve never been sculpted.”

She didn’t want to admit that she had no idea. He would be her first sculpture from a live human subject. Inspiration for some of the previous figurines came from photographs but most came from her imagination. In both cases, she’d been able to start with clay. The male fairy she had in mind using Theos presented an unusual challenge. Unlike the tiny, thin, pale greenish people typically associated with the fairies in mythology, Theos was tall, dark, and swarthy, completely against type. She hoped she could pull it off. She gestured for him to move to a spot she’d prepared by the window before she gave a response that felt plausible.

“First things, first. I’d like to see how you look in that wonderful light I was telling you about.”

While he walked to the window, she stepped behind the easel and organized her pencils. When she looked back up at him, she choked on her next breath. He’d already taken off his shirt and draped it across the back of a chair, revealing a chest every bit as perfect as she imagined. As he was sliding off his jeans, she tried not to gawk at the way his briefs hugged his butt and left little to the imagination in the front.

He reminded her of the pretty-boy models in art school who were so eager to strip and show off their flawless bodies. She didn’t care about their motivation then and didn’t care about Theos’ now. She loved the show. Not only was a gorgeous man standing half-naked in front of her, but he expected her to stare at him for as long as she wanted. Plenty of people would kill for a job like hers.



“You didn’t mention what to wear, so I hope this is all right,” he said with a perfectly straight face. He stuck his thumbs under the waistband of his briefs and pulled them slightly away from his flat stomach. “I can ditch these, too, if you want,” he offered as if removing them would be as simple as her saying the word.

For a few moments, she couldn’t speak, and he took her astonished face to mean he’d upset her. “Oh, I’m sorry. Your female fairies are nude, aren’t they? I just assumed you’d want me naked.” He kept his thumbs in the waistband and watched another few moments to see if she’d changed her mind.

“Um, yeah, no. You’re right. Most of them are.” She wondered how long it would be until she could form a coherent sentence while he stood facing her like that. “But no. Keep them on.” As soon as those words tumbled out, she wished she could take them back. She didn’t want him to think she was provincial. “For now, anyway. I just, uh, didn’t expect you to, you know, volunteer.”

“You forget, you’re dealing with a professional,” he teased.

“So are you.” She got back to the lighting issue and asked him to turn a little to the left.

He faced the other way. “Do you mind? This is my good side.”

If she hadn’t been under such pressure, she would have burst out laughing at the notion that he had a bad side, but she had to admit that his way put him in a more flattering light. “Yeah, you know you’re right. That is better.”

“So, Lily, I work best with a little direction. What do you have in mind?”

She thought for a moment. “Hmm. Why don’t you pretend you’re a fairy? You seem preoccupied by fairy stuff so it should be easy. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask why.”

“It comes naturally. My whole family was into the fairy thing. How about yours?”

“Mine too! All the women in my family collected fairy figurines, going back to at least my great-great-grandmother.

Of course, I loved when they read me fairytales before I went to sleep. So, I guess they've always fascinated me. Honestly, though, as much as I go on about them granting wishes and all that to my customers, I don't really believe in fairies. Anyway, I was just kidding. I have a few ideas on poses, but first, let's spend some time seeing how you move."

He put his hands on his hips. "Oh, did I misunderstand again? I hadn't planned on actually modeling today. I thought we were only discussing the project and perhaps doing a lighting check. I'm sorry but I don't have time to stay long today."

Lily couldn't hide her disappointment at losing another day. She hoped he wasn't backing out. She doubted that it was finding out she had a child, since the toys on the floor didn't seem to faze him. Maybe her modest apartment turned him off, or worse yet, her frumpy clothes. Maybe it was because he didn't think she knew what she was doing.

"Lily, you looked stressed. Don't worry. I can stay another hour, and I promise we'll have plenty of time tomorrow."

He'd read her correctly, though he couldn't have known that she was worried about losing her store, and her apartment, and of not getting the divorce she wanted. Or that Mrs. Coffey's daughter and her diabolical sidekick, Katherine Needham, petrified her.

Under it all, she was scared that she was attracted to the man sitting next to her in nothing but his briefs. Knowing she could work with him for at least another hour was better than nothing. She'd simply have to pedal faster, as her art school friend Alan always said, and make up a day somewhere else.

"But if I'm going to stay, I could really use a cup of tea. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to go back to your kitchen and conjure up one." She wondered why he'd bother making the pointless effort, but she didn't mind admiring his behind as he walked to the cupboard.

"Where did you find that?" she asked when he returned with a cup and saucer. He lifted the teabag out and dropped it in a wastebasket.

“There was a whole box of tea there all along. I can make you a cup if you like.”

She shook her head and walked over to the stool to share her notebook with him, which outlined approximately how many hours she'd need to see him, and for how long. The schedule was another balancing act. She didn't want it to sound like a huge time commitment, but she wanted to be clear that it might take longer than she estimated. At the same time, she wanted to convey her sense of urgency but not appear anxious.

Her best work often came organically. She had assumed she'd recognize what she wanted when she saw it, and that his gorgeousness would somehow mystically and automatically transfer into a statue. That approach ran contrary to everything she'd learned in art school, so in the meantime, she would make basic sketches of him from every angle, which would be a good use of the remaining hour. He returned to the spot by the window. “Okay. Let me know if you want me to change positions.”

Lily often had luck getting tense models to relax by engaging them in conversation. At the moment, though, she was the one who needed the loosening, not the model, and she hoped the conversation technique would work as effectively in reverse.

“Why don't you tell me about your modeling career?” She returned to her easel.

“Wow. No artist has ever asked me to talk during a session, but here goes. So, I had just wrapped up a day of surfing. This woman had been watching me from the beach and asked if I'd be interested in sitting for a life drawing class. I was young and I'd never done that, so I gave her a few months. I got to surf during the day and stand around at night, so the schedule was perfect. And I got paid for it. Guys always complained that modeling was boring, but I enjoyed the experience. In a class one day, a photographer noticed me and cast me in a couple of ads, which was also fun.” Lily told him to try a different pose.

“Next, I tried my hand as an artist, and I think I was decent. I painted the same things everyone does. You know, flowers, ponds...lilies.” He paused for a reaction, but she was too focused to catch the play on words with her name.

He tested her again. “It was brief...my career as an astronaut.”

“Mmm. Sounds like it,” she mumbled without looking up. “Turn.”

He changed his position. “Sounds like what? Lily, have you been listening to anything I’ve said?”

“Um. What? Of course.” He changed his position again, and she asked, “Why did you stop?”

Her question caught him off guard. “Stop which? Modeling, painting, astronaut-ing?”

“No, your pose. Can you go back to the last one? I really liked it, but I didn’t finish my sketch. Do you remember what you did?” He nodded and held it longer.

“Done!” She ripped the final page from her sketch pad and smiled at what she’d drawn. She looked at her watch. “Right on time.”

“So, tomorrow, then?” he asked. He got dressed and followed her back to the kitchen. He reached out to shake hands, and while she found it strangely formal, she wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to touch him. “I’d like to make your worry about my commitment disappear. You know, like your fairies are supposed to do,” he assured her as though he’d read her mind. “So please know that I want to do this, okay?”

“Deal. Nine?”

He winked. “I’ll bring more tea.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

She took her time getting dressed the next morning so as not to embarrass herself again. The floral sundress she picked out was a good balance of pretty and relaxed, and wouldn't give him the impression she was trying too hard. When she twisted her hair into an appropriately messy bun, she let a few strands fall loose around her face. She wished there was some way to prepare emotionally. Theos always appeared calm, but around him, she had to fight against her tendency to turn into a stuttering, nervous mess. After a quick swipe of peach lip gloss, she was as ready as she could be.

He showed up on time, loaded with several bags, and he seemed puzzled by the loud sound coming from the kitchen. To save herself more tea preparation embarrassment, she had run out the night before and bought a new tea kettle, which was whistling on the stove.

"You look beautiful again." He saw the kettle and tilted his head. "I don't remember that you had this yesterday."

"What, this old thing? I remembered I had it packed in a box somewhere. Since I figured we'd be making tea, I decided to look around for it."

He changed the subject and placed a thoughtfully wrapped package on the counter. "Oh, gee. Then I hope you still like what I brought you." Lily shook her head at his unexpected generosity and tugged on the gigantic pink bow. From the box, she pulled out an expensive-looking electric kettle, a see-through glass beaker set in a pale blue metal frame.

“Theos. You said you were bringing tea, not a kettle. I would never have agreed to this.” She was glad she saved the receipt so she could return hers after he left.

“See? You can watch the water bubbling as it boils.” She was still shaking her head, but she smiled at his childlike passion. “Then do you want me to take back the rest of the stuff I brought you?” he asked.

“There’s more?”

From a canvas bag, he produced a large pink ceramic teapot, two tins of tea she didn’t recognize, and a sterling silver strainer. He made his tea the old-fashioned way, with leaves, and judging from the high-end items, being a kitesurfing champion paid well.

“I love these gifts, but you spent way too much.”

“What do you mean? They didn’t cost a cent. They were mine.”

She laughed. “Come on. I’m supposed to believe you owned a pink teapot?”

“Why not? It was my mom’s favorite color. My dad’s, too. And you’ve got pink wings.”

“Yes, but that’s because I’m supposed to look like a fairy.” His unpredictable response and disheartened expression made her backpedal. “But you’re right. Nothing’s wrong with pink.”

“So, you’ll keep it all?”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you. I love everything. Pink happens to be my favorite color, too.” She pulled a piece of paper out from the pocket of her sundress. “And I have a present for you.” He looked confused about what she’d written. “It’s my cell number. That way you can always text, you know, if there’s a change in plans.”

“Thanks.” He slipped the paper into his pocket and sipped his tea. While she waited for his number, which never came, he added, “I’m not much of a phone person.” He went to grab some milk and saw the fridge was still empty. “Still no groceries?”

She shook her head and shrugged. She glanced at her watch, but she knew it was the bank's ticking clock that made her check the time. "So, do I still have you for most of the day?"

"All yours, till one or so."

Lily pushed away thoughts of Ms. Needham laughing over the loss of another precious half-day. With Theos in the studio for only a few hours, there wouldn't be much time for small talk. He followed her into the studio, and sensing she was tense again, he stripped immediately and took his marks.

She started suggesting poses, and he cooperated by assuming whatever position she directed. He seemed to know precisely how long she needed him to hold a pose before transitioning to the next. By the third pose, she'd noticed the way his abs wobbled when he spoke, as if he was showing them off on purpose.

"I can't lie, Theos. I've sketched a lot of guys, but you have an amazing body. You must live in a gym."

He laughed. "So, you caught my wiggle, huh? I thought we needed a little comic relief. But to answer your question—no, I don't go to the gym, and guys hate when I say that. Truth is, I was born this way."

She laughed back. "Well, it's not fair. It's not human. Switch!" While he changed poses, she decided to continue their conversation from the previous day. "You should take up drawing again. You could sell your art in my shop if you wanted."

"It was painting, not drawing. See? I knew you weren't listening. Hey, maybe after you finish this project, I could paint you." He spoke with a sudden heat that brought a blush to her cheeks. By the look in his eyes, she assumed the dress code he had in mind would be like his current one.

"Uh, thanks, but I'm not sure about that. The only man who's seen me without clothes was my ex." She wished she could take it back. The last thing she wanted to talk to him about was Kelly.

The Kelly reference didn't seem to bother him. "Who said anything about being naked? Not that I would mind."

There was no question in her mind that he was flirting, even if she found it hard to believe. That nagging voice was still inside her insisting that he was out of her league and that he talked like that to women and men all the time. Her face reddened and she was glad she was standing behind her easel. "I don't know. I just assumed."

He stopped posing and turned to her. "There you go making assumptions again. Could I ask you a favor? Not to make them about me, anymore?"

As always, Theos spoke from his heart, and Lily feared she'd put him off. A man like him didn't have to wait around for women with children and years of emotional issues, not to mention financial troubles. He could walk out the door and have someone else in minutes. He probably already had another woman in the wings. He returned to the exact position he'd held before.

"But I hope you'll ask," he added under his breath but loud enough for her to hear. She looked up to find a surprising amount of heat in his eyes, proving again that he knew exactly what she wanted to hear.

His titillating banter excited her, and it also added to her dilemma. Because of the casual atmosphere of his being half-naked around her all morning, she'd come to know him well enough to imagine a romantic relationship. But until her divorce, encouraging him was wrong. She finished drawing the detail of his lower abdominals and gave him the signal to change positions again. But before he moved, he told her he wanted to try something different.

"Put your pencil down and just watch for a minute."

He parted his lips and extended his open palm seductively toward her as though inviting her in. Astonished that a man could move so gracefully and with such fluidity, she sensed something extraordinary was happening. She stepped around to witness the pose evolve and held her breath as his other arm



crossed his chest in slow motion and he brushed a finger lightly against his neck.

Until that moment, the poses she'd suggested were figurine-worthy, if not a bit predictable. But in two stunningly simple balletic motions, Theos had become the sexiest man on the planet.

“Oh, wow. Hold that pose. Please.” She held up her phone to take a picture so she could recreate it. “Do you mind? This is exactly what I've been looking for.”

“Go ahead. But you won't need a photo. I'll remember.”

He never flinched as she snapped shots from every angle, even during close-ups. When she was shooting him from behind, she noticed a small scar between his shoulders, and she touched it gently with a finger. “What happened here?”

“Oh, just something I've had since birth.”

Without thinking she pecked him on the cheek. “I hope that wasn't being too forward. I couldn't resist.”

He smiled at the gesture. “Not at all. Makes me wish I had something else to give you. Oh, wait, I almost forgot. I do.” He went back to the kitchen and pulled a strange-looking pouch about the size of a softball from his duffle bag. “My mother made little figures like you do, and she used this powder all the time. I thought you might like to play with it.”

“If it belongs to your mother, I can't possibly take it.”

“Why not? I'm certainly never going to make pottery.”

“Well, thank you.” She peeked in the pouch. “It's really pretty. Feels like it might be a glaze of some type. I'll take a closer look tonight.”

She set the bag aside and gave him a devilish grin. “Hey. Remember how I threw a bunch of fairy dust into the air at the end of my skit with Greta? Well, she's been begging me to use something else, because my glitter is too hard to get out of her cloak. This stuff is so much finer, and it has plenty of sparkle. Would you mind if I used it next time as a prank? It would definitely drive her crazy. I can see her now.”

“It’s yours to throw around all you want. There will be plenty more where that came from.” When she wasn’t looking, he tossed a pinch at the refrigerator door.

“Talking about your mother made me think about the rest of your family, and I wondered if you have any siblings?” she asked.

“I have a brother, Alias. He’s one of those guys who is good at every sport. He likes to kitesurf, too, but he prefers regular surfing. He’s the smart one in the family, and quite the scientist, with The Endowment for Oceanic Solutions. Maybe you’ve heard of it.”

No surprise that she hadn’t. She loved the science courses she took but she’d never gone beyond those. Art was her passion. She tried to picture the scientist brother, and as Theos put on his clothes, she wondered if they looked alike. She snapped her mind back to the project at hand. They’d made progress that day, and she felt confident that she could move to clay the next day.

“We can start with this pose first thing in the morning.”

“Um. It’ll have to be the day after, if that’s okay.” Her face fell and he caught her disappointment. “Uh, oh. I can see you’re upset. You can’t fool me.”

She was determined not to let him learn the reason behind the aggressive timetable. “To be honest, I’m used to staying on schedule. I hope you understand.”

He nodded. “I promise to do what I can to help speed things along. Oh, and by the way, I still want to paint you.” He poked her in her tummy again. “Don’t worry, I won’t try to take your clothes off.” He put his mouth so close to her ear it almost touched. “Unless you ask.” He was about to leave when he stopped. “Listen, we put in a full half-day. How would you feel about grabbing a late lunch?”

She didn’t want to tell him why she couldn’t be seen alone with him in town and was about to decline. “Hold that thought.” She turned to go to her bedroom. “I’ve got charcoal all over these clothes.”

“I’m not a bad cook,” he called. “I could make us a nice pasta.”

She yelled from her bathroom. “That would be great, but I haven’t been to the store, and the kitchen is absolutely bare.”

Her jaw dropped when she came back out and saw him chopping vegetables and the penne pasta boiling in a saucepan.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Theos*

*I'm really falling for Lily, and I think she might be the one for me. When I told my father, he was thrilled. He'd married a human, after all, and she's made a terrific queen. And with Lily's affinity for fairies, I think she could make a good one. I'll bet she has a little fairy blood in her, too.*

*Depositing stashes of my personal fairy dust here and there around the world over the years was genius. Even though, as a royal, I don't need it for my own health, I will probably have to tap into it over the coming weeks to use for emergencies until we are able to make more. My parents suggested that I give Lily a small amount to gauge her reaction and monitor how it affects her, without telling her what it really was.*

*I've used a bit of magic around her in small doses, too, so she will be less shocked if and when I reveal myself.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Lily and Julie were in The Fairy Kingdom office when they heard a loud knock on the back door.

“I finished my run early,” announced Greta. “C’mon to Joe’s with me. I haven’t seen you for days, and we need to catch up. Julie, you come, too.”

Greta wasn’t always an early riser. She’d picked up the habit from an uncle during a summer she spent with him in Europe. When she first arrived, he’d let her sleep in, but after the third day, he staged an intervention. He’d roust her out of bed each morning to stroll the streets and watch the Parisian shopkeepers set up. In time, she woke up early on her own and couldn’t wait to head for one of her uncle’s favorite joints and stand at the bar to take coffee with the locals. He had indoctrinated her that the ritual was essential to ensure the continuation of civilized society, and she’d gone out for coffee every morning since.

Joe’s Java Joint was Greta’s Parisian bar. The hole-in-the-wall operation was a few doors down from their two stores, and because it opened early, she stopped there without fail after her morning run, and then showered and changed at her store.

“Have you ever had one of his croissants?” she asked Julie. “They’re as French as you can find over here. I don’t know how he does it.”

Lily liked croissants well enough, but she wasn’t a fanatic like Greta. Before Greta’s store got so hugely popular and

when she could take time off more often, Greta would frequently vacation in Francophile countries. Lily remembered being floored at least twice when her friend jetted off to Paris for a three-day weekend “just to get a decent cup of coffee and a real croissant.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Julie admitted.

Greta laughed. “Hmm. Now that I’ve learned you’re ambivalent about my favorite food, I might have to reconsider our friendship.”

“Who said anything about not liking French croissants? I love ’em. It’s Joe that I’m not crazy about.”

Like his coffee house, Joe himself was a Myers Beach institution...along with his abrasive personality. For some reason, from the beginning, he’d decided to affect an unpleasant demeanor when he was behind the counter, and over time his caustic barbs became something of a legend. Neither Julie nor Lily cared for him, though he hadn’t done anything specific to create bad feelings. There was something vague beyond his personality that neither of them liked but could not articulate. They tolerated him for Greta’s sake and seldom went there without her.

Greta reminded them of the “Spotlight on the Boardwalk” feature column that ran in the local paper on Joe’s Java Joint and the tourists who allegedly returned over and over to experience insults from the “wise-cracking owner.”

“I remember it being more like a puff piece,” Julie said. “They should have called that smarmy old man what he is, a smart ass.”

“Oh, come on. That’s his way of saying he likes you,” said Greta.

Julie shuddered.

“Under that crusty exterior, he’s really a pussycat.” Greta tossed her hair. “Or, I don’t know, maybe it’s my pretty brown skin that charms him.”

Joe was not his real name, as anyone who heard him speak could discern, though it was a perfect choice for his line of

work and for anyone trying to fit into American culture. While fluent in English, his accent was laden with thick overtones that Greta could only identify as vaguely European.

Once, she'd initiated a light conversation with him in French, but after exchanging the same basic phrases everyone knew, he would revert to his version of English. She'd experienced that situation many times with bilinguals whose English was better than her French or Spanish.

Lily and Julie knew Joe's Java Joint was Greta's domain. At first, he had treated Greta with the same off-putting indifference he showed to every other customer, and she endured his insults like everyone else. Only after she had become an established regular and began to insult him back did their exchanges become playful. Each morning they'd amp up the invectives, and one day after he hurled a particularly hysterical insult, she couldn't control her laughing or her reflexes. Without thinking of the consequences, she said what she suspected plenty of people wanted to say but didn't have the nerve. She called him out for his ridiculous comb-over. He turned red, but then burst out laughing as well, and after that denouement of a sort, they became buddies.

She had her own reserved table on the deck against the railing where she could see and be seen, and later he added to his menu the special coffee concoction they'd developed together. To compensate for all the ingredients and steps required to make it, "Greta the Witch's Brew" was the most expensive drink on the menu, and Lily guessed that the exclusivity added to Greta's appreciation for the honor.

One day Greta felt comfortable enough to ask how he came to Myers Beach, and he responded by giving her a rare glimpse into his personal life.

"I'm not French," he'd told her. He'd come to California decades earlier to marry an American woman he'd fallen in love with while he was in Europe. They had a child, and all was well until one day she met a real Frenchman and decided to leave Joe and their son. He moved to the beach, bought the building, and opened the coffee house. He'd dropped whatever his name had been and started going by Joe.

He knew Lily, of course, as most of the shop owners on the boardwalk were friends of a sort, but she was far from a regular. Going out for coffee every day was not practical for someone who needed to watch every penny, and Joe's prices overall were steep. Julie stayed away, too, and not just because she was on a student's budget. The one unpleasant exchange she'd had with him had been enough.

He brought Greta's coffee. "Can I get you ladies a Witch's Brew as well?" Lily had fallen for it once before when Greta dragged her there to show her the addition to the menu. This time she wasn't eager to splurge, and she opted for black drip.

"Oh, my gosh. I've already had a lot of coffee this morning, and that Witch's Brew is way too strong for me," she lied. He returned with a paper cup and left them to take the order from another table.

"It seems like ages since we've had a chance to talk," Greta began. "Julie tells me you've been holed up with that dreamboat working on the figurine, and I want to know how it's going."

"Well, we got off to a slow start, but things are really coming together. He even brought groceries and cooked us dinner. I don't know how he sneaked them in, but it was sweet." She teased Greta, "When he said he'd modeled before, he wasn't kidding. He's a natural. He stripped right down to his briefs and knew just how to pose."

Greta teased back, "I'll bet he did."

Lily laughed. "Listen, we all agree that there can't be many men more beautiful than him, right? So, get this. He only let me sketch him from his left side, because he claimed it was his *good* side."

Greta laughed. "As if he had a bad one, huh? Do you have sketches or anything to show us yet? We saw your first ones, but I should really get to see your progress, since it was my idea, after all."

Lily laughed harder. "I'm not ready to share them yet. Besides, I know what you really want to see. By the way, I'm



sorry that, other than seeing his nearly naked body, there are no scandalous details to report.” She gulped her coffee. “Anyway, I only need Theos two more times. Once to nail the final pose, and...” She paused to watch Greta’s expression as she dropped the last tidbit. “Another to take his measurements.”

“Oh, my God, if only we could be flies on the wall, right, Julie?”

“I know. Hey, tell Greta about the pink teapot,” said Julie, and Lily regaled them with descriptions of the gifts Theos brought her.

“Pink? Hmm. That proves he’s gay. Damn. I knew it,” said Greta.

“No. I’m sure he isn’t. Pink was like a family thing. Speaking of which, he did mention having a brother.”

“That’s encouraging,” said Greta. “When do we get to meet him?”

“I don’t know where he lives or anything, other than he’s some sort of scientist.”

Greta’s face brightened. “Hmm. A scientist could be kind of hot, especially if he looks like his brother. So, has he asked you out?”

“No, but he cooked us dinner at my place when we finished our session. Candles and all. You know I have to keep this relationship professional-looking, at least until the trial. If Kelly got wind, I’d never get the divorce.” She shook her head. “But I have to say, it’s really hard pretending that I’m not crazy about him.”

They ordered a second round. “Something bugs me, though, and I want your honest opinion. He’s bailed on me twice before, you know, so I gave him my phone number and told him to text me if he was going to be running late, because I still worry that he’s not going to show up.”

“And?”

“What’s troubling is that he gave me a teapot and all those other things, but he didn’t give me his number. He said he wasn’t into phones. What kind of a guy says that?”

Julie chimed in. “Actually, I like the sound of it. Maybe he picked up on your concern and wanted to keep a respectful distance.”

“And should I worry that I haven’t mentioned anything about Kelly, or the divorce trial? I mean, he hasn’t asked.”

“Then I say leave well enough alone,” said Greta.

Lily changed the subject. “Enough about me. What have the rest of you been up to?”

Greta raised an eyebrow. “Well, of course, there’s Julie’s new boyfriend.”

Lily’s shocked expression showed she hadn’t heard. She’d been so preoccupied with her problems and her project that her conversations with Julie had centered around store business. Julie blushed. Her relationship wasn’t at the boyfriend stage yet, and she didn’t want to jinx it by discussing it further.

“I’ll let you know how it’s going after we get the finished figurines priced and on the shelves.”

Greta picked at the rim of her cup. “So, I hate to bring up a sore subject, Lily, but I assume you’ve heard about all the people lining up to buy your building.”

“Yes, and like I told the bank, the line starts behind me!”

When Greta reached across the table to congratulate Lily, her voice didn’t convey any doubt that she could pull it off.

“Yay! That’s the Lily I know and love. So, this morning all the news is good. You’ll have new merch for the summer, and you’ll get to keep your store.”

“That’s the plan and why every day counts!” She didn’t mention that she’d be closer to finishing if Theos showed up more often and stayed longer. He wasn’t to blame, of course, and he had been sweet to promise to do whatever he could to speed things up. “All I need is about two more days with Theos.”

“Let me cast a spell to help.” Greta reached into her purse and pulled out a collapsible wand.

Julie laughed so hard that a mouthful of coffee went down the wrong way, and she sputtered. “You carry a freaking wand around with you?”

“Why are you shocked? I’m Greta the Witch, and I try to stay on brand.” She showed Julie how it opened and collapsed and bopped it on Lily’s head. “Seriously, I really hope it all works out for you, Lils. *Xerbiat Erbidocerim!*”

Greta paid the check and went back to Lily’s store with them. “It’s so hard to believe that none of us ever thought about adding a king statue to the mix. Looking back, it just makes such good sense.”

“Yeah, but getting them off the shelves and into customers’ hands will be the next big step, and at this stage, I have no idea or budget for marketing.”

“Easy peasy. I’ll help. The tie-in with Theos is a PR flack’s dream. I can see the headlines. ‘Queen Lily Finds King to Help Rule her Fairy Kingdom!’ We talk about how the store never sold male fairies before, and how Theos, who is kind of a king, models for the statue. The story is so good, it writes itself.”

“Offer accepted,” Julie replied. “We need all the help we can get.”

Greta sighed. “Witches don’t get kings, like fairies, but I wish I had a guy like him in my life. Even a pretend king, like Theos.”

Julie laughed. “Be careful what you wish for. You’re in a store full of fairies who like to grant them.”

“In that case, here’s another one. That the three of us get together for dinner tonight and I could hear more about their relationship. I feel we just scratched the surface. Besides, we all have plenty to celebrate.”

Julie held up her phone to display the reservation at the Sea Catch she made on the app. “Done!”

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“Table Number One. This way, ladies,” invited the host when he recognized the three women. Everyone knew table Number One was the best in the house. With glass on three sides, it overlooked the beach, the jetty, and the cliff with the weird blinking antennae. Julie had reserved a table for three, but they were delighted at the upgrade and surprised to see Theos greet them in a silk sport coat, skinny jeans, and a crisp white shirt opened at the collar.

“How did you know we’d be here?” asked Lily. “We made the reservation on the spur of the moment.”

“I know. Talk about luck. I came alone tonight, and when I learned you’d be here, I asked if they had a larger table. Oddly enough, this one turned out to be available. I hope I wasn’t being too presumptuous, and if you would rather not join me, I made sure they kept your table.”

“Are you kidding?” Greta broke in. “This is perfect.”

Their server arrived and handed out menus. “My name is Eric. And I’m so glad to have a four-top. After the kitesurfing group left, the place has been pretty quiet, and I was wondering how I could afford to work another night with so few tips.” He was reciting the evening’s seafood specials when his eyes fell on Theos’ pendant and he stopped talking. Greta cleared her throat to get his attention.

“Oh my gosh,” Eric said. “Has anyone told you that the color of your stone matches your eyes perfectly?”

Theos touched Lily’s hand. “Yes, once or twice.”

He reached for the stone. “May I?” While the women looked at each other with raised eyebrows as his being so forward, Theos didn’t seem to mind. He smiled and pulled open his collar wider to give the young man more access.

“I think what Eric likes is the chest it’s hanging against,” whispered Julie.

When the young man's finger touched the stone, his hand snapped and he fell against Lily's chair. "Wow. I felt a shock. Is it like battery-powered or something?"

Greta laughed. "Nice try, Eric, but I think Theos is taken." Never missing a chance to promote a friend, she pointed at Lily. "But if you want a good luck pendant like his, you can get one in her store, The Fairy Kingdom, just over there on the boardwalk."

After they ordered, Lily stood. "I'd like to propose a toast. Julie, I never thank you enough. I couldn't have gotten through the past several years and especially these recent weeks without you. And by the way, everyone, she also managed to stay on the dean's list."

Julie took a bow. "And here's to finishing that new skate park," added Greta. "She's too modest to admit it, but without her social media and marketing skills, they never would've been able to raise the funds to build it."

"Aw, thanks. It started as a passion project, but it took off fast, and I was lucky the university let me count my time as community service hours toward my degree."

"As long as we're giving toasts," said Lily. "Here's to Theos. You literally dropped out of the sky and ended up saving my life. It probably sounds corny coming from me, but the whole thing reads like a fairy tale, really."

Greta jumped in. "Okay. My turn again. And here's to the most important part: getting them *sold*, so Lily can save her store and get that hateful woman at the bank off her back." She tossed down her Prosecco and sat back down, but she saw the horrified look on Lily's face, she realized she'd accidentally revealed a confidence in front of Theos.

Theos turned his chair. "Lily, you never mentioned a problem with your building."

She blushed and whispered back. "Of course, I didn't. We don't have that kind of relationship."

Theos ignored her comment and pressed for details until she gave in and explained the embarrassing ramifications

caused by Mrs. Coffey's unexpected death, including the immediate need for cash.

Greta took the blame for talking her into the extra work to make it look exactly like Theos, and he laughed at her theory that other people would buy them because of some mojo she thought he possessed.

"This is all so embarrassing, but at least now you know why so much is riding on getting your figurine done and on the shelves," Lily explained, and Theos' eyes lit up when he heard her say she could raise the money, if only she had more time.

Eric was breathless when he presented their check. "You'll never guess what happened. I can pay my rent this month. A couple in the other room left me a two-hundred-dollar tip! Talk about luck."

Theos gave him his credit card, and when he looked at the name Eric's eyes bulged. "How do you get a credit card with only your first name on it? That is so amazing!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Theos*

*After all my time studying with humans in college, I continue to be amazed at how clueless I am at understanding their dating customs. And since I'm half-human and several hundred years old, I should be better at it than I am! Lily's comment about "not having that kind of relationship" stung. None of this emotional murkiness exists among full fairies.*

*I'm also astonished that she and I both find ourselves in such dire circumstances and under urgent looming deadlines. Me, with my fairy dust dilemma, and Lily with her financial problems. Maybe that shared struggle is why I feel such a strong attraction.*

*And I do like that we're getting more intimate. When she found the port on my back between my shoulders, I desperately wanted to pop out my wings and show her what I really am. Of course, I must wait until I am certain we are committed, because after I tell her, there would be no turning back.*

*A friend from university told me that couples need many shared experiences to thrive, so tomorrow I will try a new approach.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Fifty-nine days, my pretty!” Katherine Needham’s hideous face screeched the deadline in Lily’s dream and jolted her awake. She sat dazed on the edge of her bed, astonished that both her real banker and the banker in her dreams looked more like a witch than Greta, and she shuddered at the possibility of the Elmyra Gulch look-alike showing up in her sleep every night. One of the ironies of the date that was so stress-inducing for Lily was that the deadline meant little for Mrs. Coffey’s daughter. She stood to make a killing either way. Lily’s failure to come through would suit her fine. She would get a much higher price on the open market.

Lily appreciated the upbeat dinner and support from her friends, but her nightmare made her rethink the scope of her project, and she decided to forget about producing an entire line and concentrate on one figurine instead. Making only one mold would be more doable for her, and it would shave off precious time the foundry would require to crank out the quantities she was going to need.

She tried to concentrate, but her mind played tricks with her by replaying the scene on the kitchen stool. A man hadn’t shown her that much attention in almost a decade, and she longed to experience it again. He’d be showing up soon, and she wondered if she could stage a similar situation where he’d have to catch her again.

The doorbell rang, and she flung open the door to find Theos in a black wetsuit that hugged him perfectly. Across his



arms, he'd draped a second suit, this one bright purple, blue, and pink.

"Today, I'm directing the action," he announced. "And I'm taking you kitesurfing." Lily opened her mouth to protest, but he spoke over her. "I understand your time crunch and believe me when I say that I don't want to delay things. But you said something last night about our relationship that might be a key to speeding things up. Today, you're going to get to know more about me."

Dread settled over her at losing another day. Double dread when he handed the extra wetsuit to her. She held up her hands.

"I hope you don't think I'm actually going to do this. Speaking of getting to know each other better, I'm terrified of heights, and I'm a terrible swimmer."

"I won't let anything bad happen to you." He placed a hand on the door trim so he could lean in closer. "Don't you trust me?"

She wondered why he wanted to put her through that, but she heard herself agree. "All I needed today was to take some measurements, so I can get everything perfect and start to sculpt."

He wagged a finger at her. "There you go with 'perfect' again. I'd like to see you let loose a little and let things flow."

"And risk my life with a sport that terrifies me?"

He bopped her nose with one finger. "You're cute when you're nervous. Trust me. This is going to help. I'm an artist too, remember?"

Notwithstanding her new resolve, she knew she was going to lose this argument, and she accepted the wetsuit he'd brought for her. "Fine. What are people supposed to wear under these things, anyway?"

"I never wear anything, but you may be more comfortable putting on a swimsuit, at least for your first time."

"First, and last. Stay here. I'll be right back."

Changing wouldn't take long. Despite living on the beach and her son's love of the water, she only owned two bathing suits. She'd bought the very conservative dark blue number after she gave birth to Jamie, and it covered as much as a nightgown and had a matching skirt. The whole thing was too large for her now and not exactly date-worthy, assuming this *was* a date.

The other was wrong for the exact opposite reason. She'd bought it for her honeymoon, and while she was back to the size she'd been in her early twenties, she wasn't nearly as brave. The black bikini covered the essentials and not much else, and it would take some serious guts for her to wear it. Reminding herself that the wetsuit would cover everything anyway, she took a deep breath and put it on, then she tugged on the suit.

"Could you finish zipping me up?" she asked when she came back to the kitchen. "This thing of yours gets tight at the top."

"I can't imagine why." He delicately pinched the zipper that had stopped at the deep curve of her breasts. She felt his fingertips brush the exposed area. "You have beautiful skin." As he gently tugged the zipper up the remaining two inches, she wondered how this simple action made her more excited than when Kelly had kissed her for the first time.

They took the back stairs to the alley, and when he led her to the ancient and banged-up Land Rover with missing doors that he called his transportation, she burst out laughing. By contrast, her decade-old sedan looked downright respectable.

"Well, this is a shock."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Something shiny and new befitting an international superstar."

"For the beach?" He gestured for her to get in, and she eyed a spot on the seat between his uninflated kite and the perfectly coiled rigging.

She examined the flimsy-looking seat belts with distrust and reminded herself that as a rule, she didn't get in a car that she wouldn't allow her eleven-year-old to ride in. But she let him lift her into the passenger side and she grabbed at the car frame. She hung on for dear life as the Land Rover bumped along, while thoughts of embarrassing herself in front of hundreds of strangers sure to be at the beach on such a beautiful day kept her silent.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Theos drove down the back bumpy road past the jetty, then surprised her by turning right onto a narrow sandy drive she'd never seen. It took them behind the cliff, and when they passed a couple of Keep Out signs, Greta got her bearings and realized where they were headed.

“Whoa! We can't go there,” she yelled as they rumbled onto the small beach on the other side of the jetty. “This is all restricted!” He continued driving until he stopped near a small sand dune. She shouted again. “Did you hear me? I'm sure you didn't know, but it's some kind of research facility, and they don't permit anyone to swim here.”

Theos laughed. “Who said anything about swimming? Anyway, we have permission.”

Lily had doubts that Theos really did have permission, but she couldn't deny that being there was a bit of a thrill. The sand was whiter than its neighbor on the other side of the jetty. Encircled by the tall cliffs around to the ocean on the far side, the beach was quite private.

“Well, at least nobody will see me make a fool of myself.” She looked up at the ominous cluster of antennae and satellite dishes and gave a nervous laugh. “Unless you count Big Brother up there.”

Theos shrugged and helped her out, and when his hand lingered on her wrist, she let it. She watched him unload his equipment, and when he brought out the board he expected her to step on, she felt her stomach churn.

“I changed my mind. This is a horrible idea. I already told you I’m a terrible swimmer. Really, even in pools, I—”

“Hey, I used to be a lifeguard. Trust me, it’s all going to be fine. Besides, you’re with the best kitesurfer on the beach.”

Pretending to search the shoreline, she teased him. “Yeah, and the only one, by the looks of things. Seriously, Theos, I’m \_\_\_”

“Awfully brave for someone so small and defenseless?” He picked her up by her middle and threw her over his strong shoulders, and she squealed. She couldn’t remember the last time she laughed like that, and it felt so good. He gave her a playful jostle as he carried her down to the water, and she put her lips to a section of his shoulder. “I’ll bite you,” she warned him through her giggles.

“Not if I bite you first.” He clamped his teeth lightly over her calf.

He set her gently on her feet next to the board and ran back to get the rest of his gear. She was still warm from their play scuffle, but with the fun part over, she suddenly faced the seriousness of what was to come.

Kelly’s wife would never have kitesurfed. She would have watched dutifully as her husband and son frolicked in the water and served sandwiches when they finished. She would have scolded them for not wearing sunblock, and if she was feeling courageous, she might have waded in up to her waist.

How far the new Lily would go was the question. What she wanted to do was strip off her wetsuit and run into the water with her black bikini on full display. If she was being honest with herself, she’d admit that she wanted to jump Theos right where he was and roll around in the sand with no concern for whoever might be watching up top. But Lily wasn’t free to be new yet. The old Lily still had a hand on the reins and was fighting for control.

Theos sensed her tension but didn’t press for an explanation. “Like I said, you’ll be safe with me.” He laid a hand on her shoulder, and Lily calmed for him to attach her

harness. Her nerves caught up with her again when she worried that she lacked coordination and that her body would refuse to contort to the positions he would ask her to take. It didn't help that he was such a natural.

“How about I watch you go first?”

“Fair enough. I was going to take a few laps around to check out the wind currents, anyway.” He laughed. “But you're not off the hook, and you better still be here when I get back.” He slapped on his harness, inflated the kite, and tossed it into the air. She watched him carefully position his feet on the board, knowing she'd have to duplicate the process.

The kite pulled his board directly up into the air from the sand, and she considered how different it was to watch him cavort over the waves this time. She thought of the couple who had sat next to her at the exhibition and imagined the look on their faces if they learned she was not only friends with the king, but he'd taken her kitesurfing.

He circled above their small bit of beach and streaked back. In his fitted suit, with his hair spraying straight behind him, Theos looked every bit a god. He landed on the water about thirty feet from where she stood, and when he emerged from the surf, he'd peeled down the top half of his wetsuit. His chest glistened in the morning light.

“The wind is perfect, and water temperature is perfect,” he announced. “Come out here, and I'll help you on.”

Knees wobbling, she waded in and experienced for the first time the weird cool feeling of water against a wetsuit. A wave broke and splashed in her face, and while she was wiping her eyes, a larger one splashed against her and threw her backward into the surf. She staggered to her feet, and a third wave pounded her under again.

“I'm done!” She pushed the matted hair from her eyes and spit out sand. “I told you I couldn't do it.”

“Don't be silly. Nobody stays dry in this sport, not even me. Be glad you got that part over. Now, grab my arm.”

He gave her that mischievous look again. “Ready?”

“Are you insane? What am I supposed to do now? I’m terrified!”

“You don’t have to do anything. You didn’t think I’d let you go up alone, did you? Relax. You’ll be with me the whole time. We’re going in tandem.”

He held the bar with one hand and positioned her on the board in front of him. As he leaned her back against his chest, his slick wetsuit felt warm and strangely soft against hers, and she pressed closer. He wrapped his other arm around her and pulled at the bar to lift off.

In seconds, they were speeding over the waves. To give her confidence, he kept close to the shore, which along that short beach meant whipping the board around frequently to reverse their direction. Each turn rolled her body into his strong arms, and while she felt safe, she wondered if he was doing that move on purpose. He squeezed her slightly to let her know something was about to happen, and she screamed in delight when they made their first jump.

“Put your arms on top of mine,” he shouted. When she gripped his hands, she felt as though an electrical circuit had been closed. A new energy raced through her body, and she felt every twitch of his muscles as he pushed and pulled on the bar to make subtle changes in direction and speed.

“Here we go!” he called. She expected that first somersault to challenge her stomach, but she found it thrilling instead, and when he asked if she wanted to do it again, she squeezed his hand and he executed two more, ending with a double before streaking up and away from the shore. “Want to go back in?”

“No. Keep going. I love this!”

He swerved the board around and dropped straight down. She closed her eyes and didn’t open them until she felt their board touch down on a sandbar, and she stepped off the board while he reeled in his kite. They plopped down on the narrow strip of sand that was just wide enough to stretch out on. Lily kept her feet in the water and leaned back on her elbows to stare at the endless horizon that surrounded them on all sides.

“I’m starving,” he said. He produced a footlong sandwich from his backpack and two bottles of iced tea. “I found this little spot last week. It only appears above water at this time of day, and I was hoping that I could convince you to come out here with me sometime.

As they ate, little sand crabs darted back and forth to grab at teeny breadcrumbs Theos tore from his sandwich and tossed their way. Imitating the crabs, he sidled closer to her, which she took as a cue, and gradually she leaned against his strong back. The sun felt good on her face.

She’d loved the beach as a kid, and she wondered why she hadn’t spent more time in the ocean as an adult. Forgetting the week’s challenges and her need to solve them, she realized for the first time what it was like to live in the moment with a tender and thoughtful man who was everything Kelly was not.

When they were finished eating, he took his position on the board. Like a seasoned pro, Lily jumped on in front of him, and soon they were back in the air speeding along. She felt his left hand release its grip and his arm tighten around her waist, and when he put his mouth close to her ear, she felt his breath.

“For this next stunt, you must keep facing forward. Don’t turn around, promise?” She nodded. “Okay. Then get ready to pop!”

She braced herself for the jolt she expected would follow, but this time they soared straight up and glided out over the Pacific in an ascension so smooth, she no longer felt the sensation of her feet on the surfboard. She imagined it was what Jasmine must have felt when Aladdin took her sailing through the sky on his magic carpet.

“Is this what they call hang time? It’s almost magical. How do you do it?”

He brushed his lips against her cheek. “Practice.”

He pulled her closer and they floated for what seemed like hours. When the sun was setting, she sensed them making a giant loop, and Myers Beach appeared on the horizon as a tiny twinkling speck of civilization.



He took the bar again with both hands. “Hold on!” he shouted, and they screamed toward shore.

They rode the crest in and stopped over the exact spot where they had started. The water was slightly over her head where he lowered her, and she had to bounce on her toes. As he was showing her how to adjust her weight by leaning into the sway of the ocean’s crosscurrents, he wrapped his arms around her middle.

“I should admit that I have an ulterior motive for taking you out.”

Lily feigned ignorance. “And what is that?”

“I didn’t think I could stand naked in your apartment again without kissing you first.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Theos*

*I may hold the record for hang time, but floating up there for hours with Lily without using my wings would have been impossible. Anyway, she never asked how I managed, so she obviously didn't see those gigantic things when I popped them out. I guess she thought what we did up there was normal, because she didn't seem to notice when I flapped them hard all the way back. Feeling her against my body today was delicious. But the closeness wasn't just physical. I think our souls are connecting.*

*I've been so tempted to step in and help her make the figurines, but Mother advised me to resist and let her make them on her own. She told me Lily sounded like a strong woman and not a damsel in distress, and didn't need a man to take care of everything for her. Since my mother was human before she married my father, she probably knows what she's talking about.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

She couldn't get him out of her mind, and that morning she wanted to tell someone, so she got up very early. It was pouring outside, but knowing that Greta ran rain or shine, Lily texted her to say she had something to tell her that couldn't wait and that she would meet her at Joe's.

"You're looking abnormally happy today, Lily," said Joe. His comment was laced with innuendo, but she took it as an attempt at a playful insult.

"I am," she said. "Happy and abnormally keyed up, from one of your outrageously expensive and super caffeinated *Greta the Witch's Brews*."

When Greta showed up, Lily gave her the whole story, from the Land Rover's dents and rust to the romantic lunch on the sandbar. "I swear Greta, Theos was so romantic, I thought for a moment he was going to propose!" Lily took a big gulp of *Greta the Witch's Brew*.

Greta listened as long as she could without interrupting. "Wow! I can't believe I'm saying something this corny, but that ride sounds magical."

Lily nodded. "I've been using that word a lot too, but I don't know how else to describe how it is with him. I can't believe my luck."

She remembered being so down about everything that day he'd walked into the store. And while in many ways more troubles had piled on since they met, the challenges seemed manageable with him on her side.

“Honestly, I felt we were in a movie or a TV commercial. The beach, the waves, a gorgeous guy, and the slick wetsuits that glistened in the sun.” She held up her hand. “I know you’re going to ask. Yes, we finally kissed, and please don’t laugh when I admit that he’s the first guy since Kelly. And I probably don’t have to tell you how long it’s been since he and I did.”

“You know, Lils, this whole outing thing he took you on sounds like a reaction to that comment you made at dinner about not having *that kind of relationship*. Remember? I’d say that kind of relationship is exactly what he wants.”

“It’s what I want, too. I’m sure now.”

“Have you mentioned you-know-who yet?” Greta pressed. “If you think he’s that close to asking you to marry him or even move in with you, you’d better tell him about your marital status soon. Telling him after he proposed would definitely kill the mood.”

“No, I haven’t. He obviously knows that I’ve been married before and have a son, and that didn’t seem to faze him. But you’re right. I’ll tell him after we finish today’s session.” She finished her fourteen-ounce coffee, knowing she’d be bouncing off the walls all day. “Speaking of which, with all this caffeine, I hope I won’t have the jitters so bad that I can’t use a tape measure.”

“Hello! Too much coffee is the perfect excuse for accidentally knocking against something you shouldn’t have by mistake.”

---

She barely heard the doorbell over the clattering thunder when it rang exactly at the time she expected him, and her heart skipped a beat as she flung open the door. But instead of Theos, she caught the backside of a delivery person dodging raindrops the size of quarters as he splashed through the puddles on the way back to his truck. The carton of paper towels she’d expected the day before leaned against the door.

Theos still hadn't shown up at eleven. Her friends would have texted if they were running late, but though she had given him her number, he'd never used it, and he still hadn't offered his. She knew that checking the time again was pointless, but she glanced at her phone anyway, and she was glad she did. She'd been up half the night watching online videos of him soaring through the air in competitions, which was much more thrilling now that she'd experienced the sport firsthand, and her phone's battery was on its last leg.

She knew something serious must have come up to derail him. After the newfound passion they had shared the day before, he wouldn't have blown her off, and she blamed his tardiness on the weather. She didn't recall an electrical storm that had carried on as relentlessly as the one that started the night before and wasn't over yet. Torrential rains could have easily made roads impassable or washed them away, not that she knew which roads he would take. She was embarrassed that she didn't know where he lived.

But she had a long list of errands to run, and fitting them in another day would be tricky. She looked outside and saw that the rain had reduced to drizzle and decided to give him a few more minutes. Taking his measurements was the only task left to do, and the job wouldn't have to take long.

She'd blown up a photo she took of him earlier and superimposed a giant grid over his body. Rule lines dissected his joints, and she'd left blanks to fill in with his measurements. He'd only have to sit or stand, so the day would be easy for him but painstaking work for her. If it turned out they only had a couple of hours together, she could speed up the process, though that was the last thing she wanted. She fantasized that during such close work with her measuring tape, one thing might lead to another. As the day grew longer, however, her imagined scenario seemed less likely.

The rap on her door was faint and unfamiliar, and when she peeked through the eyehole, she almost didn't recognize him. Stringy dull hair hung flat over pale skin, and as he dragged himself through her door, his slouch made him look

defeated. He stumbled into the kitchen and fumbled for the back of a chair. He fell onto it and rested his head on the table. For the first time, Theos, the King appeared mortal.

He stammered out an apology, and as he struggled to string a sentence together, she could tell he was keeping details from her. She had always been the more inarticulate of the two, and while his appearance alarmed her, she found the role reversal fascinating. He waved away her suggestion that anything serious was wrong.

“I just had a bad morning.” He pointed to the kettle. “Any chance I could make myself a cup of tea?”

“Of course, but why don’t you go sit down in the studio, and let me fix one for you?”

As he shuffled across the floor, she thought she saw him grimace, but then he stopped and turned. “So, what do you need me to do today?”

“Today is supposed to be easy. You really only just kind of have to sit there. I’ll do all the work. I just have to take your measurements to be certain I get your proportions exact. It’s what we were going to do yesterday, remember? But if you’re not up to it, we don’t have to.”

He wobbled as if he barely had the strength when he lowered himself onto his customary seat near the window. “How do you want me? Oh, and you look very pretty today.”

“You will have to take off your clothes and face me, though. Can you do that? I can help you with them if you like.”

He waved away her offer, but from the kitchen, she watched him struggle to lift the T-shirt over his head. When he pulled off his pants, he teetered and fell on the floor. The scene was familiar. When Kelly had stumbled into their bedroom late at night, he was often too drunk to stand up. He’d fallen many times undressing, and it took her years to learn to resist helping him.

But she hadn’t smelled alcohol on Theos, so she gave him the benefit of the doubt. At last, he pulled himself up by the

rungs of the stool, and after staring out the window for a few minutes, he uttered a single word.

“Ready.”

“Are you sure?” He nodded. Lily brought him his tea and tried to sound chipper. “What we need is a little music, and I’ve got just the right playlist to cheer us up.” She picked up her phone and then, remembering it was dead, she hooked it to a charger.

Resigned to another day that would not proceed as she’d imagined, Lily luxuriated in the sight of his nakedness for as long as she dared before unrolling the cloth tape measure. He stood motionless, and she began at his toes. She continued up his legs, systematically walking across the room to enter the numbers on her grid and then double-checking each before moving to the next body part. When she reached his underwear and saw that his eyes were closed, she lightly tapped just above his genitals.

“May I?” He nodded, and she was surprised that he was unresponsive to the sensation of the tape measure over his mound. “I’m sorry this is so tedious.” She moved to his hips.

He let out an exhausted sigh. “Don’t worry. I’ve been through this before.”

He never spoke while she lifted his arms or moved his legs, and though the awkward silence was not the least bit sexy, the absence of conversation made it easier for her to focus and make progress.

“All done.” She rolled up her tape. “Listen, do you want to tell me what’s going on? I’m a good listener.”

“No.” He gazed at the clothes she’d folded and put on the chair. “I should leave.”

She looked at her watch again. It was only one o’clock. “Stay for one more cup of tea, will you, for me?” He nodded and followed her to the kitchen. To make room for their cups, she slid aside the leather pouch he’d given her, and she noticed his eyes grow wide when he saw it. “Oh, yeah. I was so exhausted from our outing yesterday, I didn’t get a chance to

experiment with it. Let me take a look now, while you're here." She untied the drawstring, but he put a hand on hers.

"Would you mind if I did the honors?" He reached in and brought out slightly more than a pinch, which he brought to his nose. "It reminds me of my mom." She thought it was sweet when he brought his hand over his head and let it sprinkle down over him.

She stuck her hand in. "Ooh, this is soft." The silky pink and gold flakes ran through her fingers like a liquid. "It's beautiful. I've never seen a glaze with a texture like this. I wonder how your mother used it. Wait. There's something in here." She dug deeper. "It feels like paper."

The markings that were scattered over the front of the tiny envelope looked like more than a design, though if it was an alphabet she didn't recognize it. Rather than letters, they looked like elegant wisps and delicate arcs of ink. And instead of being written in straight lines, they appeared to be grouped in swarms. She asked him what it meant.

"It's addressed to me." When he flipped it over, he swallowed. "It's a letter from my parents."

"How can you tell?"

"It says so."

"You're joking. Those markings are words?"

"It's a language thing my parents taught my brother and me, our secret code."

"You get more mysterious every day. You know, in all our time together you never mentioned where you were from. I can't tell by your accent, not that I'm an expert or anything."

"I don't know exactly where I was born, and we lived all over the place."

"Are you going to keep me in suspense?"

A tear formed as he stared at the envelope. "Listen, I've slowed you down on this project long enough. If you can wait until later today, I'll probably feel better, and I can come back and stay for as long as you want."



“No. For heaven’s sake. I’m sorry to dig into your personal life. That was a stupid question. You’re in no shape to wander around, let alone drive that jalopy of yours. Please stay and read the letter, and I’ll take you home when you’re feeling better.”

He nodded and pointed to the studio. She nodded back.

“Take your time. I’ll leave you alone and make us that tea.” She turned on the kettle and set out fresh cups, but while the water boiled, she tiptoed to the doorway to peek, concerned for his condition, but mostly out of curiosity.

She watched him fondle both sides of the envelope and take care to open the flap without tearing the paper. The sheaf of pink parchment he pulled out matched the color of the envelope, and when he turned it over, she caught a glimpse of the same peculiar script. Her heart ached as she watched tears stream down his cheeks. While she’d experienced his tenderness, she’d never seen him vulnerable, and she desperately wanted to rush in and hold him. The kettle whistled, and she returned to the kitchen, feeling guilty for spying on him during his intimate moment.

As she waited for the tea to brew, she thought about how much was riding on the success of her figurine. She wouldn’t have traded kitesurfing with him for anything, but she’d have to make up for the missing day somehow, and with him recovering in her studio, there was little she could do on her project. She sat at the table to wait for him to finish, and her eyes landed on the opened pouch. The seductive texture of the contents intrigued her, and her mind drifted as she swirled it around with her fingers.

She’d dabbled at making small figures before she met Kelly, and it wasn’t until the third or fourth year of marriage that she’d perfected her technique to the point where she considered selling them. Kelly was old-fashioned and believed women should be allowed to pursue art if they treated it as a hobby, and she recalled how her innocent suggestion of opening a shop threw him into a rage.

They'd argued before, of course, but when that happened, she remembered feeling afraid of him for the first time and knew that their marriage was over. In a moment of remorse, he gave in and helped her secure a loan to set up The Fairy Kingdom. She endured a few more years of marriage misery, and by the time she paid off the loan, she'd found the courage to tell him she wanted out. He protested and warned her that if she left, she'd be on her own and would have to find a "real job."

Lily turned to look into the studio again. Theos was still quiet, and as she continued to wait for him to come back into the kitchen, the minutes stretched to an hour, and the tea went cold.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Penny for your thoughts?” His strong voice jostled her from behind. “Isn’t that what they ask?”

“Yes. That’s the right expression, but technically, I haven’t been thinking, as much as wishing and hoping. Wishing I could hurry up and get these darned things on the shelf and hoping they do us both justice and make a killing.”

“Is work all you ever think about?”

“As a matter of fact, just now I was also wishing that you felt better, and that whatever your parents wrote in the letter would make you happy. You looked so miserable when you walked in.” She turned to face him and did a doubletake when she saw him standing tall in the doorway. His skin glowed, his eyes sparkled, and somehow his hair had become wild and fluffy again.

“Well, your wish came true, because I feel terrific.” He walked with his usual perfect posture and poked her playfully in the shoulder. “Hey, what about that tea?”

“It’s probably cold by now. I didn’t want to disturb you when it was ready, and then I started to daydream, and I guess I lost track of the time. Give me a second and I’ll make more.”

“No. Let me.” Without waiting for her to object, he cleared the table and added fresh water to the kettle. She noticed how comfortable he seemed in her kitchen after having spent only a few mornings in the apartment. He knew where to dump the old tea leaves under the sink, and he opened the right cabinets to find what he needed on the first try. More than anything, she

loved that he felt relaxed enough to wait on her in his underwear. Kelly had started out attentive like that, but she soon learned that he was inherently lazy. After Jamie was born, he never lifted a finger.

“I noticed you’re still wearing my pendant. I had hoped it would bring you good luck.”

He beamed. “It did. I got to spend time with you.” He put his hand on hers and changed the subject. “Would you feel like doing another sketch when we’re done with the tea? I promised you a new pose.”

“That’s not necessary. All the poses were winners, especially the last one. It’s all coming together beautifully, and faster than I thought.”

She was convinced she already had the makings of a masterpiece and going through the effort of sketching a new one would add an unnecessary delay. It was two-thirty, and if he was adamant about doing another one, they’d have to hurry. She’d invited Greta to come by and look at the sketches she’d made, and the last thing Lily wanted was for her to see Theos naked.

“I promised to help speed things along, and I always keep my promises. I also feel inspired. So, I’d like to try out a couple of different things, if you wouldn’t mind.”

She followed him into the studio and took her position behind the easel, wondering how the delay he suggested could count as speeding things along. Besides, she knew the lighting would be all wrong at that time of day. But Theos found his marks, and coupled with his dramatic change in appearance, he looked more than inspired.

Unusual but gorgeous light streamed through the window, and Lily chalked it up to a temporary phenomenon stemming from the aftermath of the storm. It framed Theos in a new way that excited her. She picked up a piece of charcoal and waited to see what he had in mind.

“I’ll start where we left off.” He gave her a wicked smile and slipped his thumbs into the waistband of his briefs as he’d

done on the first day. This time, in one quick motion he shoved them down to the floor and confidently kicked them to one side. Seconds later he assumed the exact seated pose of what she had been calling her masterpiece. “Tell me when you’re ready.”

She swallowed hard. He was every bit as magnificent down there as she imagined, and suddenly she felt the surge of her caffeine.

“Go.”

Theos closed his eyes and inhaled. With the grace and precision of a ballet dancer, he rose slowly to his toes, and as he exhaled, he drew his fingertips up along his torso and stretched his arms out to the sides. Gone was the contemplative tone of the previous days, and the fine hairs on Lily’s arms tingled to attention as she witnessed his majestic presence envelope the studio with electricity.

“You’ll have to go fast,” he warned.

She did. As he sped from one breathtaking pose to the next, she felt his every muscle twitch, even when he made the most subtle shifts in position. It was as though a mystical connection had granted her access to his body, allowing her to anticipate his next move. The tingling was similar to what she felt during kitesurfing when she laid her arms on his, but now she felt his vibrations from across the room.

He presented each new pose with impeccable form, forcing her to up her game and respond with equivalent skill, and she marveled at how her sketching technique improved in front of her eyes and in real time. Over the next half hour, he changed poses faster, and to keep up, her fingers flew across the pages. Sometimes she caught herself drawing with both hands, a skill she hadn’t realized she possessed, but which made it possible to complete the drawings quickly in minute detail.

Dance music blasted from the other room, a sign that her phone had finally been charged sufficiently, and Theos’ body glistened from silvery sweat as he raced through more poses in sync now with her playlist.

“Talk to me!” he shouted. “Tell me what you want!”

She didn’t have to think, and she shouted back. “You’re the king, Theos. Be my King!”

He shot her a sly look, and she took it as a signal that his best was still to come. He crouched on the floor and bowed his head. Then Lily watched each muscle flex and limb lengthen as he unfolded his body again with a spectacular burst of energy.

“Then I will be your King. I am Theos, your fairy king!”

She put down her charcoal and grabbed her camera. His pose was exactly what she’d envisioned but hadn’t been able to articulate. “Hold it. You look so regal.”

He obliged, and when she saw that he exuded power even while he was motionless, she knew she was tapping into the mojo Greta said was critical.

“No, Lily. This is regal.” He dropped to one knee and bowed his head again, and with one hand covering his heart, he held the other upright like a priest blessing his flock.

“What do you mean? You looked much stronger before.”

“Yes, and that pose will make a terrific figurine. But if you want to show a great king, the King of the Fairies, you must show him humble.”

When she finished, she collapsed against the wall, exhausted and trembling. Steam from their bodies had fogged the window, and the floor was strewn with dozens of charcoal bits and the finished drawings she’d ripped from three sketch pads. She looked around the room in disbelief.

Theos was dripping wet and still kneeling with an expression she took as an invitation. She pushed herself away from the wall. She slid her arms under his shoulders, and as she lifted him to his feet, she brought his slick body to hers.

“You were magnificent.” She made tiny circles in his chest hair with her fingers. “What you just did for me today is going to change my life.”

“Mine too.” He found her hand and guided it slowly down his flat stomach, and she moaned at the anticipation of more. Then, suddenly, he yanked her hand away. He put a finger to his lips and whispered. “Stop! Someone’s here.”

She heard the footsteps on the stairs, and assuming it was Julie or Greta, she frowned at the bad timing.

She turned her head to the doorway, as Theos pulled on his jeans. “Whoever you are, this is not a good time, okay?”

Jamie froze in the doorway and he jerked his head back when he saw the shirtless and sweaty man in the room with his mother.

Lily panicked and hoped her smile would be more convincing than her red face, and that her stammer wouldn’t give away her guilt. “What a surprise!”

Jamie pointed. “Who’s he and why is he here?”

She reached for his hand and her brain worked overtime to find the right words. “He’s been helping me with my figurines. Here, let me show you the new sketches we made.” Then, realizing Jamie would see the full-frontal nudes, she changed her mind and scurried him out of the studio.

He stomped down the stairs. “Don’t touch me!” he shouted. “I’m telling Dad.”

“Honey, please don’t do that! It’s not what you think. I can explain.” She snatched her phone and turned to Theos. “This is so embarrassing. He was supposed to be at school.”

“I should leave.”

“No, stay. Please!” She ran to the top of the stairs. “Jamie, come back up here. You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I do. You care more about your fairies than us! Dad says that’s why your marriage is a mess.” He slammed the door, and as she started down after him, Theos took her arm and eased her around to face him.

“You’re still married?”

“No. Well, yes, technically. But listen. I’ll be right back and explain everything.”

She ran out the door and made a quick survey of the alley before dashing back into her store. She scanned the aisles, and when she saw Julie she screamed, “Is Jamie here?”

Julie shook her head and excused herself from the customer she was helping.

“He’s not here, Lil. What’s wrong? I heard lots of noise and loud music from upstairs.”

“I’ll explain,” Lily was aware that she now owed explanations for her odd behavior to the three most important people in her life. She left the store, and after scouring the neighborhood for an hour, she dialed the familiar and hated number. If Kelly was no help, she’d call the police.

“What the hell, Lily? Where have you been? The principal has been trying to reach you all morning. I’ve called and texted, too.”

The sound of his voice still rattled her and she stammered. “My phone was dead.” She scrolled through the avalanche of messages from him and Principal Peele, the first one sent at ten that morning. “I’m reading them now. Something about another fight?”

“Yeah, and that’s the only good thing. At least he threw the first punch, something I taught him.”

“What’s wrong with you, Kelly? He’s eleven!”

“He’s an effing sissy, and it’s your fault for making him grow up around all your girly crap. No wonder they call him a fairy at school.”

She gulped at the irony. “He told you that?”

“Yeah, been going on all year. And they’re right. I’ve got a mama’s boy for a son.”

She ignored his taunts. She’d heard him humiliate Jamie enough times in front of others for not knowing how to throw a football to guess how he probably tormented him when they were alone at his house. But she’d never heard of the bullying



at school, and what stung the most was learning that Jamie had been honest with his dad and had kept it from her.

She hoped that she hadn't overcompensated for Kelly's bad parenting and raised him to be too sensitive. Under the circumstances, she was astonished that he'd turned out so well. When the divorce became finalized and she could take control, she vowed to arrange for professional therapy, not help from the fools at his school. She saw dollar signs, but she didn't care. To provide her son with the help he needed, she'd give up eating if she had to.

"All right, stop! I can't listen to any more of this crap from you. Is he there, or not? If he is, I'm coming over now to pick him up."

"He's not here. The principal said he took off in the middle of the fight. Nobody knows where he went, and that's why everybody has been calling. But I knew that he would go home to his mommy."

She hated to come clean. "He was here, but he ran out again, and I've been looking for him all afternoon."

"The damn crybaby. Why did you let him leave?"

To his credit, Kelly came right over and announced that they would start the search over, this time doing it his way. He proposed they take sides. Lily fumed. "That should work. We're good at that." They were to meet in front of the store in twenty minutes, and though she had thoroughly searched her designated section before he arrived, she was determined to scour every square foot again. She was exploring the far end of her half when she got the text from Greta.

**Dyk that Jamie is asleep on my couch?**

Lily sprinted to The Witch's Cauldron, feeling ridiculous and stupid that she hadn't thought to check there first. She was breathless both from running and from relief, and Greta explained that she had discovered him curled up.

"He told me he was playing a game, and he wanted me to keep it a secret. The poor kid conked out right away, and I just

let him sleep, because I assumed you were busy working. I hated to betray his confidence, but it's getting late, and I thought you should know."

"We've been searching for hours. I was so desperate, I got Kelly to come help."

"Oh, dear. I guess you'll tell me what happened later?"

Lily added her to the growing list of people she needed to explain things to. In the meantime, she wanted to send Kelly away and bring Jamie home.

"No!" Jamie yelled. "You'd rather be with that man. I want to stay here with Greta."

Kelly barged in. "Son. I've been looking all over for you." Jamie smiled at the unexpected affection, and he reached for his father's hand. "Let's blow this popsicle stand and go back to my place."

It infuriated Lily to watch him manipulate their son with his fake fatherliness, but she was relieved she didn't smell alcohol on him. If he'd been drunk, she'd have called the police. But Jamie was still legally his through the weekend, and she shivered when he draped his arm over the boy's shoulder.

"I love you to the moon, Jamie," she recited their pet phrase, and it broke her heart when he didn't answer with his part.

Though it had been hours since she'd left her apartment, as she climbed the stairs, she fantasized that Theos would be waiting. He'd take her in his arms and make everything better. But he had left, and she collapsed on the sofa in the dark, crushed by the solitude and wondering how long he had waited, if at all.

The moon spotlighted the stool, and she wandered in and rested her cheek on the wooden seat where hours earlier he'd sat naked, happy, and very much at home. Then she moved to the spot where they held each other during that brief but glorious moment before Jamie walked in, and she rocked in

place, savoring the memory of how close they'd come to making love.

She accepted the fact that a continuing relationship with the man she now loved would need to be put on hold at least until after the trial. Theos' mere presence in her life would add to the confusion of the already complicated situation she and Kelly had created for their impressionable child.

Patching things up with Jamie and regaining his trust would be her number one priority. When it was her time to keep him at her apartment again, she'd work through the day on her project, so she could spend quality time in the evening with him. After he went to bed, she'd work through the night and do whatever it would take to save her store and her home.

Another sliver of moonlight illuminated the pink T-shirt Theos left behind when he fled from the apartment. It was so like him to fold the shirt carefully and place it on the chair instead of crumpling it into a ball and tossing it on the floor like every other male in her life would have done.

She felt very alone, but this time it was her fault. She'd been the one who ran out. But facing all that would have to begin the next morning. At that moment, all she wanted to do was put on his shirt, curl into a ball, and cry herself to sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Theos*

*Apparently, I do not understand humans at all. Why would Lily withhold such crucial information? She had to realize we were on a path together. Wouldn't the need to be free and clear have been obvious? Never mind that as prince I could never consort with a married human, or fairy for that matter.*

*Staying underwater for eighteen hours during the storm the day before not only kept me insulated from the thunder, it ended up being fortuitous. While I was down there, I discovered that the veins for the igdia and tepa conveniently stretch all the way from the lighthouse to past the jetty. It's too soon to know exactly, but at first glance, they appear to be richer than ours at home, and again, I feel so lucky that I found them both in one place.*

*Despite the unfortunate setback with Lily, my advisers and I agree that the tremendous supply of these two elements is reason enough to set up a base in Myers Beach. I found a house that can be made into a fine palace, with property large enough for a lab and a small factory. It's more space than we need, but the location is ideal, so I grabbed it.*

*My brother thinks he has a good shot at making a quality dust very soon that can stabilize the sickest of the fairies using the igdia and tepa as the base, but he'll need a third to give it any kind of power. Luckily, while I was kitesurfing with Lily, I picked up a scent that I'm sure is danog. That element is airborne, so I know we'll find it around here somewhere.*

*I think about the letter from my parents a lot. It was both sweet and enlightening, and they reminded me of their love for me and my brother. They also outlined the new powers I'll have as king after I pass some sort of ordeal. But that's a long way off. In the meantime, I have plenty on my plate.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You can stop talking about me. I know I look like crap.” Julie and Greta were chatting in the back room of The Fairy Kingdom the next morning when Lily came downstairs.

“Actually, we were comparing notes,” Julie replied. “With the weather finally good again, people are out, and both stores are making our sales goals.”

“Finally, something positive.” Lily plopped down next to her friends. She knew they wanted to hear every detail. “Okay. Where do you want me to start? It was a real roller coaster ride.”

“Before you tell us the bad parts, is there going to be a happy ending?” asked Greta. “I couldn’t bear to hear you tell us that the roller coaster derailed.”

Lily slouched back on her sofa. “Oh, the car definitely went off the tracks.”

Julie threw up her hands. “I’m so over this roller coaster metaphor. Just cut to the chase and tell us what happened. You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

Julie was right. Lily skipped the part about Theos’ weakened condition and went straight to the part where she took his measurements and how she had to measure some areas two or three times to ensure accuracy.

Greta broke in. “Jeez, this is hot.”

“Let me finish. After I had taken all the measurements I needed, he said he wanted to give me another pose. I already

had sketches of a perfect one, and I really wanted to start sculpting, but he insisted. When I looked over, he'd stripped off his briefs and was sitting there on the stool completely naked."

Greta pretended to fan herself. "Remind me exactly what the problem is?"

Lily described how he was speeding through his poses and how, to keep up, she sketched with both hands. "I'd never done that before, and I felt delirious while I was doing it. It was so weird, because at the same time it seemed very natural."

"I don't know. When you say 'speeding' and 'delirious' it sounds to me like two people hyped up on amphetamines. Are you sure you two weren't on anything?"

Lily lashed out. "Don't be ridiculous! You know I would never do anything like that." When she saw Greta back off from the accusation, she continued. "After all the years I spent in art school drawing beautiful naked men, this was the first time that I felt a serious connection with the model." Lily had her friends hanging onto every word, and their eyes widened when she casually mentioned that they nearly made love.

"I knew something big was happening from all the racket upstairs," said Julie. "A few customers heard the noise, too."

The room was silent for a few moments before Greta dared to ask the question.

She giggled at Julie. "So, um. It sounds like a happy ending to me. What exactly went wrong?"

"Jamie walked in on us." The giggling stopped, and Lily took a couple of breaths. "Fortunately, Theos heard him coming so he didn't catch us touching, let alone doing anything remotely sexual. Theos managed to put on his pants before Jamie walked in, and I still had my clothes on, thank God."

"No wonder you're a wreck," said Greta.

"Yep. That's why he ran and hid in your office. He's confused and furious, and it's going to take a while before I

can convince him that nothing happened and that his mother isn't a prostitute."

"How did Theos take it? He must have been embarrassed," Julie asked.

"Okay, I think. I haven't actually spoken with him since it happened. He wasn't there when I got back, but I doubt the episode with Jamie did any serious damage to our relationship. What's going to be sad for him will be his disappointment when I tell him that we can't see each other until I patch things up with Jamie."

"I'm so sorry your fling had to end so soon," said Greta. "You two barely got started. But look what he left you. You'll have this great new line and you're going to make lots of money. And then next month, you'll have that divorce, and you can date again."

Lily closed her eyes and looked at the floor. "I don't know. My lawyer always assured me my case was a slam dunk, but now that might be a problem. Jamie said he was going to tell Kelly what he saw, and I'm worried he'll try to use it in court against me, the pig!"

"Is there anything we can do to help?" asked Greta.

"As a matter of fact, there is. Theos got into the most amazing poses, and I've ended up with tons of sketches, but Julie and I are clueless when it comes to your aura thing, and since you believe it's so critical, I need your help picking out ones that show that off best."

"What? Paw through sketches of Theos naked?" Greta pretended to pout. She winked at Julie. "Oh, all right. I guess. I mean, that's what friends are for."

"I'll take care of the store," said Julie, "but only if you promise to show me the sketches later."

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"What on earth did you guys do in there?" Greta pinched her nose when she walked into Lily's studio. "It stinks like a



locker room.”

“Yeah, well we both got pretty physical...just not together, like I said. It was all kind of rather fast and furious.”

“Smells more like hot and heavy.” Greta picked her way across the floor strewn with nude drawings. “What the hell. There must be a hundred of these.”

“Yeah, maybe more. As you can see, we worked like crazy. I went through three whole pads.”

When Greta turned one of them right side up and saw Theos in all his glory, her eyes bulged. “Holy crap! You got to spend the whole day looking at this?”

While she picked them up, Lily sorted them into piles. By the time they finished, Greta couldn't bear the stench any longer and insisted they take them to the kitchen to study. Lily spread out her top selections on the table and for the first time stood back to take them all in. Her eyes watered and she bit her lip. They were really good. She stepped aside and let Greta scrutinize each one.

“I can feel his energy and almost hear him speaking in all of them, so if your finished product can look like these, you'll hit that home run.” She shifted in her chair, and Lily sensed Greta had more to say. “Um, and you really drew these yourself?”

Lily snapped. “What's that supposed to mean? Of course, I did.”

Greta held up one. “It's just...don't take this the wrong way. Like I said, they are fantastic! But I'm not sure how to say this.” She looked Lily in the eyes. “It's just that the style is not at all like the ones you showed me last week.”

Lily stepped in to take a closer look. “Well, I did give these much more detail.”

“More than that. These look like gallery-quality stuff.” She could tell by Lily's shocked expression that she'd used the wrong words. “No, no. I don't doubt your skill. I simply don't see how the heck you could have done all these in one afternoon.”

Lily turned on the tea kettle. “Well, like I said, we were both in a weird zone.”

“Yeah, I know. *Speeding*. So, I’m going to ask again. Were you two on something?” She ignored Lily’s glare. “Look, these days, you never know.”

Lily groaned. “Hey, while we’re working, I’ll make us some of his tea. It’s like nothing you’ve ever tasted.” Greta arched her eyebrows. “I told you he brought me some the other day, along with the pink teapot, remember?”

“Yeah. Of course. So, did you guys drink it before you started working?”

“Yes, and it turns out I like it better than coffee.”

“Could he have spiked it?”

“Come on.” She pointed to a drawing she’d kept apart from the others, the one they did last.

She told Greta it was her favorite and his too, and that she’d turn that pose into her first fairy king figurine. If that one did well, she figured she could roll out a new one every month and by the following year have a new line. She wanted Greta to help her select the next twelve, and they spent thirty minutes admiring Theos’ assets as they narrowed down the huge pile of possibilities.

They cracked up over the absurd names they came up with for each figurine and Lily was glad her friend could inject some fun into her life. Finally, after they landed on proper names and put them into the right order, Greta poured another cup of tea and waved at the pink teapot.

“Well, your model taught me one valuable lesson.”

“What’s that?”

“You can’t judge a man’s sexuality by the color of his teapot.” She was still cackling when Lily’s phone rang, and Greta saw Kelly’s profile picture fill the screen. “Take your time, Lil. While you’re talking, I believe I’ll study these a little more to see if I missed anything.”

Kelly cleared his throat. “Lil, you’ll never guess what I just learned.” She sat on the living room sofa and braced herself for what she knew was coming. “Jamie told me he saw you entertaining your half-naked boyfriend. Boy, is the judge going to like hearing about that!”

“Bullshit. All Jamie saw was a guy who was modeling for me. That’s it. End of story.”

“Is that what they call them these days? Well, in all fairness, the words ‘boyfriend’ and ‘entertaining’ weren’t his words, but ‘half-naked’ was. Anyway, the judge won’t care. As far as the law is concerned, you subjected our son to a naked man in our boy’s own home, and I think we both know how that will blow a gigantic hole in your case.”

“Why are you fighting me so hard? You don’t even like Jamie.”

Kelly was quiet for so long, she wondered if he was still on the line, but when she heard him tell her through his faint sobbing that he wanted them to be one family again, she rolled her eyes. She had heard this pathetic act before and was unmoved. She knew he wasn’t experiencing sudden emotional growth and reuniting wasn’t possible. She held the phone away from her ear as Kelly continued to whimper.

“Please, please come back. I’ll be a better husband. I can be a better father.”

“Kelly, stop! I’m not falling for it again, okay? It’s not going to happen. You and I are through.”

He snapped. “Well, then you better tell your boyfriend to watch out. I’m going to find him and make sure you never see him again!”

He hung up, and Lily returned to the kitchen. Things had been going so well. She had customers. She was keeping up with her bills and had a plan to buy her building. She finally met a guy who made her happy, and now Kelly wanted to destroy him, too.

Greta saw her shaking and pulled her head to her shoulder. “Rough, huh? It’ll be okay. I’m here.” As she stroked Lily’s

hair, she held up one of the sketches with her free hand. “I’m so proud of you. You really got it right.” She noticed the leather pouch on the counter. “What’s that, a new prop for our act?”

She opened the drawstring. “It’s pretty. Like him. In fact, this stuff is so pretty, I’d even let you throw it at me at our next skit.”

Lily laughed. “You read my mind. But it’s really a ceramic glaze I’ve been meaning to try. Here, I’ll show you what it looks like.” She rubbed a pinch of it on a drop of tea that had spilled on the table and held up her finger. “Look at that gorgeous sheen. It’s both silver and gold, perfect for the Theos line.”

“Speaking of that, how’s business, otherwise?”

Julie had gotten the foundry to crank out some new Arielles and recast some of the oldies and goodies, so they had inventory to sell while they waited for the new stuff.

“If I can keep the sales steady, everything I take in from the Theos line can go straight to the down payment.” She put the drawings they selected in a new pile and looked at the sheen on her finger again. “I just hope I can sell enough of them fast enough.”

“I’ll cast another spell.” Greta laughed and waved her hand. She knocked into the pouch, spilling some of the powder on Lily.

“No worries.” Lily wiped away the mess with her hand and brushed it back into the pouch as Greta took another look at the sketches.

“Hey. Can I take one of the ones we didn’t pick for the thirteen, if I promise not to show it to anyone else? And will you be okay if I leave? I know you have a long night ahead of you.”

“I sure do. I just wish there were more hours in my day.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“I’ll show you, my pretty,” sneered Greta as fog oozed out from her store into the audience. It was Saturday morning, and they were at the part in the skit where Greta stuck the urn with the greenish-yellow smoke in Lily’s face.

Lily’s Fairy Queen scrunched her nose at the odor and waved away the fumes. “Begone, Witch! You have no power here.”

“Ha!” cackled Greta, stifling a real laugh when she heard Lily revert to Greta’s original script. “You can’t hurt me.”

“I said begone!” shouted Lily. All eyes watched her fling a small handful of Theos’ glaze into the air. Lily had taken a page from Greta’s playbook and singled out potential customers in the crowd, and she’d aimed her throw so the dust would fall over a family that was standing in the front row.

She paid special attention to how the new dust flew through the air, and she broke into a wide smile as the tiny sparkling bits of silver and gold formed into a cloud and flickered overhead before drifting down. A small boy jumped forward to make sure the dust fell on him, and it landed on his hair and clothing in momentary bursts of light. The pyrotechnic property of the dust surprised Lily as much as anyone, and she held her breath until the last pop. Greta winked and gave her a thumbs up.

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The audience practically stampeded into her store, and she was grateful for the huge sales that came as a result. Still, she had to spend the day in the store instead of her studio, and she felt the pressure. Her constantly evolving timeline didn't allow for any further letups, and a voicemail message from the foundry advised her that to keep her time reserved, they'd needed to receive her model in two days. She had never sculpted a figurine that quickly before, and she texted Julie that she was on lockdown and not to interrupt her unless it was Theos or Jamie.

Greta had characterized the pungent aroma in the studio as foul, but to Lily, the floor and walls covered with Theos' glistening sweat smelled sexy and romantic. The studio was a mess, though, and she had to clean everything before she could start work. Kelly had often called her fondness for cleaning an obsession bordering on a disease, but Lily thought of it as therapy. She cleaned to let off steam and distract herself from stress, but whatever the motivation, the result was a clean house, clean dishes, and clean laundry. If not for her, Kelly would have lived in a pigsty. No doubt their old house where Jamie had to stay looked like one now.

She felt detached as she put away her drawing supplies and scrubbed the windows, but when she mopped away the last drops of Theos' sweat that still glistened on the floor, she choked back tears. It wasn't as though she would never see him again. She expected him to drop by any day. She'd halfway thought she would see him in the audience on the boardwalk. While she didn't relish telling him they'd have to stop seeing each other for a while, she was confident that he would get over the initial shock and disappointment, and she'd at least get another kiss.

As she finished wiping off the last windowpane, she eyeballed the kitchen. That room was next to do, and in five minutes, she'd washed and dried the dishes and cleaned the sink. She wiped off the remaining glaze Greta had spilled on the table and marveled again at the brilliance of the silvery-gold residue that remained even after washing her hands with hot water. She made a mental note to experiment with the

glaze as soon as the foundry delivered the first Theos statue. His mother's gift was too unusual not to use.

She surveyed her work and knew from experience that a clean workspace made her more efficient. She put away her easel and drawing equipment and replaced them with her armature and sculpting tools, but given the lateness of the day, she planned to begin bright and early in the morning after a good night's rest. She didn't feel like sleeping, though. Cleaning the house had rejuvenated her, as it often did, so she taped the drawing for the first Theos, the King figurine on the wall above the armature and brought out a lump of clay.

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The hand on her shoulder jostled her awake.

“Julie! Jeez. I thought you were Katherine Needham. I was having the worst nightmare.”

“My bad. But you scared me when you didn't hear me banging on your door, so I used my key to let myself in.”

Lily picked up her iPhone. “But it's two in the morning.”

“Um, no. Two in the afternoon.”

“Crap! I overslept.” She struggled to stand, and she groaned when she reached around to hold her back. Then she fell back on the bed. “I was supposed to get started on the figurine first thing. I'm behind already.”

Julie opened the curtains and Lily squinted at the bright sunlight. “I know you said not to disturb you, but I thought this was important.”

“Did something happen to Jamie? Is Theos downstairs? How do I look? God, my back hurts.”

Julie couldn't disguise her reaction to the frightful-looking creature standing in front of her. Lily had been sleeping in horribly stained and filthy clothes, and her face and hands were ash colored and caked with dried clay. She broke it to her gently.

“Um, no. Jamie’s fine as far as I know, and Theos hasn’t been by. But before we get into that, have you looked in a mirror? What have you been doing? You look like a crazy person, and you can’t even stand up. All you’re missing is one of Greta’s broomsticks.”

Lily limped to the bathroom sink and in the mirror saw a woman in serious neglect. Her hair was greasy and stringy and matted to her head, and she had huge bags under her eyes. Julie was right. The face staring back looked more like a witch than a fairy princess. Julie heard her stomach growl from the living room.

“You sound like you haven’t eaten in a week. I’ll fix you a sandwich.”

Lily blinked. “No. Wait. What day is it?”

“Now you’ve really got me worried. Today is Sunday. Yesterday was Saturday, remember? You and Greta and I sat downstairs, and you told us about Jamie walking in on you and all that.”

Lily sat on the edge of the bed. “Sunday.”

Julie took Lily’s hand and saw her fingernails. “Looks like you’ve been messing with clay. Why don’t you take a bath?”

“No, no. Hold on,” Lily shouted. “I can’t sit around in a tub all day.” She looked at her hands. “You’re right. I was working, and now that I’m awake, I think I remember finishing a figurine. And I’ve got to remember to get it to the foundry. They’re expecting it tomorrow.”

“Today, actually. They were expecting it today. But I’m not letting you go anywhere looking like that. I’ll close the shop and take the thing myself. God knows I’ve made plenty of trips there.”

“What do you mean?”

“How else do you think we’ve gotten stuff to sell these past couple of weeks, magic? Now hop in the tub and relax for a few minutes.”



Julie started a pot of coffee and made Lily a sandwich before she went into the studio for the figurine. A few minutes later she tapped on the bathroom door.

“Hey, I hate to bother you, but which one did you want me to take?”

“There’s only one, and it’s of Theos, so it should be obvious. On the card table against the window. I pray I haven’t become so crazy that I dreamed about it.”

“Maybe I’m the one who’s nuts this time.” Julie laughed. “All the statues on the table are of Theos. How did you make so many?”

“Impossible!” Lily threw on a robe and her wet feet splashed on the floor as she made her way to the studio. She stopped short at the doorway. On the worktable sat thirteen completed figurines of Theos, the King, each masterfully sculpted in a different captivating pose, and each reflecting a silvery-gold sheen. She looked at Julie and back at her creations.

“Did I do that? I thought you said I was only up here one day.”

Julie laughed. “You were. I don’t know how, but if you can crank out stuff like this, I’ll leave you alone more often. I’ll even overlook your hygiene.”

Lily examined each one. “I have to say, they are magnificent. My God, look at the details.”

“And you really don’t remember making them. So, which one do you want me to take?”

“Take all of them. Oh, and it looks like I even made them in the right order, so make sure they know that at the foundry, will you?”

Julie wrapped, packed, and labeled each one and flew down the stairs. “Listen. Don’t you go anywhere. I’ll be back in a few hours, and then you’ve got more explaining to do!”

Lily shook her head. “You’re taking them now? Since when is the foundry open on Sunday afternoons?”

Julie smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Dennis owes me a favor. I’ll have him put them next in line so they start production tomorrow morning.” She grabbed the doorknob and stopped. “One more thing. Get in touch with your lawyer, the divorce one. She said it was urgent. It’s what I came up here to tell you in the first place.”

Lily sighed. “I hope that doesn’t mean Kelly followed through on his threat.” The rest of her bath would have to wait. She placed the call and learned that Kelly was planning to introduce Jamie’s testimony about finding her with a naked man, and her lawyer needed to sit down with her face-to-face as soon as possible.

Lily groaned. “Crap. This is a wrinkle we didn’t need.”

“It’s more than a wrinkle, Lily. They could throw the works at you.”

“But nothing happened. He can’t get away with that.”

“I’m afraid he can, unless we’re smarter. Which is why we have to meet. The testimony of a child is powerful ammunition to a judge.”

“Only if he testifies. Listen. When he comes back to stay with me, I’m sure I can talk him out of whatever his father is forcing him to say.”

“That’s a big no-no. If they find out you’ve been trying to change his mind, it’ll be far worse. Forget the divorce, they could charge you with a crime.”

“Well, that isn’t fair.”

“I know, but it’s the system.”

“So, what can we do?”

“Work around it. It’s why you hired me. Also, keep your fingers crossed.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

She returned to the tub and tried to reconstruct the events of the past twenty-four hours. She remembered cleaning the studio and the kitchen. Both rooms were spotless when Julie arrived. Considering the amount of work she'd done since that cleaning, she must have cleaned it *again*.

She also remembered taking out some clay and vaguely shaping it in her hands, but beyond that, she drew a blank. The fastest she'd ever made a finished figurine from scratch was five days, and that one lacked the detail of this batch. She studied her filthy hands. The clay under her fingernails that would take days to wear away was proof she'd done the work herself, but how she made thirteen baffled her. And Julie was on her way to the foundry in Overdale, proof she wasn't dreaming.

She leaned back and closed her eyes. Regardless of how she'd accomplished the impossible, she wanted to enjoy the relief of crossing that monumental task off her list. While she still had so much to do, she could finally afford to give Jamie all her focus when he came back. Her lawyer planned to give her strategies to help smooth over the awkward conversations that would inevitably arise on the first few days, and she also promised to provide a list of strict dos and don'ts to make sure Lily didn't cross a line and say anything detrimental to her case.

As she added hot water to the tub, she thought about how her prolific output was similar to her final sketching session with Theos. In art school, she was notorious for being the

fastest one with a piece of charcoal, but the ability to draw that fast in such detail, especially using both hands, was not possible for a person in a normal state. She thought of the suggestion Greta had made and wondered if she'd been drugged.

The only other people in a position to slip her anything were her closest three friends. She dismissed Julie immediately. Theos was present during her first speeding episode, but he hadn't been around when she'd sculpted the statues. As she struggled to find the common denominator, it occurred to her that she'd had his tea before both episodes of craziness.

Theos must have known it would get him pepped up, because he'd specifically asked for a cup. If he spiked it that time, were performance-enhancing drugs also the secret to his winning championships? She shuddered to think he might have been high when he took her kitesurfing. The last thing she needed was a guy secretly drugging her. That would mean the two men she loved were both addicts, and she wondered what that said about her.

If one cup transformed him dramatically from edgy and unhealthy-looking to strong and vibrant and turned her into an all-night sculpting machine, she wondered what it had done to Greta. They had shared an entire pink potful, and she would never forgive herself if Greta suffered side effects. She texted, and when she didn't get an immediate response, she threw on clothes and raced next door.

"Greta's in back," her newest salesperson reported.

"Thanks, but before I go see her, I have to ask. Has she been acting weird today?" The salesgirl recognized Lily, but she appeared uncomfortable answering the personal question.

"Why are you asking?"

"Because she didn't respond to my text."

"What else is new?"

"So, is she okay?"

"Why wouldn't she be?"

Lily dashed to the back and threw open Greta's office door without knocking. "Please tell me you're all right. I never meant to drug you. It was Theos' fault."

Greta swiveled around from her computer. "Hey, hey, slow down, and give me some context for all this gibberish."

"Turns out the tea that he gave me has been getting us all high," explained Lily.

Greta laughed. "Us all? I'm not. And you know I was just kidding when I said you were speeding, right?"

"But I made thirteen statues in one night."

"I know. I ran into Julie as she was leaving for Overdale, and she let me take a peek at what you made. Lily, they're fantastic! You nailed it."

"Thanks, but I couldn't have made them on my own. It had to be the tea."

Greta touched Lily's hand. "I think you're suffering from impostor syndrome again. Does this have something to do with the fact that he hasn't been by to see you since the, you know, thing with Jamie?"

Lily looked away. "Not at all. I think he's just too chicken to face the eleven-year-old he scared to death, and too self-centered to help me fix the problem he helped make."

Greta shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I think you're wrong."

"Why else would he be staying away?"

Greta stumbled with her words. "Well, let's check his website." She turned and did a quick search. "All big-shot athletes like him show their competition schedules online, probably to let sponsors and potential photographers know where to find them." She turned back to her computer. "Here. See? Oh. It says he's canceled the rest of his tour."

Lily slumped into a chair. His blank schedule didn't offer any clues, but it didn't refute her theory about his drug abuse, either. She figured he'd wait a while and then show up with

some elaborate excuse and beg her to take him back. God knows Kelly succeeded enough times using that tactic.

“Guys like him and Kelly always come back. I’m just surprised Theos is taking so long.”

“Um, are we still talking about the same guy? I drank from the same pink teapot, and I didn’t go home and make thirteen cornhusk broomsticks in one night to sell in my store. I couldn’t even stay awake long enough to finish watching *Dancing with the Stars*.”

Lily’s face reddened. “Well, I’m glad, because I was really worried.”

“Look, we both know the pressure you’ve been under, but Theos is a good guy. Have you even tried to contact him?”

“I don’t know how.” She stood to leave. “So, no side effects from the tea?”

“Only pure pleasure. It was damn delicious. A rich Ceylonese, with a hint of cardamom.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

When the foundry surprised Lily by cranking out the first batch of Theos, the King figurines in only a few days and not the normal three weeks, Lily knew Julie's relationship with the manager was more than a business one. Lily had worked closely with Dennis since she opened her shop. He was young and full of creativity, and he had always taken a special interest in her figurines. More than that, he'd impressed Lily with his integrity, and she was happy that Julie had found such a fine man.

Her budget didn't allow her to produce the other thirteen, but she ordered more Theos, the Kings than she ever had for any of her other pieces. To gauge customer reaction to her first male fairy figurine, she was back working the floor, doing what she loved and did so well: engaging with the public. After several weeks of being out of the picture, she felt at home again in her full fairy costume stationed at the front greeting customers. But she also had time to focus on the big picture. She still had to amass the cash for Needham, the woman she and Greta called "the other witch." That pressure meant coming up with creative ways to advertise the new line without a marketing budget.

She went big to show them off in the store. She and Julie placed a massive display in the store window and another just inside the front door, and Julie implemented some tactical systems she'd learned in school to track the sales. They started by asking every customer how they found The Fairy Kingdom.

As expected, most people had wandered in from the boardwalk, but over the next few days, their data showed a different and promising trend of people coming from out of town specifically to buy Theos, the King figurines. Given there had been neither time nor budget to launch an advertising campaign, they were at a loss to understand how these outliers had learned about them.

They also noticed more customers speaking with foreign accents. Julie scratched her head. When she asked the foreigners how they heard about the figurines, they gave polite responses that sounded intentionally vague. Neither Lily nor Julie wanted their salespeople to appear pushy, so they instructed them not to press for more details. While they relished the sales, there was no usable data to apply to her algorithms, and she was frustrated not to be able to duplicate that target audience.

Greta had been right about the mojo. A single glance at a statue of Theos, the King was all it took to spark a sale for most people and turn window shoppers into customers. In the absence of online advertising, revenue from the line came exclusively from in-store sales. Fortunately, keeping inventory in stock had not been an issue. Dennis, the manager of the foundry, was seeing Julie most nights in Myers Beach, and he delivered a shipment each time he visited. The store was building encouraging sales momentum, and Lily estimated she could accumulate the earnest money the bank required in three months, but not in the time that remained before her deadline expired. Her new strategy was to offer the bank a sizable installment, show them her sales figures, and negotiate an extension. In the meantime, despite feeling victimized by a grossly unfair system, she wasn't about to let on how close she was to losing her store and her son, so she wore her biggest smile.

She still hadn't heard from Theos. When he hadn't shown up the day after the incident, she assumed he was giving her time to work things out with Jamie. But when his absence stretched to several days, she feared the worst, and that Kelly had followed through on his threat for revenge and had run him out of town. She checked the police column every day in



the Myers Beach Tatler, and each day she was relieved not to see his name. At first, she chalked up his absence to embarrassment at being caught by a kid. Later, though, she had to admit that she had put him in an awkward position and hoped that he'd come around.

The paradox of being surrounded by him all day didn't escape her. He was everywhere. His statues lined the shelves and stared at her from every display, and she probably spoke his name or heard another salesperson speak his name a couple hundred times a day in their sales pitches. Though he hadn't shown up, she never questioned the depth of their friendship, one that nearly culminated in making love, and she refused to buy into the notion that he was a one-night-stand kind of guy, or that he no longer cared.

Every time she heard the tinkle of the store door's silver bell, she turned to look, and though she didn't see him enter, the sound served as a reminder of how painfully she missed him.

“Hey, Mom. There she is. There's the fairy princess!”

Lily turned to see a young boy running in her direction with his parents in tow. She beamed and bent down to tap his head with her wand. The mother seemed eager to speak, and she motioned for him to join his father who was staring at the Theos, the King display.

“I can't imagine you'd remember us, but we were here last Saturday morning, standing in the front row at your little skit.” They'd wanted their son to enjoy a little time on the boardwalk in the fresh air. The poor kid had a rare and severe type of asthma that had kept him from participating in sports and most other physical activities. But that Saturday afternoon after a day at the beach, he played a full afternoon of soccer with his friends for the first time. “I suspect it was the vegan diet I'd put him on, but he honestly believes it was your fairy dust that cured him. Isn't that cute? He couldn't wait to tell you, so we humored him by bringing him back to the store.”

Lily whispered to the woman. “Well, I'm very happy to hear about his recovery, but what do you suggest I do? I

obviously can't take credit. I have a young son, too."

Her thoughts went to Jamie, who'd been trying to get her to talk about having to go to court. She desperately wanted to discuss it with him, but she was resigned to following her attorney's advice to the letter. Whenever he brought it up, she'd either change the subject or pretend she hadn't heard him.

She decided to tackle the issue yet remain as neutral as she could at the same time, because the situation created an opportunity for a crucial life lesson. Even if it was to the detriment of her case, Jamie had to learn the importance of telling the truth and doing the right thing.

The boy's mother went on. "Anyway, it was a cute story, and I wanted to share it with you. Now, he wants one of your statues of the King Fairy. Believe it or not, my husband wants one, too. We can afford them, now, because on Monday we both got big promotions. Go figure!"

Lily's drive to succeed had few limitations. She made a point of being the first one to arrive at the shop in the morning and the last to leave at night, and most evenings she'd collapse after Jamie went to bed. Her routine worked well, but it ruled out any social life, and that night she felt like catching up with her best friend. It would be the perfect time to share the strange news.

She went next door to The Witch's Cauldron and crossed her fingers that whoever was stationed behind the counter would at least be friendly. Greta never had a Julie. She seemed unable to keep many steady employees, a situation Lily found baffling for such an otherwise astute businesswoman.

"She's not here," offered the fresh-faced young man with a witch hat he'd cocked to appear rakish. "Lately she's been going to the Tiki Hut after work." The guy laughed. "You know Greta. She's always got a new obsession. This time I think it's a man." Lily didn't remember seeing that kid before, and she wondered how he knew so much about Greta's private obsessions. He pointed to his hat and winked. "Well, she is a witch."

She followed the guy's hunch and went to the Tiki Hut, hoping she was early enough to find Greta unattached. After a thorough search of the rowdy half-priced-drink crowd, she determined that Greta was not there. A warm breeze beckoned, and she left the hectic watering hole to enjoy the moonlit stroll by herself. Walking on the beach in the evening reliably improved her mood and helped her arrive at solutions to her problems. She chalked its therapeutic benefits up to the combination of the surf's steady rhythms and the chemical properties of salt air.

Her lazy walk took her south, and she used her time alone to confront fears about the divorce trial. She wondered if Jamie had any idea how influential his testimony would be to the outcome of his custody, and therefore, the rest of his life. Despite their recent misunderstanding, and unless Kelly's lawyer tricked him, she could imagine no scenario where he would choose Kelly over her. As she faced the ocean and the incoming waves washed over her bare feet, she felt convinced that if she could explain the dire consequences, he would do the right thing and correct his testimony.

Her thoughts turned to Theos as they often did when she was not working. While she wasn't about to let him off the hook, the next time they met she vowed to get him to admit to his drug problem so she could find him help. No matter his demons, she owed him for giving her his likeness and the bright future, with or without him, that was barreling her way.

She breathed in the night air and turned to continue toward the jetty, satisfied that she had a plan to make things right for the two people she loved the most. For the first time in ages, she felt in charge.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A couple's giggles pierced the quiet. Lily had been staring at the sand during her meditative walk, and when she discovered she had already reached the jetty, she could guess where the voice came from. Tucked among its jagged rocks were a few indentations big enough to lounge on and high enough to stay dry in that had been carved out centuries ago by higher tides and more turbulent waters. The deeper ones were the secret hideaways known to every teenager within a hundred miles. She shivered at the thought of Jamie learning about intimacy there, too.

She continued past the jetty into the restricted area and climbed around past the warning signs to the spot where she'd experienced her kitesurfing debut with Theos. She remembered warning him that the beach was off-limits and recalled him insisting that he had permission. Looking back, tears came to her eyes as she wondered if he had lied about that, too.

She laid down and stretched back on the sand to enjoy the exceptional quiet of the evening and replay every minute of her glorious ride in the sky with Theos, the King. He may have turned out to be a lying, self-centered drug addict, but that day, from the moment he zipped up her wetsuit to his passionate kisses in the surf, he had one hundred percent fooled her.

When the sand became cold on her back, she brushed herself off and crossed back to the public side of the jetty, where she noticed couples emerging from their private spaces. She watched them hold hands and join the slow-moving

caravan of other lovers who eventually peeled off in different directions to their homes and hotels.

Clouds had gradually gathered and muted the moon. The darkness also obscured the features of the two shapes walking about fifty yards ahead of her. She wasn't about to intrude on a private moment, so she cut to the right and walked along the dunes to give them privacy.

Acoustics on the beach at night could often play tricks on people, but the faraway laugh sounded familiar, and she stopped walking and strained to listen. When the woman laughed again, Lily knew her hunch was right. No one but Greta made such an annoying sound, and Lily was glad her friend had found a guy. She wondered who it was until the man turned, and moonlight reflected off his pendant.

She wanted to rush over and call Greta out on her betrayal, but her bravado gave in, along with her knees, and she collapsed on the sand. She could see that Greta and Theos squinted in her direction when they heard the sound, but Lily remained still and didn't get up until they had left.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### *Theos*

*Greta keeps me in stitches. I'm getting better at reading her, and I'm fairly certain that she would have been interested in me had our paths crossed earlier. We're becoming good friends, but because of the witchy thing, she's wrong for me romantically. And I appreciate that she is a true friend and is trying to help me understand why Lily acted the way she did. After the dust settles, literally and figuratively, I'd like to set her up with my cousin, Dos.*

*She's concerned for Jamie, too, and I'd like to help him as much as I can. Even though Lily and I are estranged, I think I have a plan to sweep away one of his bad dreams.*

*I didn't tell Greta, but I knew it was Lily in the shadows, and I'm positive she recognized us. I still can't see her, of course, but I would have liked to have told her that I missed her and that as soon as her divorce is final, I'd like to be back in her life.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“I’ve been doing some digging around on your husband,” Lily’s lawyer reported on the early morning telephone call. “But I need a few more days to follow up on a couple of leads.” Lily was grateful that not only was she thorough, but she was sympathetic, unlike her banker.

Lily planned to give Jamie her full attention, and she had just enough time before the skit to run out to pick up some chocolate cupcakes as a welcome home treat. Since she discovered Greta’s betrayal, she hadn’t planned on sharing the stage with her anymore. Circumstances had changed, however, and she desperately needed sales that would come from the street traffic their skit was guaranteed to generate, and she figured out a way to use the act to irritate her former friend and still drum up business. Even with the stop at the bakery, she arrived at the apartment with enough time to prepare.

When she heard Jamie bounding up the stairs at the end of the day, she hoped it meant his resentment had passed, and when he said he couldn’t wait to tell her about his exciting day at school, she changed her mind about saving the cupcakes for later.

He seemed different. Taller, or maybe just stronger, more confident and she knew it wasn’t just puberty. She brought the tray into the living room and sat with him on the sofa to hear the whole story.

It had been the final assembly of the year, and while the school wouldn’t tell them the topic in advance, Principal Peele had made a big deal about their special guest. Usually, that

meant another boring lecture, but the students knew something was going to be better when they saw 3-D videos of oceans, sailboats, and surfers playing on a new huge screen that took up nearly the entire stage.

“It was so cool because we didn’t have to wear those special glasses. And the sound was amazing, too. You could hear the waves crashing from special speakers they set up around the auditorium.”

A man had walked on stage in a swimsuit and a T-shirt. Nobody had introduced him, but many of them recognized him from the kitesurfing exhibition. He showed them a brief video of some of the most beautiful places he and his friends had kitesurfed all over the world. Then he talked about how ocean pollution was out of control and showed them the islands of garbage twice the size of Texas, which he’d seen firsthand.

He spoke to them about keeping the oceans clean and showed them some advanced technology he and his fellow kitesurfing champions were using to help in the effort. Then he explained the screen they were watching. It was the latest in virtual reality and would let them experience kitesurfing without wearing goggles or helmets. When he asked for volunteers, practically everyone raised their hands.

Lily hoped Jamie was going to tell her that Theos had picked him, but Jamie explained that he chose Richard and Tripp, the boys who bullied Jamie and caused his suspension.

Theos buckled Richard in the harness first and showed him how to use the controls. He explained to everyone that the most important thing in kitesurfing was to keep your focus. He told them that even though the rest of the audience wasn’t buckled in like Richard, everyone would feel what he experienced. Theos set him on the board, and when they turned off the lights, people could watch Richard skimming across the waves on the screen.

“It was so cool that we even felt the bump when his board hit a whitecap. He was speeding up when Theos called his name, and Richard turned to look. That’s when a gigantic



wave smacked against the board, and he lost control and capsized. We all tipped over in our seats, too, but I laughed my butt off when he took the spill.”

Richard begged for another try, and he got farther the second time, but when it was time to jump, he crashed again. Tripp went next and made it through the first jump, but he lost his balance when he had to make a turn. Theos told the audience that if sports were as easy to play as they looked, everyone would be a champion.

“He needed another volunteer, and can you believe out of all the people who raised their hands, he picked me? When he asked my name, Richard yelled out ‘fairy,’ and I heard a few of his friends laugh. It was embarrassing.”

Lily felt goosebumps when she heard that, and she resigned to remove him from that school next year. She didn’t know where she’d send him, but she knew it would be far from Principal Peele’s orbit.

“Theos asked him to explain what he meant, and Richard said out loud that I was lame. But everyone in the audience laughed when Theos asked Richard if Jamie was as lame as they were since neither of them had done such a fantastic job. I went third, so I knew what to expect and I had an advantage. I got past the first jump and made the turn, but when he asked me to pop, I lost control.”

“Did you get hurt?” asked Lily.

“No. I wasn’t really in the air, you know. That’s what virtual reality is. The surfboard was on the stage floor the whole time.”

Since Richard and Tripp got second tries, Theos let him go again. Jamie felt special when Theos came over to him and ruffled his hair and told him the next try was for the championship. Then while Jamie focused, Theos started the audience in a cheer. The first jump was easy, and so was the turn.

“I could hear the kids in the audience fall back in their seats when I popped and went way up in the air. Theos shouted

for me to keep steady and that I was doing great, and everyone kept clapping and cheering.”

Lily put her arm around him. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Wait. I’m not finished. After the pop, I just stayed up in the air. You can’t imagine how amazing it was to hang there looking out over the ocean. Anyway, I was feeling so confident I asked Theos if he would let me try a flip. He told me they were dangerous, but since I was doing so well, he agreed, and he walked me through the steps. I made the flip and did a back roll. Of course, the whole school did it along with me, and when we all landed back down together, they cheered like I was a football hero or something.

“He’s my new idol. I want you to meet him one day.” He dug in his book bag and handed her a gift certificate for a free ride with a pro at the Myers Beach surf shop. “Oh, and he said a parent would need to fill out the permission slip inside the envelope.”

A glint of something in his hair caught her eye, but she picked at his head and didn’t find anything. He wiggled away and reached for another cupcake. That’s when he noticed the figurine on the coffee table.

“Hey, you finally made a man fairy. Cool.”

“Um, yeah. I worked hard to finish him before you got here, so we could have plenty of time together.”

“It looks a lot like Theos, the guy I was telling you about.”

“It should. He was the model for it. You met him in the studio when you came home that day.”

Jamie thought for a moment and scooted next to her on the sofa. “That was him? Today he had his hair all pulled back. But I wouldn’t have recognized him anyway, because that day I honestly didn’t get a good look.”

“Yup. That was him.”

“Then I guess I was wrong about everything, wasn’t I?”

“Let’s not worry about that now, but you learned a good lesson. Believe your mother. I would never lie to you.”

Jamie shivered. “Jeez, then I’m glad he’s leaving the country.”

Lily heard herself swallow. “Where’s he going? And why is that good?”

“Because Dad said if he ever ran into him, he’d kill him.”

“Well, we both know he didn’t mean that. But never mind. Let’s have another cupcake before our banker comes by and I have to go back downstairs to the store.”

“I’d rather see what else you’ve been working on.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Greta cranked up the fog machine and sent Lily the customary text announcing that a large crowd had gathered in front of their stores and that it was showtime. Typically, Lily would confirm that she was ready, but that morning she took her marks without answering. Greta emerged through the fog, and Lily made a point of not making eye contact. They ran through their usual lines until they got to the part where Greta limped up to Lily and held the urn in her face. That's when Lily deviated from the script.

"Begone, vile creature! You disgust me." Greta flinched when she heard Lily's new lines. Lily pointed her wand directly at Greta and shouted, "I said *begone!* And this time I mean it! Get out of my life!"

Without the usual cue, Greta fumbled for her lines. Lily took advantage of her misstep. Knowing how much it would irritate her, she aimed a handful of her old glitter directly at Greta's cloak. Some even landed on the witch's face.

"Bah!" Greta's growl was more convincing than normal. She looked down at her costume and groaned at the hundreds of pieces she'd need to pick out, and she shouted back her own improvisation. "And when I say *bah*, I really mean it, too!" She fluffed her cloak and twirled around.

"Ha!" Lily waved away the comment and pointed her finger at the witch, hurling Greta's own spell back at her. "*Xerbiat Arbaracerim!*"

Greta tripped on her cloak and fell. Her hat tumbled off, along with her wig, and she scrambled to her feet. Lily's real confrontation with Greta was yet to come, but she gave her an oversized grin that showed her satisfaction at lobbing the first salvo. Without another word, she bowed to the cheering crowd and then swirled and entered her shop to ring up the sales from the hordes of shoppers who followed her in.

Lily was relieved that Greta hadn't complained to her right after the skit. She still hadn't figured out how she was going to broach the subject of Greta's betrayal and was hoping to deliver the speech she had rehearsed on her own terms and in her own time. But on her way back from grabbing a sandwich for lunch the next day, Greta showed up.

"Hey, I've been really busy and I'm sorry I'm just getting back to you on this, but Sean mentioned that you were looking for me the other day," she began. "But great skit yesterday, huh?"

Her voice made Lily's stomach churn. She suddenly felt unprepared. And Greta disarmed her further when she held out two cups of coffee that weren't from Joe's. Lily raised an eyebrow at his missing logo.

"Oh, yeah. You noticed. Joe's been gone for the last few days. Sign says the café's closed for a family emergency."

"I thought he didn't have a family?"

"He has a son in the Myers Beach Rescue Squad, but I doubt he's the problem. I'll bet he finally found himself a woman." If Lily hadn't been so mad, she would have loved to kick back with Greta and spitball theories as to why the café was really closed. Greta offered her one of the cups. "Cream, one sugar, just the way you like it."

Lily wanted to sound cool, but her heart started pounding from nerves, and she grasped for the right thing to say. "Thanks, but I've already had some." She opened the door and flipped on the lights, hoping Greta wouldn't follow her in.

"No problem. I'll drink both. So, what did you want to see me about?"

“Gee. Um, that was so long ago I’ve forgotten,” she said, trying to appear aloof. And to give herself more time to remember her speech, she headed to her office.

“Yeah, I get it. Being busy like we were yesterday can screw with your head. I’ve been forgetting things too. Speaking of which, I noticed you forgot your lines. Actually, the new ones were dynamite, though. The insults were fine, but you caught me off guard, and you should probably tell me when you’re going to do that, so our timing doesn’t get off. I’m sure that’s why I tripped.”

Lily didn’t react, so Greta continued. “And the use of my spell was genius, but I did trademark it, so you’ll have to remember to use your own from now on.” She leaned against the doorframe. “Listen, if you have a minute, I’d like to share another idea I have for the skit. Since they’ve worked so well in drumming up business for both of us, what would you say to expanding our skit beyond the weekends?”

Taking a cue from Katherine Needham’s “Handbook to Intimidate,” Lily created distance from Greta by walking to her desk and pretending to search for something in a drawer. “Oh, I remember now,” she interrupted. “I was going to tell you that I actually don’t want to do the skit at all anymore. The whole thing is silly, and I’m tired of it.”

Greta had started to remove the lid from her cup, and she spilled some on her dress when she heard Lily’s surprising remark.

“Are you kidding? The two of us out there, pretending to be enemies? It’s the best sales tool we could have.”

“Pretending to be enemies? I’d say you’ve been pretending to be my friend!” Lily couldn’t look Greta in the eyes, so she got up and walked back the length of the store to her checkout counter.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” said Greta, following her.

Sarcasm didn’t flow naturally from Lily’s lips, and while her nostrils flared, she choked on her words. “I don’t know,

Greta. Why don't you tell me."

"Look, I don't understand why you suddenly sound bitter. All I wanted was to propose a few ways we could mix things up."

Lily pretended to organize the items on the countertop. "Oh, you're doing a fantastic job of that already."

"Geesh, Lily. I'm only thinking about what's best for us both."

"Was going out with my boyfriend what's best for me?"

Greta threw her head back. "Ah, so it *was* you out there spying on us. I thought it looked like you." She reached across to touch Lily's shoulder. "Hey, it wasn't what you thought."

Lily recoiled. "Don't touch me! And please leave my store. I can't stand the sight of you."

"Lil, stop it. You're my best friend."

"And you used to be mine."

Lily turned to walk away again, but Greta crossed her arms and stood in her way. "Okay, okay. I'm not letting you out until we talk this through."

Lily crossed her arms to mimic Greta, and they stood their ground without speaking until Lily finally broke the silence. "Look. You were holding hands on the beach. I saw you with my own two eyes."

"Yes, I admit that we were walking together, but we weren't holding hands."

"I saw you two laughing."

"Well yeah. That's true. I asked him if he was on drugs, and he laughed in my face for even suggesting it."

She shook her head. "You betrayed me."

Greta held up her hand. "How? And please, can you not use that word? I would never betray you. I went to talk to him and find out why he hadn't contacted you. I could see it was tearing you up inside that he hadn't come by, and I didn't like

seeing you that way, especially with everything else you're going through. I promise that we weren't doing anything romantic. It was more like a meetup."

Lily bit her lip. "But how did you contact him? I don't even have his number. Or did he contact you?"

"I drew him to me in the old-fashioned way." Greta tugged on Lily's sleeve. "It took me a while. We'd all been at the Tiki Hut before, so I started there. I spent the first two nights drinking too much because he never showed up. I later discovered why. Kelly somehow found out that Theos was the model Jamie saw, and one night he tracked him down there. Apparently, Kelly was drunk as a skunk and slamming his fists on the bar. According to Theos, Kelly warned him to stay away from you and Jamie."

Lily put her head in her hands. "This is so embarrassing. Did anyone get hurt?"

"No. Everyone could tell Kelly was soused, and a few guys got together and escorted him out before it escalated to the point of needing to call the cops. I guess Theos hadn't been back since."

"Well, that's a relief. I'd never forgive myself if Kelly hurt him. I still wish I knew where he was. His website tells me nothing."

"So, you've been keeping tabs," Greta tried to joke.

Lily ignored the jab. "What was this old-fashioned way you mentioned?"

"I lured him in with an incantation." She watched Lily roll her eyes. "You don't have to believe me. I'll show you."

When they stepped into Greta's office, Lily choked from the thick smell of incense, and she pointed to the candle stubs and urns full of ashes that covered her desk.

"Good grief! You could have burned down the place!" Then she saw the sketch of Theos naked taped on the wall. "Wait! You stole my boyfriend *and* one of my drawings?"



“Hold on. You told me I could have this one.” Greta clenched her jaw. “Now you’re accusing me of stealing, too? You’re supposed to be my best friend.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I needed his image to locate him, and if you remember, this wasn’t one of our top picks. I told you I was going to give it back.”

Lily sneered. “So, if I want to contact him, I need to burn a year’s supply of candles and mumble some magic words?”

“Laugh all you want. I’m only saying that the next morning, he walked into my store. He was wearing a hoodie pulled down over his face, so I didn’t recognize him at first. He agreed to meet me later, and we set a time and place. Nothing public, of course. You know how he is. Oh, to be completely transparent, we met twice. The second time was the night you saw us.”

“Why did he come back here, anyway? We know it’s not for another competition.”

“I wondered the same thing and laughed and asked if there was something in the water. He surprised me by saying there actually was. Apparently, he’s involved with some science project dealing with the oceans. A foundation or something that is going to keep him here. He was pretty vague about what he was doing.”

“Jeez, Greta. You know more about him than I do. Um, did he ever mention me?”

“You’re joking, right? You were all he wanted to talk about. When the subject wasn’t you, he talked about your freaking fairies. Honestly, if it had been a date, it would’ve been the worst one ever.”

“Nice to hear he still cares. For a while, I was actually afraid that he disappeared because he was breaking up with me.”

Greta looked at the ceiling, and down at the floor, anywhere but at Lily. “Um, that’s the thing. He did.” When she noticed Lily’s lower lip tremble, she stood up. “Listen, don’t even think about crying. I have to leave in a couple of minutes,

and I don't have time for that." Lily nodded, and Greta continued. "It's simple, and kind of like what Julie and I predicted, remember? He thought you were single, because you kept referring to Kelly as your ex, and he was hurt and stunned that you didn't tell him about the still being married part."

"Crap. When we separated, my lawyer told me to start thinking of Kelly as my *ex*, and I guess I got into the habit of calling him that. The timing never seemed right to tell him. I said something about having a lot of baggage, but he didn't bring up the subject again, so I didn't elaborate." She thought for a minute.

"Well, he brought it up with me. He asked if having a husband was what you meant by baggage, and since I would never betray a confidence I have with you, I didn't get into the weeds with him on it. But I did tell him that you had been separated for over a year. And I'm not sure why, but I mentioned that Kelly had been completely unsupportive of your fairy business. Anyway, bottom line, he's staying away because you're married."

"And the way things are going, I might never get the divorce. Kelly is trying to deny me that and custody. I'm trapped."

"I'm so sorry Kelly is being so hard on you, and that Theos left you, Lil, I really am. But do you have any idea how much you hurt me with these accusations? Even if I had tried to start something with him, which I didn't, I should have been able to. You said yourself that you were calling it quits with him, because of the Jamie thing. Anyway, at the Tiki Hut, you mentioned he was out of your league, and that he was all mine if I wanted him, remember?"

"Hold on. The thing with Jamie was different. I distinctly remember saying I couldn't see him until I got things straightened out. I never said it was over."

"It's not the way I remember it, but it doesn't matter. It's just that you shouldn't be so quick to accuse your best friend of something as serious as betrayal." She picked up a

newspaper from her desk and gave it to Lily. “Did you see this?” She pointed to the headline. *Myers Beach Tourists Walk Away from Head-on Collision*. Lily scanned the article.

A couple had spent the past Saturday morning shopping on the boardwalk. They were crossing the street in the crosswalk on the way to the parking lot when a car slammed into them. Someone called 911, but since they lay there motionless, people assumed they were dead. But just before the ambulance arrived, the couple got to their feet and walked away, completely unharmed.

Greta interrupted her reading. “Have you gotten to the point where it says that they were each carrying a figurine from your store? Weird, huh?” Greta pointed at their picture. “I recognized the woman in the picture from her Cher-like hair and remembered her in the front row when we did our skit the other day, the time you threw the new fairy dust.”

Lily took a phone call that cut short their conversation. “We’re going to continue this later. I’m not done being your best friend,” Greta promised as Lily left her office. “Anyway, Theos won’t be spending time with either of us. He’s leaving in a few days on a trip.” She laughed. “The airplane kind, not the drug kind, in case you wondered.”

On her way next door, she passed the two women customers who had left without buying a few weeks earlier. Each was carrying two Theos, the King figurines.

“We got your email.” The taller one held up her Theos, the King statue and lowered her voice. “And we rushed over to buy these naughty little things right away.”

Unaware that Julie had been doing behind-the-scenes promotion, she faked a response. “Oh yes, the email. Of course, you were on the list. And any day now, there will be twelve more.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“My, my, *another* unscheduled visit.” Katherine Needham glared at her fresh-faced assistant when he ushered Lily into her office. “We can all function so much better when we make appointments, don’t you agree?” Not wanting to repeat her earlier faux pas, Lily had dressed to the nines for her visit, and she ignored the vice president’s patronizing words and sat without being invited.

“I realize I’m early with my down payment, but I wanted to show you how serious I am, so I’m writing you a check today for the first ten thousand dollars.” She poised the pen over her blank check. “How should I make it out?”

Ms. Needham pursed her lips. “We have a stamp.” She buzzed her assistant and then picked up Lily’s check with two fingers like tongs handling a toxic substance and she let it fall into his hands. “So, ten thousand down, and what, only ninety thousand to go? And how many days remain to remit the full amount did we say?” She pretended to consult her calendar. “Let’s see, oh yes, three more weeks.”

Lily had hoped the banker would be impressed with her good-faith deposit, but she didn’t let her disappointment show. Needham continued. “While we are delighted to accept your partial down payment, I’m obligated to inform you that the estate has already received several serious offers to buy the Coffey building.”

Lily’s reaction was swift. “Well, they’re going to have to wait thirty or forty years, because my building is not for sale.”

Ms. Needham tapped her finger on her blank notepad. “Technically it is, of course, and we’ve already discussed your lackluster balance sheet.”

“Miss Needham, you’ve been very clear by your manner and your speech that you don’t like me and that you don’t believe I’ll come through. And while I cannot fathom why you feel this way, I do understand that your world considers only figures and not human factors. You have no idea who I am, what I’ve accomplished, or what I can do. Furthermore, you don’t seem to have any interest in learning about me, or my store, or my merchandise.”

Katherine Needham sipped from an ornate teacup. “True. We don’t visit the boardwalk often. Not our cup of tea, really,” she added with a touch of irony. She slammed her cup back down on its equally delicate saucer. “Ugh. Cold, again.” She pushed the button on her phone, and Lily could hear the buzz outside in the receptionist’s office.

Needham shook her head. “What was I saying? Oh yes. I’m sure those, what do you call those little things you sell again?”

“Figurines. Fairy figurines.”

Needham folded her hands on her pristine blotter. “Yes, I’m sure they’re very cute.”

“Well, since you are not likely to visit my store, I thought I’d bring one to show you.” She pulled a Theos, the King figurine from her bag, and she was about to place it on Needham’s desk when the woman took it from her hand.

“My, that *is* actually quite lovely.”

“Lovely enough that people pay five hundred dollars apiece. Thanks to this new figurine, we’ve had a huge spike in sales this past week, just as I predicted.” She gripped the upholstered arms of the chair and looked the banker in the eye. “So much so, that I’m more than confident that I could bring you the full amount in three months. I’m hoping now that you know what I sell, and the good faith deposit I just gave you,

will convince you and the heir to give me that small extension.”

Needham’s lips turned into an uncharacteristic smile. Before she could speak, her assistant walked in with a new pot of tea.

“I believe I made it the way you like it, ma’am.”

The vice president sighed when he left. She tapped her finger on the side of the cup and arched her brow.

“Is it too much to ask that my tea be served at precisely one-hundred and thirty-five degrees? I abhor drinking anything lukewarm.” As she took a sip, she let her finger stroke the figurine’s head. “Sometimes I wish they would send me a new assistant.” She shook her head and looked back at Lily. “Missus Harper, may I speak frankly? I don’t believe I am talking out of school when I tell you that the heir is quite perplexed that Missus Coffey believed that you could actually put your hands on sufficient wherewithal to buy such a prime piece of real estate. And—”

“Miss Needham, I’m sorry to interrupt, but that’s exactly what I’m talking about. I understand you have come to this small bank in Myers Beach from your corporate headquarters, but Missus Coffey lived here and understood me, my store, and the Myers Beach culture.”

Miss Needham continued speaking over Lily’s voice. “They’re concerned about having to endure a lengthy delay in the sale should you fail to comply with the terms of the agreement. And while we are delighted that your business prospects are looking brighter, facts are facts. Therefore, they’ve asked us to show the property to potential buyers in the meantime. As you no doubt recall, the same agreement you signed stipulates that you must allow them that opportunity.”

Lily snickered. “You may show my building to anyone you like. But like I said, it’ll be a waste of their time and yours. I am buying it.”

“Yes, so you continue to tell us. We cannot act unilaterally on your request, but rest assured that we shall convey your

request and your case to the heir. In the meantime, absent the occurrence of anything miraculous, we will bring by the first of the interested parties this afternoon. Shall we say two o'clock?" She stood but did not extend a hand. "See how well everything is working out for everyone? Our buyers will get their walk-through of Missus Coffey's building, and we'll get to visit the boardwalk at long last and see more of your charming little figures."

"Figurines," Lily corrected. She was not a hater. Her parents raised her to look for the good in everyone, and she tried, even with Kelly. Hoping that he'd eventually revert to the man she fell in love with was the reason she'd put up with his unconscionable behavior for so many years. But Katherine Needham was a different species, and after being on the receiving end of her endless sarcasm, staying on the emotional high road took every ounce of goodness Lily could muster.

"*We* will be delighted." Lily mocked Needham's annoying use of the royal "we." But she had to admit that the grouchy old woman was probably right. Facts were facts, and she would need a miracle to raise ninety-thousand dollars in three weeks. She was about to let herself out when the door to Needham's office opened again. Neither she nor Needham recognized the young man with the nose ring standing in the doorway.

"Who are you?" Needham demanded.

"HR sent me. I'm Troy, your new assistant. Can I get you anything? Tea?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### *Theos*

*The number of casualties is staggering, and my parents have asked that I escalate my efforts on the fairy dust project so that we might bring the sickest fairies to Myers Beach as soon as possible for safe dustings.*

*The property I bought is fantastic, and we are lucky to have gotten it. Like the captain of a ship, my father will be the last to leave, and when he and my mother get here, the house will need to be fit for a king. My brother and I share the same design aesthetic, so I wasn't surprised when he suggested we convert the whole place into an Italian palazzo. He's found one he likes from the seventeenth century and he's rebuilding it here stone by stone.*



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“How did it go with Elmyra Gulch?” asked Julie when Lily got back from the bank.

“You can’t tell with that woman, but I think I made a good case. I don’t trust her, so I don’t know if she was lying about running the idea past Missus Coffey’s daughter. In any case, I should be hearing about that soon.”

“Nice move, Lil. I don’t know how you come up with the guts and grace to do what you do. You are definitely my role model.”

“And you always say what I need to hear. Oh, and you’ll get a chance to meet the ghoul in person. She’s coming at two this afternoon to show *my* building to some potential buyers.”

They stood behind the counter and brainstormed a few more things they could try right away to ramp up sales. She’d heard Julie parroting her marketing professor’s lectures that advocated advertising on social media as the key to modern successful retail sales. The photographs of the new figurine were sexy enough, but once again, Lily lacked a budget, and the followers on their pages were mostly personal friends she and Lily talked into following when they set up the store’s accounts.

Julie was quick to suggest that having large numbers of followers wasn’t the only factor to success. What made social media work was the engagement those followers gave their posts. Lily’s head spun whenever Julie tried to update her on the platforms’ ever-changing algorithms. She knew that since

she hadn't posted anything in years, her engagement was zero. Still, she was confident that Julie was doing everything she could, and she resigned herself to giving their efforts a chance to kick in, which, as Julie explained, could take a while.

"So, if we can't count on that to save us, we'll have to keep hustling on the floor every day," Julie explained. "Unless we can come up with a better idea. It's amazing, though, how right Greta was about the mojo. Once a person locks eyes on a Theos, the King figurine, they buy." She fondled the head of one of the statues. "My biggest worry is getting more people into the store."

Lily sighed. "You're right. And as much as I don't want to do the skit anymore, the show does bring in a lot of people. So, I guess I will." She collected her things. "Listen, I need to think through a few things. Can you handle the store for a while?"

"Of course." Julie tugged on her sleeve as she was leaving. "And hey. I hate that you and Greta have become distant. I don't know what happened, but it's not right, and I wish you two would work it out."

Lily went upstairs to unravel her thoughts. Her court date was in two days, and as Needham had sternly reminded her, three weeks remained to meet her deadline. Then there was the situation with Greta, which had been keeping her up at night. There had never been a question of trust before, so their distance was doubly uncomfortable and foreign. She had to admit that Greta was right about one thing. She hadn't exactly said it out loud, but her message came through loud and clear. Lily had screwed up with Theos. He was not coming back, and it was her own fault.

Jamie was poking around in the studio. "Can I make something?" he asked.

"What do you feel like, drawing or painting?"

"I'm not sure." He noticed the leather pouch. "What's in here?"

“That’s a glaze, a present from Theos. You know what? It’ll make a great project. Why don’t you brush some on one of the brand-new figurines the foundry just made?” He plopped the bag on the work table and untied the thong. “I haven’t even tried it myself, so I’m not sure how to use it, but I know that it’s very delicate and you probably won’t have to use much. Oh, and it sticks to your skin,” she added. “So, since we’re going out to dinner tonight, promise to wear gloves, okay? I’m going to lie down for a few minutes.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The text alert roused her from her nap, and she grimaced at the message from Julie.

**They're here.**

The last person she wanted to spend time with was Katherine Needham and her buyers, but she was determined not to let them spoil any more of her day.

“I won't be long,” she called to Jamie on the way down the stairs. “Don't forget to put on some nice clothes.”

Lily thought the middle-aged husband and wife looked overdressed, as though they were off to a fancy cocktail party instead of inspecting a building. She was grateful that at least Miss Needham was not with them. Another woman Lily didn't recognize held out her hand.

“Hello, Missus Harper. I'm Christine Coffey. We took the liberty of poking around down here a bit on our own while we were waiting for you. But of course, my buyers are eager to see the rest.”

“Yes, but as you can see, we are very busy today.” Lily imitated Needham. “As we were not given much notice, our tour will have to be brief.” She made a polite smile and put aside any trace of salesmanship skills. She planned to cooperate with Christine Coffey, but she had no intention to show off the property and advance the sale. So, without offering any commentary she led them down the aisles and

opened the door to show them her office. After a private consultation with the couple, Christine pointed to the ceiling.

“Could you show us the second level, please?”

“Yes, but my son is in our apartment at the moment. I hope you don’t mind.”

The woman looked at her husband in surprise. “The upstairs is large enough to live in?”

She and Jamie had been more than comfortable there for over two years. The bathroom and kitchen needed updating, but Mrs. Coffey had looked the other way so often when Lily was a little late with the rent that Lily had never asked for a refresh.

“Yes. The apartment only has two small bedrooms, but we’ve been very happy there. It’s our home.”

She turned to lead the way to the rear of the store and staircase to the apartment when the woman noticed the display of the Theos, the King figurines, and she reached for Lily’s sleeve to stop her.

“These are lovely. Who is the artist? Do you know?”

“Yes, of course. I am.”

“They’re precious,” she interrupted. “I’ll take two.” She turned to her husband. “Wait! You know, I’ll bet Carole and Steve would want one, too.” She shoved three figurines at Julie, who’d been standing behind the desk, reviewing an invoice. The woman pawed through her billfold and tossed several credit cards on the counter. “Here,” she sniffed. “Use whichever one you like. Take care of it, will you?”

Julie picked up one of the cards. “Did you know there is an entire series?”

“Well, then, charge me for the whole shebang. Thanks.” She turned back to Lily. “I’m afraid I interrupted you earlier. You were saying?”

“I was saying that yes, I’ve been making fairy figurines and selling them here in my store for years now. This building

and the apartment upstairs have been my dream come true, and I can't imagine leaving."

"Then why on earth would you?"

The man coughed and lowered his voice. "Karen. She can't stay."

Lily shot daggers at the couple. "Yes, thank you for that, and I'll finish answering your wife's question. Why on earth, you ask?" She pointed at Christine Coffey. "Because I'm renting, and she is selling the building out from under me."

"What a shame," noted the woman. "So, now can we go upstairs?"

Lily gave them a brief tour of the apartment, and as the wife struggled to compliment her on its charm, Lily overheard her husband explain to Christine his plan to gut the entire building. Then he and his wife slipped into the kitchen for a private discussion. They were smiling when they returned to the living room.

"Well, Frank and I agree that this building is just what we were looking for, so what's our next step?"

Jamie tugged on his mother's arm. "Sorry to interrupt, but do you like what I did? Beautiful, isn't it?" The figurine he held sparkled and glowed. The effect was unusual enough that Lily made a note to try it on several more to see how they'd sell. "You were right," he continued. "I hardly had to use any. It was so cool. I didn't even mix it with water or anything. I just touched the top of his head with my brush, like this, and the stuff just dripped down and covered the whole statue by itself."

Lily took a closer look. "And I don't believe we'll need to fire this, either."

"No. I should say not." The woman tapped Jamie's arm. "Would you mind?"

He looked at his mother for permission, and when Lily nodded, he handed the figurine to the woman. "Be careful not to get any on your hands, lady. It might still be wet."

“This is exquisite, both the workmanship and the glaze, and I consider myself somewhat of an expert.” She noticed Lily’s teary eyes. “My dear, whatever is wrong? I was attempting to give you a compliment.”

“I was this close,” Lily explained. “I knew this figurine would be special from the beginning, and from what you just said, I was right. I had hoped I’d make enough from the sales of the very object you’re holding to allow me to buy this building. I still believe that in another couple of months, I would have.”

“Well, if this is your work, you are a very skilled artist, and you have a bright, bright future.” She turned her back to the others and spoke privately. “Look, woman to woman. You seem like a very nice person, and I can tell that you are under a great deal of stress. I’d like to help in some small way, and I’d be honored if you’d let me buy this figurine, in addition to the others, of course. Name your price.”

Nothing short of ninety-thousand dollars would make a difference to Lily, and so she took back the figurine.

“I’m sorry, this one is not for sale.” She turned to her son. “Listen, Jamie, I’ve got to finish up with these people. Why don’t you change into your good clothes now, so you’ll be ready when I get back?”

“He’s a cute boy,” said the woman. She turned to Christine. “Frank and I love the building. We’ll take it.”

Mrs. Coffey’s daughter smiled. “Then let’s go back to the bank and crunch numbers, shall we?”

As they were leaving, the woman touched the statue’s head again and looked deep into Lily’s eyes.

“I am so sorry.” Hearing words of sympathy coming from the stony woman surprised her, and she was about to believe she had a heart after all, when the woman continued, “This piece of art would have been stunning on the pedestal in our main foyer.” She blinked and turned away. “But alas, it won’t. In any case, my dear, we both wish you great happiness and

hope the next stage in your life gives you everything you want.”

Devastated that the sale of her building seemed suddenly a fait accompli, Lily cleared her throat. “Thank you. And in that wish, I’d like to include having more money than you do so that I can buy the building and anything else I want myself.”

“That’s the spirit.” The woman winked at her husband and squeezed his hand.

As they walked out the front door, Lily grabbed Christine. “I wondered if you had a chance to think about the offer that I proposed to Miss Needham this morning? She said she was going to pass it on to you.”

Christine swallowed and fumbled with her purse. “Um. I, um, actually haven’t spoken to her, and so I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.” Without waiting for clarification, she turned and left, arm in arm with possibly the new owners of her building.

The encounter with the couple and the sale of the building left her rattled. It had been one thing for her to mask reality with bluster in front of Miss Needham, but another to face two more-than-qualified and eager buyers in her living room. And it wasn’t just the couple’s insults and condescension. It was how quickly it happened.

She was furious to learn that Needham hadn’t followed through as she’d promised, and she immediately called the bank. The vice president wasn’t available to take her call, and Lily left a curt message with her new assistant, Troy. She didn’t accuse, but rather she asked for the courtesy of a callback to verify that Christine Coffey had been made aware of her offer.

She powered through the remaining hours until dinner and sold every Theos, the King statue in the store. She’d been lucky. Because of the success of the figurines, Dennis had put the other jobs at the foundry on hold, and Julie said she was expecting him to bring several more boxes later that evening.



Determined to balance the ugliness of the day with something positive, she and Jamie took their time strolling the length of the pier to the Sea Catch restaurant. She'd reserved table Number One so they could watch the waves crashing over the jetty and look up at the blinking lights on the cliff. The two familiar sights no longer simply marked the southern end of Myers Beach. They were relics of a magical interlude in her life and uncomfortable souvenirs of the love she was foolish enough to lose.

She had every reason to be proud of what she'd accomplished. If Mrs. Coffey hadn't died, and her heir wasn't kicking her out, The Fairy Kingdom would have provided them with more than a comfortable living.

"Order whatever you want. The sky's the limit." She felt good to have a cash flow that enabled a night out. They split the Fisherman's Platter and splurged on two slabs of the Captain's Chocolate Cake.

She was resigned to leaving the building, but she wouldn't give up her business. That night and the next day she would put out feelers for another location, ideally a smaller shop but still with an apartment above.

"I love this place," Jamie said as he slid closer to her on the banquette. "I'm sorry I was so mean to you the other day. Will you forgive me?"

Of all her problems, fixing her relationship with Jamie had been the most crucial, and it warmed her heart that she regained his affection so easily. But as they stared into the dark ocean and listened to the rhythms of the surf, she silently wrestled with the irony. His innocent testimony could tip the scales in the case, and the evening they were both enjoying so much could be one of the last times the courts would allow them to be together.

"Have you ever been out on the jetty?" he asked.

"On it? Oh, no. Too dangerous. Did you know that someone gets killed out there almost every year?"

“I know, it’s nasty. I saw it from the air when I was kitesurfing on stage with Theos.”

She thought about whether to tell him she’d seen it from the air with his idol, too, but in his arms, not in virtual reality in a school auditorium. When she got home, she had a voicemail from the bank. The assistant to the vice president stated that he was sorry for the confusion, but that indeed, Miss. Needham had personally spoken to Christine Coffey earlier around noon when she’d stopped by, and Ms. Coffey had denied Lily’s request.

She was surprised to hear that the old witch had followed through and disgusted that Christine had been so gutless not to speak the truth. She hung up the phone wondering how a woman as kind and wonderful as Mrs. Coffey could have produced a child so awful.

Realizing that the deck was stacked against her, she decided to change the game. She had one final card to play. Jamie’s welfare had to come first. She picked up her phone and tapped in the number she knew by heart.

## CHAPTER FORTY

It was one in the morning when Kelly let her into his house that reeked of garbage. The coffee table in the living room was covered with pizza boxes, and crushed beer cans littered the floor like a fraternity house. She cringed to think that Jamie had spent the last year and a half living in such gross conditions, and she wondered if her son had slept on clean sheets since she had moved out.

For over two hours, they negotiated the reconciliation. In exchange for cosigning the mortgage on the Coffey building, she would drop the divorce action. She agreed to Kelly's demand that they live with him again in Kelly's house. After they bought the building, they would rent out the apartment. She stipulated that he make significant lifestyle changes. He claimed to be seeing a therapist once a week, but she insisted he take an additional step and agree to stop drinking. If he upheld his part of the bargain, she and Jamie would move at the end of the month.

She grudgingly extended her hand. "Shall we shake on it?"

After they shook, she turned to leave, but Kelly worked his arms around her from the back and pulled her against him. She closed her eyes and shivered as he slobbered kisses on her neck and pawed at her breasts. He'd insisted that a resumption of their sex life be part of the bargain. While she got most of what she wanted, she considered having to endure future sex with Kelly the worst part of the deal. She pulled away after a few seconds.

"Is that all I get?" he grumbled.

“Yes. You were lucky to get that.”

She drove back to her apartment in tears, relieved at salvaging her business and her store, but unimaginably sad and depressed at the considerable cost. She crumpled onto her bed and cried herself to sleep.

The first stop the next morning was the bank where she would submit to the further humiliation of applying for a mortgage as a married couple. She did her best to ignore Needham’s pompous blather, and she filled out the paperwork and submitted the form without a trace of her previous bravado.

Dispirited by the loathsome turn of events, she felt numb, and her shoulders sagged this time when she left the bank. Having saved the building and her business, her next step would be to call off the divorce.

Her attorney was not impressed with the decision. “Are you positive? Look, I only have a few minutes to talk, because I’m running into court on a different matter. Would you mind if we met in our usual place in an hour? I know you will want to hear the latest developments, and this will require an in-person kind of chat.”

“Yes, but don’t try to talk me out of my decision. In my mind, this matter is settled.”

“What if I told you that Kelly’s case has fallen apart? What if I told you we think he’s been bluffing? Among a few other tidbits, we’ve learned that there are no records of Jamie testifying, or even that he is being called as a witness, and I would know. Lily, I think we have an excellent chance of winning.”

“I can’t deal with ‘excellent chances,’ anymore. I need certainty. We’ve worked everything out. Jamie and I are going to live with him, and he’s cosigned the note so I can buy the building. That’s it. We’re moving on.”

“Please hear me out. If you’re going back with him just for that, then you need to know that he got fired and has been unemployed for some months. I doubt his signature will be

worth anything.” Lily couldn’t speak. “It’s one of many things we need to discuss. See you in an hour?”

She stared at the phone in disbelief. She was livid with Kelly for pretending to come to her rescue and furious with herself that she fell for his act. If what her lawyer said was true, there would be no reason to go back to him and every reason to continue with the divorce proceedings. She felt emboldened. Staring down her dire financial situation alone was preferable to facing a lifetime of certain misery. The conversation changed everything.

She found a corner booth at the place where she and her lawyer frequented and nursed a carafe of coffee while she waited out the hour until her lawyer arrived with the briefcase of promised tidbits.

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Jamie was asleep in front of the television when she came up after work. As she carefully removed the remote from his fingers, she noticed the dark bruise on his right forearm. Pulling back the other sleeve revealed a similar bruise on his left.

She nudged him awake. “Hey, what happened here?”

He was groggy, but when he saw what his mother was looking at, he tried to hide his arms. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Were you fighting with those guys again?”

“No! We’re friends now.”

“Then how did you get them? They look the same.”

He looked away. She could tell he was withholding something horrible, and she made him take off his pajama top.

She fingered the two large welts on his back and gulped. “You didn’t have these before.” She forced his head toward hers. “This is serious, Jamie. I need you to be honest with me. Who did this?”

Tears welled in his eyes as he stared back at his mother. He leaned against her and sobbed. He couldn't protect his father any longer.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### *Theos*

*I haven't heard from my parents in a while, and their chief adviser contacted me with the devastating news that they both are ill from the contamination and are in quarantine. What's worse is that I still can't see them.*

*They've discovered that not only did the perpetrator contaminate our main supply, but he poisoned the entire underground source. They say that at least half our population has been affected, but they don't have an exact count, because they are still tabulating the dead. In any case, I'm going to have to redouble my efforts to get this fairy dust made. We now have a small finite amount left, and my entire kingdom is depending on me.*

*I have an idea of who did it, but I don't want to mention it to him until I can back it up with evidence, particularly since my father has a complicated relationship with that person. So does Alias, although he still doesn't know why.*

*In the meantime, I long to touch Lily again. I've missed her so much and wish she were at my side.*

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“We’re as close to a slam dunk as we can be.” Her lawyer produced documents she hoped would persuade the court that Lily should receive both the divorce and full custody. “Records of his unemployment filing ought to be enough. He obviously cannot show the ability to provide for Jamie.”

“I hope you’re right. Lately, nothing’s been obvious or easy.”

“Oh, and I have more.” She held up Kelly’s DUI arrest. Lily sighed at the paperwork outlining mandatory weekly attendance at the alcohol abuse awareness class, guessing it was what he palmed off as his regular therapy session.

“Together with the photos we took of Jamie’s bruises and his testimony that Kelly has beaten him before, he shouldn’t stand a chance.”

When Kelly failed to show up at the trial, Lily was baffled. Kelly’s embarrassed lawyer was not. “To be perfectly honest, Missus Harper, I have no idea where your husband is. He hasn’t followed through on any of my advice, and he hasn’t returned my calls in two weeks.”

“I hope he paid you in advance,” said Lily.

Since Kelly’s side presented neither suggestions of infidelity nor the promised torrent of accusations claiming endangerment to a minor, the judge made the easy call, and when the gavel fell closing the case in her favor, Lily hugged her attorney to savor the joyous moment. The case was behind her, but Lily wasn’t through with the legal system.



“Now, it’s time to file the injunction we talked about. I don’t want him getting within a hundred yards of Jamie or me ever again.”

“This is wonderful news,” said Julie when Lily got back to the store.

“I can’t believe it myself,” Lily admitted. “I was expecting the worst, but he didn’t even put up a fight. Now, all I have to worry about is, well…” She gestured around the store. “You know. This and the bank.”

“And now I forbid you to worry about anything else for the rest of the day. We’re going to celebrate.” She ran to the office and came back with a bottle of Prosecco and two glasses. “I chilled it, just in case.”

Lily raised her glass. “Here’s to checking off boxes!” Julie joined her in the toast.

“Funny you should mention the bank,” Julie said.

Lily smirked. “There is nothing whatsoever funny about that place.”

“There was today. While you were in court, the real witch, Miss Needham herself, stopped by.”

Lily poured another glass. “Your story is definitely not getting any funnier, but I can’t wait to see where it goes.”

“Hold on, I’m getting to the good part. She came to buy two Theos, the King figurines, one for her home, and another one for her office. Except, she called them *figures*, I think, not figurines. Weird, huh?”

“Yup. That’s Needham, all right.”

“And get this. She said she was intrigued by one of our Instagram posts!” Julie roared. “And. Oh, my God, you are so right. She looks exactly like the Witch of the West. Kinda talks like her, too.”

Lily was still laughing and couldn’t decide which was more unbelievable. That Needham actually came to the boardwalk and bought something from her store or learning that the old bag used social media. She was sorry she hadn’t

been at the store when she came. “I would have asked her if she had an appointment.”

“Oh, and she wanted me to tell you that the couple who looked at the store decided not to buy.”

“I wonder why? Not that it changes anything. That witch will find someone else.”

Julie scrunched her face. “Have another glass. I’m afraid she already did. And that somebody wants to come by to look at it next week.”

“Crap. I knew a story with that woman wouldn’t have a happy ending.”

“Something else funny happened, too. Are you ready for this? Theos came in. He wore his hoodie, which I’ve decided is a more effective disguise than I thought, because he didn’t have an entourage. Our new part-timer, Samantha, waited on him, but on the way out he made a point of making eye contact with me. I’m pretty sure he wanted me to know he was there.”

Thoughts of Katherine Needham popped like the bubbles in her drink when she heard Theos was back in town. but that was as happy as the story got.

“But he bought one of the last sets of his figurines,” Julie reported. “I am so glad we went ahead and had the other twelve made.” She pointed to the sole figurine on the counter. “We sold them all so that’s good news, too. Why don’t you go upstairs and relax? We can close up.”

Lily stared at the figurine on the counter and downed the last of her bubbly, “I will. I just wish Theos would leave me a message.”

She took Julie’s advice and went up to her apartment. She wondered if he’d come to the store to see her, or if he’d been in the back of the courtroom for some reason and learned she was a free woman. It would have been easy to miss him. The court had a full docket, and the room was packed with other nervous people, awaiting their fates. Now that she was a free woman and Theos was Jamie’s idol, she imagined how much

easier things could be, and her mind filled with images of their happy lives together.

She could neither concentrate nor relax, so she made a sandwich, which always helped in situations like that. When she took it to the living room, she noticed the envelope containing the permission slip lying on the end table. Signing the form had been out of the question earlier. Had the judge's decision gone in Kelly's favor, her signature would have been worthless. But she could sign it now. Redeeming the gift certificate might be an opportunity to run into Theos, where she would casually mention that she was officially single if he hadn't already heard.

She opened the envelope and pulled out the contents. Along with the generic certificate was a standard-looking permission slip with the obligatory blanks to fill in and sign. But what set her heart thumping was the impeccable penmanship of the handwritten note on parchment-like paper that fell onto her lap.

*Dear Lily,*

*We belong together. I knew the moment we met.*

*I hope Greta explained why I've been staying away. I guess I'm old-fashioned, but I simply couldn't be in a relationship with a married woman. I hope you understand.*

*I'm sorry that Jamie's first impression of me created so much trauma for everyone. At his school assembly, I did my best to fix things. He and I have a lot in common, for I was not like the others in school, either. I hope to have an opportunity one day to explain why.*

*Recent developments in my personal life, too, have made me realize more than ever that I both want and need you in my life. If you feel the same way after you are divorced, meet me in the south lifeguard stand at night when people have left the beach. I'll be waiting every evening, and hoping you'll be there.*

*I love you. I hope you love me, too.*

*Theos*

*P.S. I hope you noticed that I used the word "hope" a lot.*

*PPS. I haven't forgotten that I still owe you luck, the good kind.*

Lily pressed the paper to her lips. For the first time in years, her tears came from joy, not adversity. Buying a building, selling fairy figurines, and getting evicted. Suddenly,

all of that was irrelevant. Being a family with Theos was all that mattered, and together they would thrive, no matter what some witch at a bank said.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and she wondered how she would occupy the remaining several hours before sunset. For a moment she considered racing to the beach and yanking the guard from his chair right then and there, so she could sit in his tower for the rest of the day until Theos arrived. Instead, she asked Jamie out for ice cream.

"Isn't it raining?" he asked. "I thought I heard thunder a minute ago."

Considering their rendezvous venue, a forecast of rain was unfortunate, but Jamie was right. They watched thick dark cumulus clouds speeding across the sky, as they scooted down the boardwalk toward the ice cream shop. Then she felt the wind shift direction. In the distance, a lightning bolt flashed, and without thinking, she counted the seconds until the rumble came. She'd learned the trick to determine a storm's proximity in the Girl Scouts, and she made the calculation every time, without thinking.

"The storm is still a few miles away," she assured him. "So, we'll be fine for now." Ruining her evening was the bigger problem.

"You seem happier, Mom. What's going on?"

She discussed the court's decision and told him that she'd shown pictures of his bruises to the judge, who added a restraining order on top of the divorce. Jamie sighed in relief when she explained that until his dad satisfied the authorities that he'd gotten himself straightened up, he would not be allowed to get near either one of them. Jamie hugged her and shared a few more incidents of his father's violence. Even as she cringed at the details, she assured him that under the new arrangement, they would both be safe.

When they returned to the apartment, she took a long bath and then looked out the window. Despite the swath of black that covered the map of Myers Beach on her phone's weather app, it still wasn't raining. Choosing what to wear on a date

outdoors in a downpour was the immediate challenge, and in the end, she picked the outfit she wore when they met at the Tiki Hut that first time. In the meantime, she held out hope that the discouraging forecast was somehow incorrect.

“You look beautiful,” Julie assured Lily when she arrived at the apartment to sit with Jamie. She took her aside. “Don’t forget that I have a date myself tonight, so please don’t be late, okay? I can only stay here until midnight.”

“I’ll be back by then, I promise. I’m just so grateful you could step in at the last minute. Have you been listening to all that thunder? It’s been going on for hours. I can’t believe he’ll be there waiting for me in this storm, but I still don’t have a way to contact him, and I miss him so much, I have to go.”

“At least it’s not raining yet. All those black clouds that have been gathering all afternoon make it look worse than it really is.”

“Well, I’m hoping it’s just one of those summer thunders that are all talk and no show.”

She walked across the boardwalk to the beach where sunbathers hadn’t given up playing frisbee in the wind. Constant lightning along the horizon made her question the sanity of waiting for someone atop a high lifeguard tower during an electrical storm. Still, she wasn’t about to risk missing Theos for anything as mundane as getting electrocuted. When she read the big bold letters on the sign at the base that the tower was off-limits, she remembered how he ignored the same sign when he took her kitesurfing. She took a page from his playbook, stepped past the warning sign, and climbed the ladder.

They designed lifeguard platforms for one purpose: to house a single chair for a bronzed man or woman whose glamorous responsibility was to sit on it all day. She’d heard from her college help that while the three-foot walls provided basic privacy, there was barely enough floor space to sit, let alone cuddle, and she ignored the rumors that those who dared to venture up after the beach closed were generally disappointed.

From below, the tower looked vacant, but since it was so dark, she couldn't be certain. As she neared the top, she closed her eyes. If he wasn't there, she'd minimize the risk of being disappointed. If he was there, she'd be thrilled.

He wasn't there, but she knew she was early and that the night was young. A bolt of lightning that streaked across the sky gave her a one-second snapshot of the tight space that would be the setting for their rendezvous. While she expected to hear thunder, the bone-rattling blast that followed startled her anyway. She scrambled the rest of the way up the ladder and threw herself onto the floor. She crawled around the chair and leaned against a wall for protection.

The rumors were true. Small was an understatement. Since there was scarcely enough room for her to stretch out her legs, he could hardly fit up there with her, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Considering that her perch afforded the best view of the entire beach, she figured she might at least see him walking toward the tower. If somehow she missed him down below, she'd see the top of his magnificent head of hair, even in the dark, as he neared the top of the ladder.

After twenty minutes, she pulled out his letter to check if she'd gotten the details right. Jamie had brought the permission slip home recently, so she knew it wasn't out-of-date. In the note, Theos specified two instructions, both of which she'd followed perfectly.

*Meet me in the south lifeguard stand at night.*

She was scouring the text again for something she might have missed when she realized she was acting out one of her longtime patterns—assuming the blame when the other person was at fault. He was definitely late, but the storm was severe, and it was too early to start throwing blame around for something that was conceivably out of his control.

At one point she moved from leaning against the side to lying flat on her stomach so she could peer out over the ladder. When that became too uncomfortable, she contorted herself again, but her legs eventually fell asleep from the newer

position that was every bit as awkward. She could tolerate the wind, and because it still wasn't raining, she moved to the best seat in the house, the guard chair.

While the drama that played out in the sky kept her entertained for the first hour, the second hour tested her resolve. He was now unconscionably late, and she wondered if he was going to show up at all. His love letter had sounded so heartfelt that she refused to believe he was standing her up, so she decided to give him a few more minutes, and then she'd leave.

A powerful blast of wind swept across the beach, and she watched it kick up abandoned lounge chairs into the air and slam them back down against the boardwalk railing, twisting their aluminum frames into pretzels. When another wind rocked the tower, she slipped back down to the floor and wrapped herself around the base of the chair, grateful that someone had the foresight to double-bolt the thing to the platform. It was ten-thirty, and she was angry.

As she clung, white-knuckled, to the chair legs, she counted her blessings that the rain had held off, but she stopped counting the intervals between the lightning and thunder. Both were right above her, and leaving the relative safety of the south lifeguard tower to go anywhere was not an option.

By eleven-thirty, all that remained of the storm was an occasional murmur of faraway thunder and her raging temper. She'd let Theos ruin her evening, but she wasn't about to mess up Julie's plans. With equal parts exhaustion, resentment, and bitterness, she climbed down the ladder.

When her feet touched the sand, she felt his lips brush the back of her hair. She closed her eyes and the familiar tingle that came when they found their way to her neck gave her goosebumps again. Then she came to her senses.

"Where the hell have you been?"

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### *Theos*

*This time I can't give thunder all the blame for being late to meet Lily. I was up watching Alias working with the danog, and I actually lost track of the time, which has never happened to me before. It had been cloudy all day, but it wasn't until I got to the base of the tower that the thunder and lightning began. I knew she was up there, but the thunder made me weak again, and I barely had enough strength to dig a hole in the sand. I hoped she'd stay while I rode out the storm.*

*The good news is that the air over Myers Beach is full of danog, something we need for our dust. I thought I smelled it the first day I arrived, but because so many people were watching me kitesurf all day, I couldn't really investigate it while the competition was going on. I certainly didn't want to look suspicious.*

*So we could snoop around undetected, Alias and I flew around together without our kites late one evening. He smelled it, too, and while we were out there, we noticed that our setup at the top of the cliff couldn't be more ideal, and he's already got a turbine-type mechanism in place to capture and filter it.*

*This good fortune has put me in such a great mood, that when I get my strength back and climb out of this hole, I believe I'll reveal my identity to Lily tonight and ask her to marry me.*



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

He placed his hands on her shoulders and tried to turn her around to face him. She wanted to oblige—her rapid heartbeat told her to—but she was mad and resisted.

“I love you, Lily. Please go back up with me, and I’ll explain.”

“Not a chance. I spent four and a half hours up there clinging to a chair for dear life during an electrical storm, and I’m over it. Why can’t you explain yourself right here on solid ground?”

He stroked her hair. “It’s a beautiful evening now. Would you go up if I carried you? Close your eyes. I’ll do all the work.”

She wasn’t going to give him a pass that easily, and she turned her head away. While she was thinking of a response, she relaxed her grip on the ladder and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were standing on top of the tower, and she was staring into the same riveting eyes that mesmerized her the day they met. Her knees wobbled, but she didn’t let them crumple.

“Hey, how did we get up here?”

“I carried you, like I said.”

“Hmm. I don’t suppose your super strength has anything to do with that tea of yours? What do you put in it, anyway?”

“Gosh, Lily. Greta told me about your crazy idea. I don’t do drugs, okay, so please, will you drop it once and for all? By

the way, I make the tea myself from a recipe a friend from Kashmir shared with me.”

“Come on. No way could I have drawn all those sketches so fast without some kind of boost.”

He laced his fingers with hers. “I don’t disagree. You are a very talented artist, but what you did had nothing to do with my tea.”

“Thank you for the compliment, but that doesn’t explain how I also sculpted thirteen figurines from start to finish in one evening. That was not only super challenging. It was an impossibility. And like the sketching episode, I did it after drinking your tea.” She tapped her finger on his chest. “So, what do you have to say about that?”

“I’d say both incidents sounded magical.”

She pulled her hand away. “Don’t be sarcastic.”

“I’m not.” He leaned in and kissed her hair. “And I can explain that one, too, but I’d like us to sit down and get comfortable. What I have to tell you might not be easy to take. Will you trust me for a few minutes?”

“Really? How much discomfort are you planning to give me tonight?”

He put his back against one of the sides, and when he pulled her against him, for the first time, she found enough room to rest her head on his lap and stretch her legs. As he massaged her temples, she nestled deeper.

“I’d like you to make me a promise,” he requested. “I’m going to share something very personal, and you’ll be so excited you want to run and tell everything to Greta. I’ll understand the temptation, but I’m serious. What I tell you cannot go beyond these...” He looked around. “These three walls. Do you promise?”

Lily rocked her head and smiled. “I never knew you had a sense of humor. I rather like it. But yes, I promise.” She closed her eyes. “I’m all ears.”

“I’ll get right to the point.” He took a breath. “I’m a fairy.”

She jolted upright. “Crap! I should have listened when they told me you were gay.”

“No silly. Not that kind of fairy...your store kind. I’m surprised you couldn’t tell.”

She laughed. “Geesh, you had me worried there for a second.” She let him guide her head back to his lap, but she kept her eyes open. “Why are you surprised? For starters, you’re awfully big to be a fairy. They’re supposed to be tiny.” Then she poked a finger between the buttons of his shirt. “And they don’t have hair on their chests.”

Theos continued stroking her hair. “Says who?”

“Says anyone, everyone, all the books, all the fairy tales.”

“Wow, for a woman who dresses like a fairy and runs a business entirely centered around them, you certainly are having trouble recognizing a real one when it is sitting right next to you.”

She laughed again. “Sorry, but you are simply not convincing. Google them. You’ll see.”

“Then why did you want me to model? You’re the one who’s not making sense.”

“That was for a completely different reason.”

“Listen, there are all kinds of fairies. I look like this because my father married a human.”

She laughed again. “I hope you really don’t think I’m going to swallow all this, do you?”

“I hoped. So, what’s that completely different reason?”

“There’s something about you that I can’t explain.” She reminded him of the people in her store who twice bought whatever he bought. “Greta calls it your mojo, and she told me I needed to capture that in the figurine I made, to make people buy them. I’m a pretty decent artist, and I nailed your physical look. But I didn’t get that magical part, or whatever it is until that last session.”

The final dark cloud finally passed and revealed a sky full of stars. “Look,” he continued. “In most sports, groupies come with the territory, especially during competitions, and I think it’s cool. Sports need fans. I was raised to be nice to everyone, and people tell me I have a reputation for treating my fans with respect. And, without trying to sound pompous, they’ve been following me around for years, just like they were during the Cavalcade of Champions.

“And Greta was right about why they bought what I bought. She just used the wrong term. The right word is *magic*, not *mojo*, and that, Lily, is because I’m a real live fairy. It’s only because of my size and celebrity that most people would never guess what I really am, including you.”

She looked into his eyes. “I have to say that I never expected the conversation to go this way tonight. You must have worked on that story for a long time.”

He laughed. “I’m trying to be serious. Can you be too, for a minute?”

She let out a breath. “Okay, so you’re a fairy. Then you must have other superpowers besides getting people to follow you around in stores, right?”

He smiled. “I can do a few neat tricks.”

“Prove it.”

“I did. Do you think we stayed up in the air on my board for three hours because I’m good at hang time? Come on. I used my wings.”

“Which you keep hidden where?”

He brought her hand to the scar on his back. “You’ve seen this, I know. When I want to fly, I can just pop them out. I’ll show you if you want.”

“Now you’re trying a bit too hard, but you’re hysterical.”

He bopped her nose with his finger. “Listen. You’re the one who keeps insisting that fairies sweep away bad dreams, make worries go away, and grant wishes, so make one.”

She thought for a moment. “Aw, you remembered. That’s so cute. Okay. Use your magic to send us a shooting star.”

He flicked a finger, and suddenly a bright star streaked across the sky.

Lily burst into laughter. “You want to take credit for that? You just got lucky. Do it again”

“Why do you resist so hard? You just wished for one. As a fairy, it was my job to grant it.”

She closed her eyes again. “Don’t stop stroking my hair. It feels so good.”

“Believe me, I want to. Can we talk about your superhuman accomplishments again? You keep blaming my tea, but there was a different common denominator. Want to take a guess what it was?”

She giggled. “I’ll play along. A ghost in my apartment?”

“No. Fairy dust.”

Lily kept her eyes shut. “That again? I’d say you’ve got fairy dust on the brain.” She looked up and saw his straight face. “You’re serious.”

“Gosh, Lily. Fairy dust is the one part of my story I thought you’d understand. I mean you sell it at your store.”

“Come on. I’ve never pretended that my chopped-up glitter was real.”

He squeezed her hand. “No, but the stuff in the leather pouch on your kitchen table is real. Look, I understand that what I’m telling you isn’t easy to process.”

“Wow! You should write novels. Actually, hearing a grown man pretend like this makes me wonder if I should laugh or run away?”

He made circles in her hair. “Okay. Now you’re making fun of me. Please stop and just listen.” He sat her up to face him. “So, getting back to the fairy dust. I saw you swirling your finger around in the bag before you started sketching,

remember? I bet you had it all over you again before you made all those figurines.”

“We’re talking about the glaze now, aren’t we? At least, that’s what you called it. I don’t know. I do love the way it feels, and I showed it to Greta that night, so yeah, I probably touched it. By the way, it gives my figurines a gorgeous sheen.” She snickered. “Almost unearthly. I’m going to use it on the rest of the ones, too.”

“Let’s get back to the cause and effect of the fairy dust.”

“You’re not going to drop this, are you?” She sighed. “Okay.”

“The night you did all those sketches I remember what you wished for verbatim. You wished you could hurry up and get those darned things, as you called them, on the shelf, and that you hoped they would do us both justice and make a killing. Remember?”

“Okay. I might have said that. It was definitely what was going through my mind. But are you seriously trying to tell me that the glaze made that wish come true?”

“The fairy dust did. Yes. And do you remember making another wish the night you sculpted them?”

“Look, the bank deadline was still stressing me out that night, so I think I might have told Greta or Julie that I wished there were more hours in the day, or something like that, but that’s just an expression. Not something you can really wish for. So that shouldn’t count.”

“Why not? How many days do you need to finish one figurine?”

“A week, if I really work hard.”

He counted on his fingers. “Twenty-four hours times seven days times thirteen weeks is two thousand, one hundred and eighty-four hours, and that’s how many hours your day had that you wished for. Pretty good return on a wish, I’d say. And I can give you one more example.” He tapped her on the top of her head. “At Jamie’s school assembly, I put some fairy dust on his head while I was hooking on his harness. Before he

started to kitesurf, I asked him what he was thinking. He whispered that he wished he wouldn't look lame in front of the whole school. So, now what do you think? Your kid is smart and nice enough and all, but do you really think he could have done flips and fancy back rolls without a little help? Believe me, if I'd sprinkled pottery glaze on his head, it wouldn't have gone that way."

Lily's mind went back to the bit of sparkle she'd thought she saw in Jamie's hair. At the time, she hadn't made the connection. "If what you say is true, then should you give up all your trophies? Using magic to win would be cheating."

"You'd be right if I had used my magic. But I happen to be a really good kitesurfer, and I won them on my own, fair and square."

She chewed on her lip. "I'm sorry, but I'm having a rough time accepting all this."

"Yet you believed I spiked the tea with a magic drug. Is this so different?"

She looked at her watch and sprang up. "Eleven forty-five. Crap! I have to go! I promised Julie I'd be back by midnight. I'm already late." She moved toward the ladder.

"I can fix it so you won't be late. Fairy dust is only one aspect of a much larger picture I'm trying to paint. Please, give me five more minutes to prove it, okay?"

"If I'm going to stay five more minutes, I'd rather you used them to explain why you were so late tonight. I love you, Theos, but I can't go through this every time we're supposed to get together."

"Fair enough. It's thunder. Thunder makes me really sick. It has my whole life. Most times the effects are so debilitating that I have to lie on the ground for a while afterward to get relief. Depending on how loud it is and how close, I can get away with hiding under a bush or something. Tonight, though, I felt it right overhead and the pain was so excruciating, I had to bury myself in the sand."

“This is priceless. First, you try to make me believe you’re a magic fairy, and then you expect me to believe that a little rain takes away your powers?” She shook her head. “Geesh, I’ve never understood why guys think they need to create such elaborate scenarios for being late when they could just apologize. But I’ll give you points for creativity. That excuse was brilliant.”

“Not rain, Lily. Thunder. It’s why I left your store that first day, and then again that night at the Tiki Hut. Obviously, I couldn’t explain why at the time. When I see lightning, I know I don’t have much time. It’s also why I was so weak that morning after the huge thunderstorm. I didn’t want to disappoint you by not showing up, so I got up from the ground before I fully recovered and dragged myself over. I don’t know if you noticed, but I sprinkled some of the fairy dust I gave you on me, and that’s what made me strong again.”

“Okay. Time to go,” she announced. While he correctly chronicled the occurrences of thunder with his coincidental disappearances, she felt he was beginning to come across as desperate, and she seriously considered whether she wanted to pursue the relationship any further. “We can pick this up later.” She started to climb down.

“Oh, and what about the times you used my fairy dust on people? I heard about the boy and his allergies, and I read the story about the couple in the accident.” She stopped climbing. “And, now that you’re leaving, will you humor me and check the time again?”

She looked at her phone. Eleven-thirty. She banged it against the palm of her hand. Now it said eleven.

He touched her wrist. “See?”



## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

“Look. I don’t know if the lightning caused this glitch or how it happened, but changing a clock isn’t the same thing as altering time, and if I’m late, I’ll be pissed.” She crawled back across the guard tower floor and leaned against him. “Why am I so crazy about you?”

He cradled her and stroked her hair again. “Because I’m not an ordinary fairy.”

“There you go again. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but can we not talk about fairies anymore? I deal with them all day, and right now I just wanted to be with you.” She nudged him. “By the way, Greta said she told you about how Kelly didn’t give me or my business any support, and I get the feeling you’re trying to compensate for that, by showing me that you do care. I really do appreciate the effort, but honestly, you’re starting to freak me out.”

“Okay, but one more important question. Do you ever feel a slight vibration when you touch me? You’ve never mentioned it.”

“It’s not so slight.” She placed her palm over his heart. “Like now, for instance.”

Theos laughed. “That’s my heart reacting to the sexy way you’re touching my chest. I’m talking about the normal tingle.”

“Yeah. Like I said, I feel it. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if it was coming from you or me.”

“It’s from me. It’s the thing in me that clashes with the thunder. In their letter, my parents wrote that one day something cataclysmic will happen that will trigger a massive and complex change to my whole body, and this weirdness will go away.”

“Gosh. Hearing you talk about cataclysms is not how I expected that we’d spend the evening.”

He nuzzled her hair. “Then what if we both stopped talking and did something cataclysmic together?”

She looked at her watch. “I wish we could, but now it’s eleven forty-five again, and I don’t want our first time to be rushed.”

“I’ll make sure you are home on time. Trust me. I want this to be special, too.”

He unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse, and the moment he pressed his chest against hers, her heartbeat synced to his, and her worries about time disappeared.

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When he kissed her awake and she eyed the bare wood platform they were lying on, she wondered why she felt as though she was floating on a featherbed.

“Last night was the most wonderful night of my life, and I slept like a baby.”

“It was for me, too. But when you said you loved me, last night, did you really mean it, or was it just the passion of the moment? Because I have something else to ask you.”

She nodded. “Yes, I did. I know now that, in spite of all your crazy talk, I love you with all my heart.”

“That last night I modeled for you I asked you what you wanted. Do you remember what you shouted back?”

She scrunched her face at hearing more fairy talk. “I said I wanted you to be my fairy king! But do we—”

He interrupted her and got down on one knee. “I’m hoping you still do, because I love you, Lily. I’m only a fairy prince, but will you marry me and be my princess?”

Before she could answer, he waved a hand. Suddenly, a crystal dome materialized and hovered over their guard tower. White lilies sprang up from the wooden floor and filled the room with an intoxicating fragrance. He took her hands and looked hopefully into her eyes.

“I will.” Her heart was beating so fast, she could barely speak.

“Are you sure? You won’t be able to change your mind.”

“I am.” The moment the words left her lips, brilliant light streamed through the dome, creating a wash of three-dimensional kaleidoscopic patterns all around them.

The refracted colors gathered together in one white light and whirled around them. Lily felt a slight prick on her back and her skin began to glow. She heard chanting in a language she didn’t understand at first, but soon the words became understandable, and she recognized them as wedding vows that she was able and eager to repeat. Theos sealed the ceremony with a kiss and produced an ornate band of platinum. Upon slipping it on her finger, glorious chimes rang in celebration of their union.

In time, the colors faded, along with the reverberations from the bells. Finally, the crystal dome dissolved, and the guard tower returned to its normal wooden planking. Lily blinked and rubbed her eyes. “Have I been dreaming, or did I just marry a fairy prince?”

“You did...Missus Prince.”

She looked at her arms and legs. “So, does that really make me a fairy princess? I still look the same.”

“Yes, you are, and you will look the same. You’re still half-human, like me, but with powers that will blow your mind. I’ll show you how they work soon. I have a lot to share with you over the next couple of days.”

She laid her fingers on his chest and played with her wedding band. “I’m not sure this ceremony will be considered legal around here. Would you be willing to go with me to the Justice of the Peace one of these days?”

“Yes, but you’ll soon see that none of those things will matter anymore. But of course, I will. Could we make it tomorrow? You and I have some urgent matters to tackle, and we’ll need to leave here and go home to our kingdom very soon.”

“Tomorrow? Sure, but oh my God. You just reminded me. It has to be past midnight by now.” She threw on her clothes. “Julie must be furious.”

“She won’t be.”

“Of course, she will. We must have been at it for a couple hours at least, and I remember we only had fifteen minutes when we started.”

“What does your watch say?”

“Eleven forty-five. Looks like the stupid thing stopped again. Now, I have no clue how late I am. Today is going to be an ugly enough day without Julie mad at me, too.”

“Why is tomorrow going to be ugly for my beautiful wife?”

Lily started down the ladder. “My banker. She’s a real nightmare.”

---

When her feet touched the sand, Theos dropped a bit of fairy dust on her.

“In a few days, all of this will come back to you, Lily. But for now, your ring will disappear, you’ll forget the magic, and the ceremony, and only remember enjoying our beautiful time together.”

---

She had no idea how she'd explain her lateness. She tiptoed up the steps and opened the door just enough to slip in without making a sound.

“Midnight. Perfect timing!” Julie pointed to Lily’s fairy wall clock. “Dennis is downstairs in the store and should be done stocking the shelves about now.” She stared at Lily. “You are positively glowing.” She laughed. “I remember hearing that corny line from my mom’s favorite TV show. But you really are.”

“Thanks. My date was wonderful, but I’m so tired I can’t remember all the details. I’ll tell you later. I hope your evening turns out as well as mine did. But don’t get too crazy and stay up too late. I need you in perfect health tomorrow.”

“No promises!”

“Hey, speaking of perfect health, would you mind looking at my back? It itches a little, and I think I might have cut myself on something.”

Julie pulled down the neck of her shirt. “Oh, it’s just a small scratch between your shoulders. Probably from getting pressed against a nail in the guard tower.” She winked. “I remember from experience how cramped they are. But it’s not bleeding or anything. See you.”

Lily looked at the wall clock again and then at her phone. Both said twelve.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

### *Theos*

*Lily has made me the happiest fairy in the land. I would like to have had my brother and parents standing next to me at the ceremony, but while we are good with time management, there are limitations, and even fairies can't be in two places at once. She requires some sort of official local wedding, so there will be a time for all of us to be present, and hopefully, my parents will be well enough to attend.*

*I hated having to temporarily cloud her memory, but before I bring it back, I must make a few of her worries disappear and sweep away a bad dream or two, so she can start clean.*

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Lily wandered through the store the next morning thinking of what she would say to get Katherine Needham to rip up the mortgage application Kelly had cosigned and reinstate her previous one. Julie was at the checkout counter scrolling through her iPad. She held her phone to her ear, and she mouthed to Lily that she was on hold.

“You’re the one who’s glowing now,” Lily teased. “I’m so happy it’s working out for you guys.”

“Yeah, it was great. Good thing you’re still in a good mood, because your banker called to let you know they were bringing another potential buyer this afternoon.”

Lily frowned. Needham knew how to spoil a perfectly good morning. “I’ve got to pay her a visit anyway. I’ll be in my office trying to think of what I’m going to say.”

“Don’t go yet. There’s something I want to show you that will blow you away.”

“I hope it’s a cute cat picture. Needham’s already got me stressed.”

“Not cats, but seriously, you’ll love this.” She spun her iPad and pointed to a spreadsheet dense with rows, columns, and numbers.

Lily was mystified. “What am I looking at?”

Julie enlarged one section. “Here. This!”

Lily brought her face closer. “Am I reading this right? This says we sold twenty-seven thousand Theos, the King

figurines.”

“Yes, and change. And that’s only since midnight. It’s obviously a glitch, but as far as glitches go, it’s pretty cool. I’m on hold with customer service to figure out what’s wrong.” While Julie was waiting, she opened her social media accounts. “Holy moly!” She disconnected the call. “It’s not a mistake! It’s a phenomenon!”

One post after another of Theos with a huge grin and no shirt clogged her feed. In the photo, he was holding a figurine in one hand, and the other pointed to the “Buy” button. She refreshed the dashboard and saw that the number had jumped to thirty thousand.

“His fans are obviously the ones buying them, and they are sharing his post like crazy!” She clicked on another tab. “We’ve taken in close to three million dollars just since midnight. Your friend Theos is a magician.”

Theos strode into the store. “It’s not magic. It’s just a picture and a link.”

He kissed Lily in front of Julie, who turned back to the screen. “Holy crap!” she blurted.

“Sorry. I meant to tell you that we made up last night,” said Lily.

“No, duh. I get that. I’m talking about this.” She pulled up Theos’ page. “He’s right. You don’t need magic when you have over a hundred and twenty million followers.”

“It sounds like a lot. How many do we have, again?”

“Um, under a hundred.” Julie looked at Theos. “You must hold some kind of record.”

He laughed. “Only in kitesurfing. I don’t pay much attention to my pages. I have people who handle all that stuff for me.”

Julie sputtered. “Do you understand how much money the store could make? Using the industry average, if point-zero-two percent of his followers buy one figurine at two hundred



bucks each, it comes to...oh, my God! Lil. The Fairy Kingdom is going to be a fairy empire!”

“Oh, I guarantee they’ll buy at least one,” he said. He pulled Lily tight and kissed her again. “Didn’t I promise to give you some luck, the good kind?”

“All right, you two lovebirds.” Julie joined in a group hug. “I realize we’re all celebrating, but I call a foul. My guy is in Overdale.”

Lily broke away. “Don’t worry. We’ll celebrate a million times. In the meantime, quick question. The money goes straight into our bank account, right? I can get my hands on at least some of it today?”

“Basically, yes. How much are we talking about?”

“The price of this building.”

Julie brought up the tally again. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but yes, easily.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a couple hours, so keep following this, will you? Tonight, we’re all going to dinner, my treat. And bring Dennis. He’s going to be a very busy guy.”

“I’ll reserve our table at the Sea Catch and meet you there,” said Theos. Suddenly, he put his finger to his forehead. After a few moments, his face fell.

“Is anything wrong?” asked Lily.

“Um, yes and no. There’s a lot of stuff going on back in my home, and I just need to be alone for a while to think. Do you mind if I kitesurf before dinner?”

After he left, Julie gave Lily a poke. “What did you guys do last night? I never thought I’d see the day when Theos would ask you for permission to do stuff.”

“That kind of surprised me, too, and I’m not exactly sure why. All I can say is that our relationship did take quite a turn.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Lily walked through the waiting room and directly into Katherine Needham's sanctuary. Her assistant leapt from his desk and raced after her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Needham," he sputtered. "Missus Harper didn't have an appointment and I couldn't stop her."

Needham arched her brows. "I was under the impression we were meeting at your store later today. I am absolutely swamped, what with the new buyers arriving here at any moment. They are most eager to move forward with the transaction."

"Not as eager as I am, and I sincerely hope they didn't travel far," said Lily. "It would have been such a waste of their time."

Ms. Needham pointed to the figurine on her credenza. "Perhaps your salesclerk mentioned that I stopped by the other day. We bought this to add our moral support for your efforts." She noticed the check in Lily's hand and coughed. "Given that the deadline is nearly upon us, we should think it's a little late for these small increments, wouldn't you agree?"

Using her fingers as tongs the way the vice president had done with her first check, Lily let the check fall on Needham's desk blotter. She enjoyed watching the woman's eyes when she read the amount.

"Yes, we would agree," Lily replied. "But as you can discern from the zeros on our check, Miz Needham, we've sold a few more figurines than just the two you bought."

“So it would seem.” She picked up her phone. “Bookkeeping, please.” She covered the receiver. “You understand, of course, that we need to verify your balance to cover a check for ninety-thousand dollars?”

Lily nodded with the confidence of someone for whom transactions like this were commonplace. Needham’s face blanched as she jotted down the balance of Lily’s account. “Can you double-check that balance again, please?” she asked with a fake smile in her voice. She looked up at Lily and tapped her pen on the notepad. “The girl’s checking.” Lily cringed at the derogatory term she used to refer to the female bookkeeper, but she noticed Katherine Needham was smiling for the first time. “I see. Please keep me advised. Thank you.” She crossed off the first number and scribbled a higher one. “Yes, one million dollars will cover a ninety-thousand dollar check quite nicely.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“Why, dear? Is there a problem with the funds the bank should know about?”

“Yes, a complication of sorts. I called my former banker, Mister Wilson, the man you replaced, and he cautioned me that I was dangerously close to having too much money in Your Bank. He suggested I spread it around in what I believe he called multiple financial instruments.”

Katherine Needham gulped and buzzed her assistant. “Tea for two, please.” She made an unprecedented trip around her desk and sat on the chair next to Lily. “I am positively thrilled, and it would seem that congratulations are in order. Why, just yesterday, I was telling a colleague how upbeat I was about your business.” She took Lily’s hand. “And may I call you Lily? I would love to take you to lunch, just us girls. We have so much to talk about.”

“I am so sorry. May I call you Katherine? But today, I am positively swamped.”

“Well, tomorrow, then? In the meantime, I’m sure you are as eager as the heirs to move this little real estate matter along. I’m assuming you still want to go the mortgage route? It’s just

a formality, of course. Tedious government forms, you know. As your personal banker, I'll be happy to fill it out for you. All I'll need is your signature...there."

---

"You didn't sign, did you?" asked Greta.

"Are you kidding? As soon as the witch—no offense, Greta—found out how much money I had, she started referring to herself as 'I' instead of 'we,' I guess thinking it would bring us closer. Anyway, I slid her loan papers to the side and told her I'd be paying cash, less Missus Coffey's portion, as soon as tomorrow.

"It was so funny. She was explaining that a million wasn't sufficient, as if I didn't know the price of the building, when the bookkeeper called her back with the news that my balance had already jumped to five million. I was afraid she'd have a heart attack when I said that *we* were moving all our money to Morgan Stanley, where Mr. Wilson now works."

Jamie straggled in from the apartment. "Hey, I'm hungry."

She handed him a twenty and told him to run to the deli and get whatever he wanted. "You know what I like, and don't forget that we're all going out for dinner tonight."

"All?" asked Greta. "You didn't invite me. Am I still *persona non grata*?"

"Don't be silly. Of course, you are included. Because of you, Theos and I got back together. This is a celebration!"

---

Lily heard a rumble and assumed yet another storm was headed their way. She heard another one and realized it was a growl coming from her stomach. Julie had taught her how to refresh the sales dashboard, and she'd been staring spellbound at the insane number of orders that kept flowing in and lost track of the time. And she was starving. She flipped off the

screen and wove her way through her crowded store to the front, to look for Jamie and the lunch she sent him to pick up.

“He didn’t come back,” Julie reported. “But we’ve been swamped, as you can see, so I may have missed him. I guess you already looked upstairs, right?”

When she didn’t find him in the apartment, she headed to the deli. The whole staff knew her son, and nobody had seen him. She ran back to her store.

“Something’s wrong! They said he never came in.”

“I wish I could help, but—” Julie gestured to the line that had gotten longer in Lily’s absence. “I’m sure he’s fine. He is eleven, after all.”

“That’s the problem. He’s eleven.”

---

Pushing through the hordes of people on the boardwalk who were minding their own business and oblivious to her panic made her feel trapped and claustrophobic. She ran down the steps to the beach and asked the lifeguards, but they hadn’t seen him, either. He wasn’t with Theos, because she saw his pink kite in the sky and him flipping and rolling. That meant Theos couldn’t help her look, either. She shook her head at the irony. Overnight, she’d become the richest person in Myers Beach, and yet with all her money, at that moment she was alone and felt helpless.

She made another quick trip to look in the apartment and went next door to check Greta’s office sofa. Then she went back out to the boardwalk. The wind had changed directions, and black clouds were taking over the sky. She heard a boom of thunder and immediately searched the sky for Theos, and was relieved not to see either him or his pink kite.

She made a couple more frantic trips up and down the boardwalk, popping in and out of each store and shouting Jamie’s name. On her last pass, a woman called to her from an open storefront to say she’d seen a man hustling a boy across

the beach. She remembered him calling the boy Jamie, and she pointed toward the jetty.

Lily felt the first drops of rain as she was racing back to her shop. Greta was standing outside her store, and Lily quickly explained that Kelly had kidnapped Jamie and was taking him to the jetty. “Please call the police. I’m going there now.”

The angry sky and frequent thunderclaps promised a violent storm. People scattered to seek shelter, so the walkway was clearer, and she made better time. As she hustled along the stretch of beach that separated the end of the boardwalk from the jetty, she passed families frantically packing their umbrellas and chairs to flee the beach and head to parking lots. Stronger winds and crosscurrents slowed her slog through the deep, soft dunes and whipped up sand that pricked her face and stung her eyes, and limited her visibility. She screamed out his name. A lightning bolt ripped through the sky, and during the silent pause before the massive thunderclap vibrated the sand below her feet, she heard him cry back.

She screamed his name again and thought she heard a faint reply. As she scanned the horizon, a blaze of lightning lit up the jetty, and she could hardly breathe when she saw Kelly dragging her frightened son up the rocks to the top.

She kicked off her sandals and waded into the turbulent water. The rocks were the most slippery at the base, where chaotic waves sloshed crazily in every direction, and she lost her footing. Sharp coral scraped her ankles before she could finally catch hold and pull herself up the wall of rock.

“Leave him alone!” she shouted.

When he heard his mother’s voice, Jamie shrieked. “Mom. He wants to kill me!”

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

### *Theos*

*While I was in Lily's store sharing her good fortune, my brother Alias reached me with some terrible news. Our mother and father's health had taken a turn for the worse. He used the expression, "on their last legs," which made me incredibly sad. The damned pandemic and quarantine hadn't allowed me to see them during their last days, and I know they had wanted to meet Lily. It kills me that I can't see them before they pass on.*

*I thought going through a few stunts in the air might help calm my mind, but instead, as I made a pass near the jetty, I heard Jamie's cry and saw Kelly dragging him up the rocks. I was about to intervene when a blast of thunder came from nowhere and literally knocked me out of the sky.*

*I fell on the beach and dug myself into the sand as fast as I could, but I feel weaker than I've ever been, paralyzed really. I can't help Jamie, and I'm too weak even to contact Alias, who is planning to come to town any day. There's nothing I can do until the storm passes and I get my strength back.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY

After she called the rescue squad, Greta grabbed her wand and flew out the door. Her raven cloak billowed as she leaned into the wind and raced along the deserted beach toward the jetty. A miniature cyclone snatched her witch hat. She grabbed at it with her free hand, but the wind was stronger, and she watched it spin around and sail out over the water.

The rain soaked her hair, creating a mass of matted tendrils that blocked her eyes, and when she reached to brush them aside to see, another gust of wind whipped off her whole wig and whirled it up somewhere in the dark and as if on cue, a flash of lightning revealed to the world her natural, closely cropped hair.

She trudged on with her head down, covering her eyes with her hand to protect them from the wind, water, and sand. Something huge, rubbery, and pink smacked her in the face, and as she struggled to brush it away, her feet got tangled in some rope and she tripped headlong into Theos' kite, the only pink one on the beach. Knowing he would never intentionally abandon it, and fearing something awful might have happened, she found the line and followed it hand over hand to where it disappeared into a mound of sand thirty yards away. The wind had blown enough sand away to reveal Theos lying on his side and still strapped into his harness.

If not for weak and periodic convulsions, anyone might have thought him dead.



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“Don’t make me jump with you. I’m scared.” As hard as he tried to yank himself away, Jamie was no match for his father’s grip.

“You’re scared because you’re a little sissy.” Kelly squeezed his son’s arm harder.

“Stop, you’re hurting me!”

Kelly pitched his voice higher. “Stop, you’re hurting me!” he mimicked. “Damn! You’re such a disappointment.”

Lily heard the exchange, so she knew she was getting close to the top.

“Don’t worry, Jamie. I’m almost there!” She looked at the next rock and found a good handhold, but a large wave pummeled her before she could grab it, and she lost her grip. She pushed on her good foot to give her some leverage, but she slipped and a razor-sharp rock tore a deep slice into her flesh. “I just need a little more oomph.”

Suddenly, giant wings emerged from her back and flapped three times, which boosted her up and onto the top. Since she hadn’t felt them appear, she didn’t notice them disappear, and she chalked her success in scaling the rocks up to a combination of adrenaline and a fortuitous gust of wind.

Father and son were at the precipice. Kelly was scolding Jamie, and when the boy tried to pull away, he slapped him. Behind Lily, flashing red and blue lights bouncing along the beach announced the arrival of two squad cars, and as their searchlights scanned the jetty from below, a policeman’s voice blasted repeated warnings through his megaphone for Mister Harper to release the boy. A second searchlight from a rescue boat added to Lily’s confidence that Jamie could be saved, but watching the raging waves rock the ship only reminded her of the rocky perils that lay below.

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“Wake up, Theos! Wake up!” Greta shoved at his ribs and rolled him on his back, but he made no reaction. She got up and waved her wand. “As the Great Witch, Greta, I command you to rise!”

A gust of wind sent a piece of nearby driftwood flying, and it stung when it smacked the back of her hand. She dropped her wand, and it skittered disjointedly along the sand. She chased after it, but another gust scooped it up, and Greta watched it disappear into the darkness.

She knelt and listened to his heart, and despite the noise from the violent storm, she thought she detected a beat. She double-checked his pulse at the neck and felt a spasm. He made a little cough and opened his eyes, and though she couldn't decipher his gibberish, she thought it sounded like a conversation. He gagged, gasped, and struggled so hard with his speech that she thought he might be epileptic, so she opened his mouth and stuck her hand in to prevent him from choking on his tongue. When his head shook her hand free, she slapped his cheek and shouted in his ear. Suddenly, he became still and unresponsive again.

She climbed on top of him and leaned into his rib cage to administer old-fashioned artificial respiration, but after trying several times with no discernible response, she collapsed on him to catch her breath. She forced herself up, and terrified she was losing him, she pounded on his chest.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

### *Theos*

*I've never been in such agony, and I am beyond despondent. I fear that I'm about to experience the epic transformation my father told me about, and if I am right, it means that my father has died.*

*I can tell that Greta is desperate to help, and she's trying everything she can think of, but this situation is grave and requires big magic. If ever there was a time for her to put away her witch mumbo jumbo and embrace the fairy in me that's right in front of her, it's now.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

“I’ll make a man out of you yet, you little crybaby.” They were standing on the very edge looking down at the raging water.

“What are you trying to do?” Lily screamed. “I don’t understand.”

He shouted at her. “My father made me jump when I was his age. It turned me into a man, and it’s time for him to grow up, too.”

“Your father turned you into a monster.”

The official-sounding voice crackled again from the megaphone. “One final warning, sir. We’re coming up!”

“You’re drunk! Let him go!” Lily begged. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

Kelly pointed to the flashing lights and warned Lily that if she didn’t call them off, he would jump and take Jamie with him.

Her stomach churned as she dragged herself to the ledge and frantically waved the all-clear sign.

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Greta shouted at the top of her lungs, “*Xerbiat Arbaracerim!*” She did a quick scan to see if he’d reacted to her spell, but he remained motionless. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she put her mouth close to his ear.

“Theos, listen to me. I believe you can hear me. You and I both know that I’m not really a witch. I only pretend to have magical powers. But right now, I want you to know that I wish more than anything in the world that I could do something to save you.”

She rested her head on his bare chest, but she jerked away when she felt a slight burning sensation on her cheek. When she looked down to see what it was, she noticed his pendant pulsating. She reached for it, and as she held it in her hand, she saw his eyelids twitch. Then three fingers drummed on the sand.

“That’s it. Come on.”

Lightning ripped from the north. To the south, another fiery streak slashed the horizon, and both met just above the shoreline in a spectacular blaze that illuminated the beach with a strobe effect that matched the flashing of the pendant stone. When she turned it toward the blaze, his eyelids popped open, and Greta watched in astonishment as his deep blue eyes turned white. His body convulsed in one drawn-out ripple motion from his feet to his head, and his skin radiated first yellow, then magenta, and finally a brilliant cyan.

Sparks spewed from the pendant and landed on his chest like drops of oil on a hot skillet until they grouped together in a great swarm of blinding light over the blue stone of his pendant which she still rested on the palm of her hand.

With another bolt, the fiery mass blasted up into the sky with a massive force that threw Greta backward onto the sand. When she opened her eyes, Theos was pulling her up.

He reeled in the lines to the kite and planted his feet on the surfboard. Then he reached into his dive belt and tossed something to Greta that she recognized from the skit.

“Thanks, Greta, but you won’t remember a thing.” He flung the kite into the air. The wind caught it instantly and pulled the lines taut.

“Go!” he commanded. In an instant, the board lifted him up into the ominous storm.

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The voice from the megaphone blared again. “Too late, ma’am. We’re coming up, anyway.”

Kelly saw two additional squad cars scream into formation on the beach, and he turned back to face the water. He pointed to a spot and pulled Jamie closer. “That’s where we’re going to land, okay?”

Lily screamed. “Are you stupid? It’s all rocks down there! It’s suicide!” Kelly held up Jamie’s hand, and the boy screamed. “Kelly, stop! I beg you.”

He stepped to one side and stumbled when his foot fell into a small crevice. Jamie took advantage of the falter, but as he pulled away, he slipped on a rock. Kelly caught him by his shirt before Jamie tumbled off the cliff.

Lily was a few feet away. “Get back!”

Kelly held up his hand. “Don’t come any closer! I’m going to show this fairy boy how to be a man.”

Theos swooped in from behind. “Did somebody mention *fairy*?” The front of his surfboard struck Kelly in the back and knocked him to the ground. Theos soared back up and kicked the board to make a sharp turn, and he yelled to Jamie. “Get ready. I’m coming back for you.” Then he disappeared into the black sky.

Kelly tried to stand, but a blast of wind kept him down. The taut lines to Theos’ kite strained against the intense force of the gale, and Lily feared they’d snap. Then she saw the tip of his board reappear.

Kelly was still hanging on to the boy’s shirt. “Let. Him. Go!” Theos shouted.

“Make me!”

Holding the kite steady with one hand, Theos flicked his finger at Kelly. “I said, let him go!”

Kelly crumpled to his knees and released the boy without a word.

“Jump, son!” shouted Theos, and Lily watched him scoop Jamie onto his board and swoosh back into the air. A few seconds later, he dropped Jamie on the beach, and as soon as he released him into the safety of Greta’s arms, he took off again for the jetty.

Relieved that Jamie was finally safe, Lily lurched toward the safety of the rescue team, whose heads she could see finally reached the top. Kelly got back on his feet and managed to trip her, and when she fell, she slashed her legs on a rock. As she scrambled to get up, he grabbed her from behind and held her in an armlock.

“If you won’t live with me in this life, then I’m taking you with me to the next one.”

A thunderclap distracted him, and he missed seeing the kiteboard strike at the back of his knees. Lily tried to fling herself away when he fell. But he yanked her up, and the rescue team watched in horror as he pulled her over the edge with him.

The team was radioing the rescue boat when they saw a man and a woman, each with giant translucent wings, rise up and hover over them. Theos threw a handful of dust on the crew before he took Lily’s hand, and they flew away.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

They snuggled and gazed quietly at the calm ocean and the infrequent whitecaps that turned silver under the brilliant moon. The past few days since they'd rescued Jamie had been wonderful, and Lily hadn't been this happy in a decade.

She fondled the stone in Theos' pendant. "I don't remember the blue being so iridescent. It's stunning, by the way, if I do say so myself. Do you think you will ever take it off?"

"Why should I? Look at all the good luck it brought."

While Theos seemed upbeat, she knew he wouldn't get over the death of his parents quickly. She was sorry she hadn't gotten a chance to meet them, and she promised herself to do what she could to help him through his grief. She touched his chin.

"I love the new life we're starting together, and it's hard to believe that we are married and that I am a real fairy." She looked at the wedding band that had reappeared on her finger. "And a queen, no less."

"So, now you do remember the ceremony and everything else that happened up here?"

"Yes. And I'm even aware that I sprouted wings, and we flew off the jetty together, but I have no idea how I did it. I have so many questions about how my new magic works."

"Don't worry. You'll pick it up quickly. Now that I'm king, I have newer powers to explore, too."



“Well, I’d like to try out something now. So, what do I do? Are there magic words? And what do I do with my hands?”

He showed her how to make easy things appear and disappear, like food and cups of tea, which she mastered easily. He also explained that there were no such things as magic words in her new world. He admitted that humans liked to hear phrases like *abracadabra*, so sometimes he and his brother would say, “poof.”

“As queen, the protocol would be to wave your wand like I saw you do in your skit, but I’ll tell you a secret that my mother told me when I was a child: fairies don’t need wands. They’re only for show.”

They played with her newfound power for a while, and then she sat with her arms around her knees.

“Mister King, I was thinking that we might spend some time at your place, for a change. I realize that this spot holds fond memories, but I’m tired of the cramped quarters. Also, I don’t want Jamie to learn at school that his crazy mother is putting out every night in the lifeguard tower. He’s had enough problems.”

Theos laughed. “Don’t worry about Jamie. He’s going to be fine. But watch now, Missus Queen. Is this more of what you had in mind?”

He waved his hand, and the three walls of the lifeguard tower pushed out, and the floor where they sat spread to the size of a hotel lobby. A fountain appeared in the center, and comfortable furniture popped up and arranged itself in charming seating areas. A butler asked if anyone required refreshment.

“I can do that?” she asked.

He stroked her hair the way she liked. “Eventually.” He gave her a poke. “In fact, I have someone at our home waiting to show you the ropes. I believe you know her. Her name is Selena.”

“My Selena?” He nodded and waved his hand, and the tower returned to its original size.

“And just where is this home of ours? Julie and the others have been asking me where you’ve been staying all this time, and I was embarrassed to say I didn’t know.”

“I bought a place a while back.”

“Where?” Greta kept her up to date on real estate transactions, and she hadn’t seen a decent property listed in months.

“You can see it from here. Look!” He turned her around and pointed to the blinking antenna lights.

“Where am I looking?”

“Up there. Follow my finger.”

“I am, but all I see is that creepy facility. What am I missing?”

“That’s my house. The place had been vacant for a couple months, but it was so super-secret, nobody knew that the organization had moved out. Anyway, I worked out a deal.”

Lily gave him a playful jab. “So, that’s how we had permission to use the beach.”

“Sneaky, huh?”

“You said *our* house. You really can’t expect us to live in a cement block bunker.”

“It’s more than that, Missus Queen. I believe the right word in English is ‘compound.’ You can’t tell from here, but there are several buildings, which my brother and I renovated. We turned the main house into an Italian palazzo with a killer view.”

“The forbidden side of the jetty has been such a mystery. I can’t wait to see it, but I didn’t know you liked Myers Beach enough to buy a place.”

“Why not? From the beginning, I smelled something in the air.” His eyes sparkled. “And I found the locals absolutely captivating. I’ll take you all up there tomorrow if you don’t mind another hair-raising ride in my Land Rover.”

She leaned back on his shoulder and positioned her head so she could see the lights. “Jamie will be thrilled. He’ll get to live in the same house as his idol.”

“And he’ll have an indoor/outdoor pool,” Theos told her. “We designed it to be suitable for my parents, so it’s quite regal, but you’d have plenty of room for a studio or anything else you’d want, and of course eventually I’ll be working from home.”

“Okay, you’re going a little fast for me. So, what did you mean, work from home? I thought we had a kingdom somewhere.”

“We do, or I should say we did. It’s a long story, but I’ll give you the Cliff’s Notes version.” He filled her in on the tragic contamination, the state of the pandemic, and the need to relocate the fairies to Myers Beach, where he and his brother hoped to manufacture new dust from scratch.

Lily’s head was spinning from the new information, but she wanted to help. For that, she needed to free herself from her current obligations. Since she was now a real fairy, she didn’t need to surround herself with fake ones, and because she was unimaginably rich, she no longer needed to run a store.

So, together they proposed closing the shop and turning the business over to Julie, who could sell everything online. Theos’ team could handle the social media part, and the foundry could continue to manufacture and drop-ship the products. Theos suggested they buy her and Dennis the foundry as well and make it a package deal.

“Julie deserves this. It’ll be chump change for us, and they’ll have a business to last a lifetime.”

“When the fairies arrive, they are going to need a place to congregate.” Theos suggested they keep the shop’s name and convert it into a tea house. He even knew someone who could help set it up.

“Listen,” he said. “We have so much to do, but before the night is over, do you want to make one more wish?”

Lily didn't have to think. "I wish you'd make love to me."

He looked at the drops on his shirt. "Are you sure? It's starting to rain."

"Positive." She waved her hand, and a giant umbrella covered the tower. The bolted-down chair disappeared, and soft bedding and fluffy pillows covered the floor. Then she saw him remove the two fingers he'd rested on his temple. Panic covered his face.

"I just got the word. Quarantine or not, we're needed back home right away. They found out who was behind the sabotage, and the ministers have called a meeting. As soon as we get officially married tomorrow, we must leave to consider a full evacuation, and I'm going to need your help.

"But first things first. Your wish is still my command."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Greta's ears were still ringing from the engine's earlier backfire when the driver ground the gears and the old clunker let out a deafening screech. She tried to wave away the cloud of exhaust, but the acrid fumes were already burning her eyes, and she had to squint to watch the honeymooners sputter off down the road in their rusted-out Land Rover.

She didn't understand why Theos and Lily opted for such a rushed and unceremonious exit. With their combined fortunes, they could have left in a stretch limo with a proper chauffeur. But she had to admit, the pink Land Rover with its missing doors and dented hood fit the vibe of their quickie bare-bones beach wedding.

They'd taken her on a couple of hair-raising excursions in that car, jostling over the treacherous, bumpy back roads of Myers Beach. Without a door, she never could find anything obvious to hang onto, and she always worried about falling out. Theos insisted his car was the perfect beach ride, but Lily confided to Greta that the wreck allowed him to roam around town incognito and throw off celebrity hounds.

Superstars. Greta had always pictured herself snagging one like Lily did and living a life in the spotlight, perhaps because she'd experienced a tiny taste of celebrity herself a dozen years earlier as a stage singer. She often longed to re-experience that adrenaline rush she got from the adulation of strangers each night she'd perform. As she watched the lovebirds round the corner, she thought how remarkable it was

that Lily had never cared about either stardom or the lifestyle it could bring. Somehow, though, she'd ended up with both.

Greta rubbed at her recovering ears and turned to Julie, who was pinching her nose against the odor. "I need a drink!" Greta proposed.

"It's a little early for me, but I'm starving," Julie answered. She pulled at Greta's arm and made a sharp turn to head toward their favorite beach bar. "Tiki Hut?"

Greta nodded. "I feel so out of the loop. Were they going straight to the airport?"

"Lilly mentioned something about flying to maybe Hungary or someplace. But I don't see how she could. As of last week, she didn't own a passport."

They were crossing the street when they heard the familiar sound of Theos' tailpipe clanking on the pavement. The Land Rover reappeared, crossed in front of them, and shook to a stop, blocking their path. Theos dangled something out the rear passenger window, and since Julie was closer, she stepped toward the car.

"Give this to Greta, will you, please?" He handed her the pendant with the blue stone he always wore. "Tell her I explained everything in the envelope. She'll know what I mean." The driver popped the clutch, and the car jerked forward, leaving both women puzzled.

Julie passed her the necklace, and Greta stared at the stone. "Where's the envelope?"

"I don't know. He said you'd understand."

"Well, I don't." Greta stopped and looked up at the hissing sound that came from the trees behind them. Julie followed Greta's gaze and took in a flock of rare California Condors that were flapping their wings chaotically. The leader grunted, and they flew out of the trees in all directions before circling around and organizing into an exquisite formation. They glided noiselessly for a moment, and the women held their breaths as the magnificent birds made a beeline out over the Pacific. Suddenly, behind them, they heard a great swooshing

sound, as though another group of birds had flown off in a different direction.

Greta was about to comment on the rare sighting when they heard the muffler again and saw the Land Rover emerge from an alley. It passed without stopping this time, but Julie noticed there were no passengers.

“I wonder what happened to Lily and Theos. I didn’t see them in the car just now, did you?”

“No.” Greta shook her head. “Weird, huh?”

“Yeah, nothing about the way they left makes sense.” Julie looked at Greta and back at the pendant. “You know, I changed my mind. I’m going to have that cocktail, after all.”

At that hour, they had no trouble getting their usual table inside under the central palapa and out of the punishing afternoon sun. The enormous wicker throne-like chairs, with backs that fanned out like peacock feathers, always made Greta feel like a queen. So did the service. As regulars, they seldom had to place a drink order, because everyone on the staff knew that she, Lily, and Julie always started with rum punch. Their server Eric arrived with a tray with three drinks in enormous coconut shells and a blank face.

“What gives? I’m used to seeing three queens at this table.”

“One of us queens married a king,” joked Greta. She gestured for him to leave the extra drink on the table next to her own.

“Way to go, Lily! Who was the lucky guy?”

“Theos,” Julie replied. “They had a small ceremony on the beach a little while ago. Greta and I were witnesses.” Most of the locals were familiar with Theos as the celebrity kitesurfing reigning champion, but only Greta, Julie, and very few others knew he had married Lily an hour earlier and that they had just left Myers Beach for their honeymoon.

Eric whacked the empty tray on the side of his leg. “So, Theos was straight after all? Damn! Just my luck.”

“Yeah, and talk about luck.” Greta held up her coconut with both hands and knocked her shell against Julie’s. “Here’s to Lily, the luckiest woman in the world.” She meant it. After Theos swept in, her chronic streak of bad luck had ended. Her business earned tens of millions of dollars overnight, and her divorce and personal problems evaporated with the rest of it. “And to think she wasn’t even in the market for a man.” She sucked down a long drink and leaned back in the chair.

“Are you?” asked Julie. Greta flinched. She had been pretty much an open book with Lily, but she didn’t recall sharing anything that personal with Julie before. The basis of the trio had been two pairs of friendships. Lily and Julie, and Lily and Greta. Girl talk between Greta and Julie had almost always centered on Lily, or the store, or issues the three of them were going through as a group. Being alone with her now at the Tiki Hut where all three had gathered so often wasn’t exactly awkward, but chatting without Lily in the mix made for a different dynamic.

Greta wondered if inviting her to grab a drink was a good idea. She wasn’t sure if she was in the mood for Julie’s bubbly personality, and she worried Julie would be oblivious to her need for at least a modicum of introspection about seeing her best friend leave. But while she warmed to the idea of a newfound intimacy with Julie, she knew it was too late. After they left the restaurant, she knew they would go their separate ways, and her immediate and trusted small circle of friends would undergo a dramatic contraction.

“I don’t know, Julie. I guess if I stumble across the right guy.” She picked at the fibers of her coconut shell and quietly pondered Lily’s absence. Through those years of Lily’s many challenges, Greta had gladly listened, advised, and cried with her. And as her best friend, Lily had relied on her to prop her up. Until that thing happened between them. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. “Do you think she honestly forgave me?”

Julie didn’t have to think. “A hundred percent. I mean, she asked you to be a witness at her wedding. She definitely



wouldn't have done that if she was holding a grudge, would she?"

Greta accepted the logic of her argument but didn't buy it. Her unbreakable friendship with Lily had taken a beating, and while superficially things were back to normal, her intuition told her something was unfinished in their relationship.

"I suppose. I'm just not sure. I feel that Lily changed. Maybe it's just marrying Theos. I don't know." She was glad Julie was with her, after all, and she smiled and raised her coconut again. "Here's to the three of us. We made quite a team, didn't we?"

She didn't expect to see Julie's face scrunch in response. "Gosh, Greta, you make it sound like our friendship is over."

Greta swallowed. "Isn't it, in a way? You don't have a reason to stay here anymore. They're supposedly turning the store into a tea house that some stranger will run for them. You already live out of town with Dennis, so when we say goodnight, you'll be gone, too."

Julie looked down at her drink and swirled the ice with her finger.

"Yeah, about that. Dennis and I didn't want to dampen the mood at Lily's celebration by telling anyone. But we broke up."

"You're joking, right?" Her revelation didn't make sense. Greta had watched them the night before at the private wedding dinner, laughing and dancing like lovers.

"No. And don't be sad or anything. I'm only twenty-three. A week or so ago, he and I were out, and I watched a group of single people about my age having fun together at the next table. I asked myself why I was tying myself down so soon. Which is why I'm moving back to Myers Beach."

Greta sat up at the good news. "So, we can stay friends, after all?"

"Better yet. I'm thinking we'll be neighbors. I should hear tomorrow if I snagged the apartment at the other end of the boardwalk. Wish me luck, will you?"

Greta was thrilled that Julie would be back but sorry that she had her hopes up about an apartment that Greta knew wasn't available. She made it her business to stay on top of the Myers Beach real estate market, and she knew that the cool top-floor apartment with the view on three sides that Julie was talking about was not for rent. According to the scuttlebutt, the entire building was for sale. She held up her crossed fingers for luck, anyway.

Eric kept their coconuts filled, and between raucous spurts of reminiscing, they became more comfortable with each other and eventually didn't feel the need to fill each moment with conversation.

"Before I move into my new place, I'm giving away all my old college furniture," Julie blurted out of the blue. Loud gurgling sounds came from the straw as she sucked down the last of her punch. "I'm ready for more mature stuff."

Greta assumed that when Julie learned the apartment she wanted wasn't going to be available, she would look for an alternative rental, and she offered to help pick out new furniture. "I've got a pretty good eye."

In her exuberance at the offer, she made a wild gesture with her hand and knocked her drink off the table. She signaled for another round, and Greta added chips and salsa to the order, thinking they both could benefit from some solid food.

Julie leaned in. "So, let's get back to your love life. I don't know much about it, except, well, for...that." Greta coughed and rearranged three birds of paradise stems of the table's centerpiece. She slid the vase to one side. Julie was talking about the kerfuffle over Greta's spending time with Theos while he and Lily had been split, when Greta had tried to patch things up between the couple, but Lily had misunderstood Greta's intentions. Lily had specifically told Greta that she'd forgiven her, but Greta wasn't convinced.

"I honestly never could figure out why Lily was so mad at you. Nothing nefarious happened between you and Theos."

“No, of course not. I wasn’t trying to snag him out from under her. Everyone knew they wanted to get back together. But if it hadn’t worked out between them, I wouldn’t be honest if I didn’t admit that I would have been open to a relationship with him. I mean, guys like him don’t come around very often.”

Her voice trailed off as she contemplated the sad ending of that unfortunate misunderstanding. She moved the vase back to its original spot and took another long slug of punch to push the thoughts out of her mind.

Julie continued, “I think you’re overthinking what happened. You were more than best friends. You were her mentor, too. I should know. She reminded me often enough.”

Greta placed the pendant on the table. She remembered Lily telling her the whole story about giving it to Theos the day they met.

“Lily claimed he never took it off, and since he always said that pendant brought him luck, I wonder why he gave it to you,” said Julie.

“Yeah, I know. It’s like gifting someone with an engagement ring from another lover.”

“Well, think hard about it. You two were laughing before he got into the car to leave with Lily. Didn’t he at least give you a clue then?”

Greta shook her head, and a small smile tugged up the corner of her mouth at the memory. Theos had pulled her aside and rambled on about how grateful he was for everything she’d done for him, particularly during his hour of need, and how he wanted to return the favor.

“I was sort of stuck somewhere between total confusion and pleasure. I didn’t have the slightest idea what he was referring to, but it wasn’t every day a superstar like him offered a favor. And then out of the blue, he gave me a poke and asked me what I wanted more than anything in the world. I didn’t have to think. I told him I wanted to do what Lily did.

Marry a king of my own like him and live a fairytale life like her.”

Julie knocked back the rest of her punch. “You do realize that Theos isn’t an actual king, don’t you?”

Greta waved away the barb. “Yes, of course. But then get this. With a totally deadpan expression, he asked if I’d settle for a handsome prince. I pretended to take his question seriously, and told him I would because I’d never been greedy. We both got a good laugh out of that, which is probably when you saw us.”

“That *is* funny,” Julie agreed. She downed a huge gulp of punch.

“Anyway, let me finish. He said he wanted to continue with the whole fairy motif, and he patted his pants pockets and apologized again for not having a magic wand or any fairy dust on him. I went along with the gag and offered him my personal wand.”

Julie laughed at the image, and a mouthful of punch went down the wrong way. She sputtered. “You carry a freaking travel wand.”

“Hey, I’m Greta the Witch and my store sells witch stuff. I try to stay on brand.” She pulled the wand out of her purse and waved it around their heads.

“Gosh, Greta. A moment ago, we talked about him not being an actual king. Do I have to remind you that you’re also not an actual witch, just because you call yourself one and you sell witchy things?”

“You’ll be happy to know Theos was as sarcastic as you. So anyway, then he stared at me with those incredible eyes and bopped me on the head with my own wand. ‘Poof,’ he said. ‘Granted.’ He was so cute.”

“He’s a charmer, all right. What did Lily call it, his charisma?”

“Oh, he’s way beyond that. That man has serious mojo.”

Julie picked up her drink and tilted her head. “Whatever it was, he had both of you under his spell.”

She was showing a side of herself that Greta hadn’t experienced, and she liked what she saw. Julie was fun, genuine, and very insightful, and Greta understood why she and Lily had been so close.

“So, what part of marrying a king do you think appeals to you most: the fame or the fortune?” Julie asked.

“Who in their right mind would turn down either? Believe it or not, I’d like to end up with someone who is kind, like him.” She fingered the stone, thinking about how busy she was, and wondering if she even had time for romance. She took a sip. “I am so impressed that you and Dennis can stay friends after splitting up. How do you do it?”

Julie toyed with the bamboo swizzle stick. “We have to. We have a foundry to run.” Greta swallowed hard but her face didn’t move. She had understood that Dennis only worked there. Julie noticed Greta’s blank look, and she squirmed in her chair. “Oh. You didn’t know? Before they left, Lily and Theos bought the foundry and gave it to Dennis and me, fifty-fifty.

“Wait! They just handed over the foundry?” Greta held up her drink.

“Yeah. We’re planning to run the figurine business from there.”

“They gave you the business, too? I’m waiting for the punchline.”

“I’m not joking. She said it was to thank me for my loyal service. It’s crazy how much money we stand to make. I can’t speak for Dennis, but I should be set for life.”

The color drained from Greta’s face. She hadn’t expected a gift from them, and while she wasn’t surprised that Lily and Theos would have doled out some of their largesse to Julie, she was shocked at the amount. They had obviously given a lot of thought to the immensely generous gift. Transferring the deed and finishing the necessary paperwork so fast with

everything else on their plates couldn't have been done at the last minute. Since Theos and Lily were now gone without giving her anything, it was obvious that leaving her out had been intentional. Happy for Julie, but feeling numb by the revelation, she turned and stared out over the sparkling ocean.

“Wow. That's great, Julie. When did all this happen?”

Julie remained perky. “Just yesterday. I still can't believe it.”

Greta remembered what she had said about moving back to Myers Beach and renting the apartment, and suddenly she understood what Julie had meant.

“So, when you said you were buying that apartment, you meant the entire building, didn't you?”

“Yes. Didn't I say that?”

Greta leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms. “I don't know. Maybe. So, I gather they must have given you money, on top of everything else?”

“Yes. Five million. One for each year I worked there.” She scratched the back of her neck. “You seem surprised. I assume they gave you at least that much.”

The pause was both long and awkward before Greta answered. “I told you she hadn't forgiven me.”

Julie saw Greta's eyes water. “Didn't they give you anything?”

Greta blinked away the beginnings of tears. As a grown woman, she wasn't about to cry over something as childish as not receiving a gift, and she refused to let the inequality get to her. She reached for the pendant and dangled it over the table.

“Well, yes. If you count his dollar ninety-nine necklace, and whatever was supposedly in the envelope they forgot to give me.” She looked away and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Even the way they gave it to me seemed like an afterthought.”

Julie slammed her coconut shell on the table. “There must have been a mistake. Lily wouldn't leave you out. Listen, I'm

giving you half of mine.”

“Aww, that’s sweet, but I don’t want her money. Besides, I don’t need it. I can’t believe I said that, but I don’t.” She pushed the pendant off to the side and signaled for another round. “Anyway. I didn’t come here to have a bad time. Tell me about your new building and the apartment, which I’ve only seen once, a long time ago.”

Julie seemed relieved at the change of subject, and she described every detail of the apartment’s floor plan. They laughed and reminisced and changed subjects many times. Before long, they’d lost track of the time, and Eric astonished them when he announced that the Tiki Hut was switching to the dinner menu. Greta realized that they had been gabbing for over three hours, and she was enjoying her new friendship with Julie. So much so that they decided to stay for dinner.

“What the heck,” Julie sighed. “It’s Thursday night and I don’t have to work...ever again.” Julie ordered the Fisherman’s Platter for two and pointed at their empty glasses. “And two more of these.”

Shortly after ten o’clock, Eric returned with a pot of hot tea. “Compliments of a man at the bar.” Greta and Julie craned their heads to see who it was. “Oh, he left, and I didn’t catch his name, but he paid your tab, too.”

Julie jabbed Greta’s arm. “Maybe he’s your prince.”

Greta snickered. Plenty of guys had bought her drinks, but never tea. “Well, if he is, he’s going to have to learn that I prefer coffee. Anyway, I doubt he had his eyes on me. The way things are playing out today, you’re the one he’s probably interested in.” She shook her head and hoped it wasn’t true. Julie landing a guy on top of everything else would be too much to handle in one day.

“Hey, I know that stone,” Eric said when he set down their new drinks. His hand hovered over the pendant, and he looked into Greta’s eyes. “Theos let me touch it the other night when I waited on you at the Sea Catch. And maybe you remember that five minutes later someone at table six gave me a two-

hundred-dollar tip.” He reached to touch it again. “Can I? I mean, who knows? It might bring me luck again.”

Greta held up the leather thong. “Knock yourself out.”

“God, it looked so hot around his neck.” He clutched the stone, and when he pressed it against his chest, he flinched and handed it right back. “Yep. Still burns a little.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway, I’m done for the night, ladies. See you soon.”

Greta made Julie drink both teas. They were both tipsy, but Julie was worse. A surfer boy with bleached blond hair was making goo-goo eyes at Eric at the bar as Julie and Greta passed by on the way out.

Eric winked at Greta and got up from his stool. “Hey, do you suppose I could buy that pendant from you? It’s brought me nothing but crazy good luck, and Greta the Witch certainly doesn’t need another good luck charm.”

She thought for a moment and then went back to their table where she’d left it. She grabbed it and hung it around her neck. “No, sorry. It’s not for sale. Theos gave it to me, and I’m very fond of it.”

They kicked off their sandals and took the long way across the beach toward Julie’s old parking space behind The Fairy Kingdom. In the distance, faint reddish streaks flickered across the sky.

“Don’t you love heat lightning? It’s so mysterious,” Greta said.

“Yeah. It’s got all the razzle-dazzle, but without the storm.”

The colorful spectacle kept them company until they passed the front door of Lily’s store. They stopped short when they saw the windows covered with butcher paper.

“I know I’m a little drunk,” said Julie. “But I swear these weren’t up earlier today.” She searched for a way to peek inside and found a tiny slit, but soon realized it was too dark inside to make out anything. Greta pressed her ear to the glass and strained to listen.



“Why am I listening?” she giggled. “Nobody’s going to be in there at this hour.”

Julie jingled her keyring. “Want to check? I was going to stop by to pick up my personal stuff one day anyway. Maybe it still works.”

Guessing that whoever covered the windows didn’t have time to change the locks, they went around to the back door to make their breaking and entering less conspicuous. Greta took Julie’s lone car in the parking lot as a sign that no one else was around, and she was glad the lock turned easily. She was desperate to use the upstairs bathroom.

“The apartment is completely empty,” she reported when she came back down. “The only thing left was a roll of toilet paper, thank goodness.”

“There’s nothing in the office either.” Julie’s voice echoed in the vacant space. “Gee, it was a store two days ago. How did they get rid of everything so fast?”

When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Greta pointed to the checkout counter. “Not everything. They left two figurines. One is Theos, the King, and the other is the one that Lily modeled after herself. I always forget the name she gave it.”

“Arielle, but since they got married, Theos talked her into changing the name. Now, we’re selling them online as Lily, the Fairy Queen. Isn’t that romantic?”

Greta walked closer. “Looks like there’s something else.” Somebody had written Julie’s name on the side of a cardboard box next to the statues.

Julie pawed through the contents. “This is my stuff, all right. Someone packed it up for me.” Voices outside the front door brought them to attention and they stopped talking.

Greta tugged on Julie’s sleeve. “Let’s get out of here. And I’m not letting you drive home. You can crash at my place.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

### *Theos*

*When I told Greta and Julie that Lily and I would be flying back to my home, I didn't let on that we wouldn't be going by plane. Lily is a fast learner, and she manipulated her wings with astonishing finesse. She has already brought me more joy than I ever could have imagined, and though the days ahead seem dark, I will use all my power to protect her and fill her life with happiness.*

*She and I decided that keeping Julie and Greta in the dark about our powers for a while longer is best for everyone, so we had my brother Alias drive us to a blind alley so they couldn't see us fly away on our own power. Coming up with the thirteen California Condors to distract them was genius, if I do say so myself. The birds escorted us all the way home, too, which was a big help, because they took turns carrying Jamie.*

*Why Mister Györfi sabotaged our dust still baffles me. Before we consider how we will retaliate, though, Lily and I must attend to the remaining fairies and get them to the safety of Myers Beach. The Fairy Kingdom Tea House that my cousin Dos is setting up for us in Lily's building will make a comfortable haven for rest and recuperation, and thanks to the elaborate spa he's building on the upper levels, we'll have a place to treat them. Hopefully, the dust Alias is making with the elements we've accumulated so far will be strong enough to get them back on their feet.*

*When we do punch back on Györfi, we'll have lots of help. Fairies everywhere are eager to avenge my father's death.*

## THE STORY CONTINUES

The story continues with book two, *Summer Storm*, available at Amazon.



[Claim your copy today!](#)

## AUTHOR NOTES

FEBRUARY 22, 2023

I confess. I wrote *Summer Thunder* on a bet, and the stakes were high. My reputation was on the line.

It was cold and damp that March evening in Scotland when I joined a group of colleagues around the fireplace. We'd wrapped up a full day of workshops and classes at a writers' conference, and we were doing what authors do best—sitting around talking about writing.

The conversation wandered to poking fun at genres other than our own. Most of us wrote crime or thrillers, and apparently, I made a disparaging comment about how much easier it would be to write a romance or a fantasy.

“You wouldn't know where to start,” said someone.

Encouraged by three fingers of whiskey I took it as a dare and suggested I not only was capable of writing a romance, but I could write a fantasy romance.

“Pfft!” I said. “I've even got the plot.”

I didn't know the first thing about writing romance novels, and to the best of my recollection, I'd never read one. Stunned that after all those years of teaching and practicing yoga I could still let my ego get the best of me, I shut up and blamed my impulsiveness on the whiskey.

“So, tell us!” The woman who goaded me was my good friend, or so I thought, and I made a mental note to get back at her one day.

I had just fallen into a gigantic hole that I'd dug myself. With only seconds to climb out, I reached not very far back in my brain to an area of expertise that hadn't failed me—a lifetime career in pitching advertising to clients.

I stood. “Okay. A beautiful woman with lots of personal baggage sells fairy figurines in her shop at a Renaissance festival. A mysterious, hot surfer guy walks in looking to buy fairy dust. Turns out he is an actual fairy prince, and his kingdom recently ran out. Naturally, the encounter changes both of their lives.”

“That could work,” said a publisher friend with the credentials to know. “But set it in on a beach in California instead. You’ve always got to think about the movie.”

On the spot, I created a fictional beach boardwalk. I kept the fairy prince, but in this revised version he also happens to be a champion kite surfer. The story was writing itself, and on the plane home the following day I scribbled plot and character notes. For the next few months, I was obsessed with writing the story entitled *Summer Thunder*.

Nobody was as surprised as I was that putting the first book together got me hooked. I had so much fun I couldn't stop and wrote three more.

If you enjoyed reading about Lily's and Theos's magical romance in *Summer Thunder*, I believe you'll want to find out what happens to her best friend Greta the witch and her run-in with a rival witch, Zsa Zsa Hadju in *Summer Storm*. *Summer Lightning* and *Summer Cyclone* complete the four-book Romance/Fantasy series Magic at Myers Beach.

*Summer Thunder* will always have a special place in my heart, too, because my life partner of thirty-one years read the manuscript the day before he unexpectedly died, and one of the last things he said to me was how much he loved the story and how proud he was that I'd written it.

I appreciate feedback, so please visit me with your comments. I'm easy to find because I'm all over the place.

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## OTHER WORKS BY THE AUTHOR

### ***Summer Storm, Magic at Myers Beach, Book 2 (Coming soon)***

The clock is ticking as Theos' kingdom suffers increasing casualties from the contaminated fairy dust and the quest to find the additional ingredients to make a new supply becomes more urgent.

Greta the Witch, the shopkeeper next door to the Fairy Kingdom, longs for fame and fortune and a fairytale romance like her best friend Lily. She meets Dos, an attractive man who is not the royalty she was seeking, but his kindness and a mystical quality in his voice win her over.

But Zsa Zsa Hadju, a rival witch with look-a-like features complicates her budding love relationship and skyrocketing popularity.

### ***Summer Lightning, Magic at Myers Beach, Book 3 (Coming soon)***

Theos's brother, Alias, the stunningly handsome surfer once mistaken as a heterosexual beach ne'er do well, turns out to be a brilliant scientist with quirky, mysterious powers and a boyfriend.

As they find additional elements to make fairy dust, Alias' incomplete formula goes haywire with side effects that complicates his effort to save all three fairy kingdoms which now have only two months of fairy dust left.

Alias confronts his past with the Third King and discovers that he holds a key to solving their kingdom-wide catastrophe.

***Summer Cyclone, Magic at Myers Beach, Book 4***  
**(Coming soon)**

With only one month of fairy dust remaining and one more ingredient left to find, Theos, Lily, Zsombor, Greta, Alias, and the Third King must join forces to fight the human who sabotaged their fairy dust and who continues to threaten the fairies who have relocated to Myers Beach.

Will the fairy dust Alias finally creates from all nine elements be strong enough to succeed, or will it take a force even greater?

**ALSO BY A. B. GIBSON**

***The Dead of Winter***

Four young professionals pick the wrong weekend to overnight at a family-friendly pumpkin patch B&B. When a scary moonlight hayride spirals into twenty-four hours of deception, they must escape the farm's mayhem to avoid becoming unwilling participants in a horrific family ritual.

***High Voltage***

When an unassuming hiker fresh off the Appalachian Trail needs extra cash, a curio shop owner in Harpers Ferry, WV, suggests day work at Winters Farm. What seems to be a lucky break leads to a series of unexplained disappearances of fellow hikers, including his own fiancée. After stumbling onto the dark truth about the farm, his frantic search requires a desperate escape from Ma, the farm's kooky owner. But a foreboding electric fence stymies his chance for freedom.

***Tracked to Kill***

A handsome young billionaire tech superstar goes missing on the 2100-mile Appalachian Trail. High tech and low tech collide, and the rescue becomes complicated when his uncle's

counter-terrorist group learns that a notorious assassin is out to get him first.

No one is who they seem in this intricate and fast-paced plot of global intrigue, revenge, and a ragtag group of colorful hikers with cryptic trail name aliases. Scenic Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, provides the stunning and dramatic backdrop for the unpredictable ending.

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