

# **The Bluebell Vengeance**

**By**

**Tansy Rayner Roberts**

Mendra Melody just loved humans. They were irresistibly round and pink and luscious, like ripe Christmas strawberries.

Take the specimen she had just woken up next to. He wasn't classically perfect (she didn't like them too pretty) but he had an interesting face and wild, curly hair. You could tell just by looking at him that he was an artist, or a writer — anyway, that he didn't work for a living.

Mendra could still feel the imprint of his long, tapered fingers on the inside of her thighs. His nails were speckled with blue paint, here and there along the cuticle. Definitely an artist.

While he continued to sleep, Mendra slid out from under his doona and headed for the bathroom where she would find evidence of a girlfriend, if one existed. It was hardly worth giving him a second tumble if there wasn't some sweet, naïve little chickadee to drive crazy about it.

Oh, yes. There was a girlfriend. She obviously stayed over on a regular basis — the bathroom cabinet was too tidy to suggest otherwise. Rose soaps and bubble bath pellets crowded the razors and general man-things. Freshly laundered towels lined the rail. A house-proud girlfriend; this was going to be fun.

Mendra's goth makeup was a nightmare scrawl across her face. Her Blood Mandarin lipstick had been kissed off her mouth and deposited somewhere near her ear. Her long black hair needed not only a brush, but was greasy from the frantic dancing and the sweaty, Olympic-standard sex.

A flicked of her fingers and she shimmered into something far more respectable: Day Goth chic, her lipstick and mascara a little less intimidating than the night before, and her hair braided back instead of swinging to her waist.

Much better. She yawned and smiled at herself, then turned back towards the bedroom. She had a human to play with, and a girlfriend to plot against.

Who said romance was dead?

After the man in question had woken up, and they had located almost all of their discarded items of clothing, the two of them walked the short distance to the nearest cappuccino bar for breakfast (note: he lived in a very trendy area, convenient for vintage clothes shopping, art cafes and gay novel-writing waiters). By the time the coffees and croissants arrived, Mendra had discovered:

a) Her new lover's name was Glen

b) He was indeed an artist, though his cagey use of the word 'painter' made her suspect that he painted houses rather more often than, say, masterpieces

c) He was a very good liar. He said he didn't have a girlfriend with such sincerity and conviction that any woman who hadn't looked into his bathroom cupboard would believe him in a heartbeat.

Mendra found this very intriguing. Every pore of Glen's body suggested 'good guy' and yet he could present a major lie without a single guilty tell — not a blink or a twitch or a smile. Mendra did like a mystery.

"So, Mendra," said Glen once his credentials had been established. "What do you do?"

She sipped her cappuccino to disguise her panic. She couldn't think of any of her usual stories. What was wrong with her? Was he such an accomplished liar that he had put her off her game? "I work for a...family business," she said. Godsdamnit, that was the truth! Bad enough that she had given him her real name.

"What kind of business?" he asked, a perfectly reasonable question.

She smiled into his very human brown eyes, wondering how he would react if she told him the whole, unvarnished truth. "Mail order stuff." Curse frocks, poisoned cloaks, trick wands, bondage gear made from frog skin leather and unicorn bristles... "Fashion."

"Oh, interesting." He popped a bit of croissant into his mouth. "So, when can I see you again?"

Mendra opened her mouth, debating between 'never' and 'when your girlfriend says it's okay for a threesome.' Her mobile sang out with the theme tune of The Addams Family (da-da-da-dum click-click) and relief washed over her as she reached for it. *No. You can't see him again. You practically held his hand on the way here! And you think he's cute. You hate cute! Could you stab a bunny rabbit in front of this man? I think not.*

The voice of reason in her head was so loud and demanding that it took a little while to recognise her cousin Chat on the phone.

"Get over here now, Menge. It's an emergency!"

She snapped the phone shut. "Sorry, Glen. Emergency."

“Can I have your number?” he asked. *Damn it, you are so not attractive. I can give you up any time I like. Right now, for instance.*

“Sure.” She scribbled a mobile number on a napkin and only after she had walked away did she realise she had given him the right one by accident. *Accident? Yeah, right.*

“This had better be important, Chat,” Mendra said as she entered the kitchen of the Big House on Hemlock Street.

He was waiting for her, wide eyed and wired. “It’s Granpap. You know that big curse he’d been working on for the VIP client? It hit a shield spell. A good one.”

“No one’s good enough to block a Granpap special,” Mendra scoffed.

“Someone is,” said Chat. “He’s a mess. If we don’t fix it before Granmam and the pares come home from Europe...”

Mendra shuddered at the thought of Granmam in a rage. Not to mention her parents and Chat’s, almost as bad as each other... “Who did this? Not those eBay wizards again? The anti-curses they’ve been selling are a joke.”

“I don’t think it’s wizard work at all.”

“One of the other Dark Families, looking for revenge?”

They rounded the corner together, into the Library.

“Oh, my ñ“ said Mendra at the first sight of her Granpap. This was a man who had been cursing kittens, princesses and Hollywood starlets since the Roman Empire was new. He was the most feared of all the Dark Lords who had survived the Great

Transylvanian Massacre. A man so very, very evil that even the Sex Pistols used to watch their language around him.

He sat in the middle of the floor, surrounded by bluebells. They grew up out of the carpet, twiddled between his bare toes, and lay in scattered handfuls across his lap. A braided wreath of them lay upon his silver hair, and more jutted out from his long beard. He was smiling as if he was genuinely happy.

“Crap,” said Mendra. “It’s the fucking fairies.”

“Don’t be like that, my sweet,” said Granpap. “Why can’t you just relax and enjoy the scenery? It’s so... peaceful.”

“Hippie fucking fairies,” agreed Chat.

“Mum’s regular supplies aren’t going to cut it,” Mendra said heavily. “For this, we need the garden centre.”

“Zebedee’s Plants and Garden Supplies” wasn’t your everyday garden centre. Due to the owner’s herbalist sensibilities, and his wife’s deep commitment to medieval botany, you could get just about any strange or unusual plant.

Mendra was carrying a box of wild widow-wart, African hearth grass and poisonous daisyblades to her car when she noticed the smell of bluebells. The heady, sickly scent of the fairy flowers hovered over her Renault like a soggy cloud. Small tendrils of leaf and stalk were twisted around one of her back tyres, and against her windscreen.

“Bugger!” The spell had followed her. She put her box of plants on the ground and opened the driver’s side door. A clump of bluebells sprung out of the cigarette lighter. Mendra was utterly unsurprised when the engine failed to turn over. Fairy magic was notorious for fucking with all forms of modern technology.

“Gah.” Mendra leaned her forehead on the steering wheel. She could call Chat to pick her up in the family bus, but he was already panicky since both his and Mendra’s parents were coming home tomorrow. For a twenty-four year old, Chat was still afraid of his mum and dad.

She hoped this thing with Granpap would be relegated to an amusing dinnertime story about how Mendra and Chat saved the day, rather than further evidence to support the general family theory that the younger generation was so not cut out for the stickier side of the family business.

But bluebells were the worst. If they didn’t peel this spell off Granpap soon, there wouldn’t be a Big House left to greet the pares on their return — just uber-meadow from one end of Hemlock Street to the other.

“Mendra?”

She jumped at the sound of the friendly voice. “Gah! Glen?”

Her one-night-stand leaned over the door of her car. His smile was so warm she could feel it heating up her stomach from the inside out. “I didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

“Um, me neither. What are you doing here?”

“I just finished a job — painting. You know. I paint. Walls, mostly.” He revved up that smile again, though it faltered a little when he spotted the state of her dashboard.

“Are those... bluebells?”

Mendra pushed herself out of the driver's seat so fast she practically ended up in his arms. Not intentional, that move, oh no. "Car. You have a car here?"

"Well...a truck."

"Brilliant. I need a lift. If I don't get these plants to my Granpap straight away, he'll..." *be stuck with the personality of a giant flower-sucking garden gnome for all eternity*, "...be really grumpy."

Glen laughed. "Heaven preserve us from grumpy grandpas."

Mendra gave him a long-suffering stare. "You really have — no — idea."

"What did you bring him for?" Chat demanded as Glen carried Mendra's box of sinister plant life into the Big House on Hemlock Street.

Glen smiled in a non-confrontational way. "You must be the brother."

"Cousin," said Mendra, thanking all the blood-sucking saints that Glen wasn't likely to meet any of her brothers any time soon. "Don't mind him. Can you pop the plants in the family room?"

"Righty ho," said Glen.

"What are you doing with a man who says 'Righty ho?' " Chat demanded, as soon as Glen was out of earshot. "Our Granpap is turning into a frigging flowerpot hugger, and you're taking time out to get laid?"

"I didn't take time out." Mendra wondered if making out at the traffic lights counted as a delay. "Maybe I multi-tasked..."

“Mendra!” called Glen, from the family room. “Do you know this old fellow?”

“Granpap!” Mendra gasped, heading down the corridor.

“He must have escaped the bathroom!” said Chat, following her. “*None* of this is my fault!”

The family room was usually an oasis of simplicity, compared to the high Gothic grandeur of the rest of the house. The furniture was red velvet and black leather, and the walls were decorated with family portraits rather than the usual collection of Dark Lords and Evil Queens that Granpap emulated.

Today, riot of springtime. Bluebells hung from every surface and corner like a riot of springtime. Plagues of baby’s breath and violets joined them. Granpap dangled upside down from the spiked light fittings, his long white beard dripping with petals and posies. He was singing a song about sweet little squirrels. With the word nonny in it.

Glen held the box of plants in a death grip. His eyes roamed the walls anxiously. He didn’t seem overly comforted by the watchful presence of Auntie Batwing and Great-Great-Uncle Spyderwart. Did mortals never pose for portraits with their favourite horned blood-parasites proudly displayed on their laps?

Granpap hiccupped, and tiny pink bubbles escaped from his nose and mouth.

“It’s reached the third stage!” Chat yelled. He grabbed a pot of daisyblades.

Mendra snatched at the hearth grass and widow-wart. “Close the door,” she snapped at Glen. “We can’t risk the fumes escaping.” She began the chant, and Chat joined in on the chorus.

“Dark Lord, resist this fairy spell. Blight their power, give them hell.” It was a simple charm, one that they had learned in their cradles. Far more useful than Hey Diddle Diddle, which wasn’t much use once you had reclaimed all the runaway crockery.

Glen staggered, still only halfway to the door. “I have to get out of here...”

“No one’s stopping you!” Mendra said as she shredded the hearth grass. “Close the door on the way *out*. Dark Lord, resist this fairy spell. Blight their power, give them hell.”

Glen hit the carpet, holding his head in his hands.

Chat threw the daisyblades at Granpap’s torso. They pierced his flesh even through the thick layers of beard and bluebells. Tiny droplets of blood ran down Granpap’s body.

“Dark Lord, resist this fairy spell. Blight their power, give them hell.”

Granpap screamed, a long horror movie of a scream. Mendra and Chat hit the floor on either side of Glen, covering their noses and mouths. There was an explosion of bluebells.

Mendra kept her eyes tightly shut even after the noise had faded. She wasn’t sure she wanted to see the results of their little botany experiment.

“Isamendra,” said a deadly voice. “Chatsworth. What exactly are you two playing at?”

It sounded like the real Grandpap. Mendra peeped through her fingers.

He hovered several inches off the carpet, his usual black cape and opera suit billowing around him. “You do know that I will kill you for this?”

Mendra pushed herself to her feet. “Well, that’s hardly fair. I can’t think how you could possibly blame either of us for this whole bluebell disaster.”

“Not you, girl, or the idiot boy. I am talking to him.” He raised his arm, pointing at Glen.

Mendra took a deep breath. “Granpap, I think you’re a little confused.”

“Confused?” said the Dark Lord, his voice dripping with charm. “I do not think I am the one who is confused, you incompetent excuse for a witch. I am not the one who brought a filthy *fairy* into the private sanctum of your family.”

Mendra stared at Glen. He didn’t look anything other than mortal. “You’re kidding, right?”

Granpap’s voice rose into a roar. “You think it is a joke? Not only do you bring a fairy into this house, but the very one that wrought this evil spell upon me. His fingernails are still stained with vile bluebell juice.”

“That’s paint,” said Mendra. “He paints. Mostly houses.”

“Actually,” said Glen, standing up. “Mostly flowers. My real name is Bluebell Glen, from the Clan Glen. And that spell you just took off your grandfather was definitely my handiwork. I was hired last week to pop up a shield at the Bank of Greenelves to protect them from warlocks, witches, goblins and terrorists. Um. I am a fairy. Sorry?”

A guttural roar burst out of Granpap. He whirled toward the lanky fairy in a tornado of rage and curse magic. Mendra summoned up her own power as a shield and pushed herself between Granpap and Glen.

Granpap reared back as if he had been physically struck. “Traitor,” he hissed. “Oathbreaker!”

There were two inviolate rules in the magical world, fairies and witches alike. The first one was about family -- family always comes first, and the happiness of the family is more important than the happiness of the individual.

The second one was about promises. Once given, one magical being to another, a promise was unbreakable.

“What oath?” Mendra yelled. “Thou shalt not protect thy boyfriends from thy *nutso* grandfather?”

A strange look came over Granpap’s face. “Family comes first, Isamendra. You broke one of the Inviolable Rules to protect a clover-sniffing, dirt-humping, tinsel-snorting *fairy*. You are no longer my granddaughter.”

Mendra blinked, and she was standing outside the Big House. Glen crashed into the gutter, his arms and legs flailing. She stepped towards the house, but an invisible barrier held her back. “No!”

“What’s wrong?” Glen asked from the gutter.

“He’s revoked my Family status,” she said. It was too big to contemplate.

“Um.” He stood awkwardly. “Can I give you a lift back to your place?”

Mendra felt numb. “My flat is Family property too. I won’t be able to get in.” This had happened to her third cousin Serenilla after she was caught in bed with a leprechaun. Serenilla’s entire apartment block was still surrounded by a hedge of thorns. She took up pole dancing and librarianship to scratch a living without Family support. Mendra didn’t even know what a Dewey Decimal *was*.

“My place then,” suggested Glen.

“You’re a fairy,” she said accusingly.

“I’m a fairy with a truck.”

“Fair point.”

Granpap’s word was law. That ran through Mendra’s mind as the truck growled away from Hemlock Street. Mendra’s pears had never once stood up to him about anything that mattered. And as for Grandmam... well, she would stand up to Granpap in a heartbeat if she ever disagreed with him. But in seven hundred years, she never had.

So that was it. She was no longer a curse witch. No longer a Melody. Just... Mendra.

She was so busy with her own thoughts that she was out of the truck and halfway up a disturbingly floral garden path before she realised that Glen had not brought her to his flat. “Where the hell are we?”

“I said I was taking you to my place. Home.”

She stared at him. For a non-human, there was something awfully mortal about that stray lock of hair that kept flopping in his face. “Your place is a flat. The neat freak place with the scented bathroom.”

“This is my home too. I just have to stop in for a few minutes.”

She stared at the house in a panic. What was this, Goldilocks Avenue? Primroses grew around the windows, and there were hollyhocks everywhere. The letterbox was pink. “Oh, no. This is your *family home*.” Talk about rubbing it in. “Glen, I can’t cope with fairies right now.

“My parents are away,” he said in a soothing voice. “I said I’d feed the pets. We’ll be out of here in fifteen minutes.”

Relieved of the horror of meeting glitter-dripping parents, Mendra allowed him to steer her inside. “Don’t you have a girlfriend to get home to?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” he said. “I told you that.”

“You were obviously lying. Why else would your bathroom smell of... flowers. Oh shit,” she said miserably. “You are a fairy.”

There was nothing for it but to have a cup of tea. Mendra sat at the country pine kitchen table, debating whether or not she should beat her head against it.

Glen put the steaming cup in front of her, followed by a plate of Arnotts Cream Assorted. “Sorry, we’re out of fairy bread.”

She knocked back the tea. It barely touched the sides. “How can you joke about this? Did you know who I am — what I am — when we got together?”

“Of course not.” He sounded shocked at the idea. Fair enough, really. Her Granpap’s reaction had been pretty bad, but Mendra couldn’t imagine how fairy parents would cope with their son fraternising with the enemy. “I didn’t suspect until I saw the bluebells in your car.”

“So it’s a coincidence that Granpap ran up against *your* curse shield?”

“Not entirely. I’m the only one making major-league curse shields except the eBay wizards, and no one buys from them any more. But you and me? Yeah. A horrible coincidence.”

Mendra tried to recall the night before. Why had she picked Glen out of the crowd? Why would her subconscious hook her up with a card-carrying member of the Bright Families? “Just the other day, I complained that the Universe kept sending me blokes who were wrong for me,” she muttered. “Ever notice that the Universe has an evil sense of humour?”

He reached out, and touched her hair. “Right now, I’m not complaining.”

The Universe paused for a moment or two, to laugh at them. Mendra wasn't listening.

The front door crashed open. "Bluebell, is that your mouldy old truck outside?" screeched a female voice. "P the kettle on, will you?"

Mendra jerked away from Glen in a panic. "Fairies! Mustn't see me here. Bad. Fairies bad."

"It's worse than you think," said Glen. "That's one of my sisters."

Luciana of the House Glen was a fairy. There was no denying it. Her brother Bluebell (Mendra was still firmly calling him 'Glen' inside her head) might get away with looking vaguely 'artistic,' but his sister had been seriously doused with the glitter gene.

She was tiny and blonde, with tapering fingernails and a giggle that could shatter frozen vodka. When she sat at the table, Mendra could hear the burr of invisible wings vibrating against her chair back.

She also wasn't fooled in the least when Glen introduced Mendra as 'my friend.' "Does she know?" she shrilled.

Mendra rolled her eyes at the lack of tact. "That he's a fairy?" she said sweetly. "Oh, yes. He told me on our second date." *If you count getting a girl evicted from her family home a date.*

"Aren't you sharp for a mortal?" said Luciana with something halfway between a smile and a leer.

Mendra managed to keep her mouth shut at that one. If Glen's sister wanted to think of her as a redblood, fine.

"So have you heard from Mummy and Daddy?" asked Luciana.

“They called my place earlier to say they were finished with their business in Prague and would be home tomorrow,” said Glen.

Mendra almost swallowed her own tongue. Prague. That was where the pares had been, last she heard — supporting the revolutionary magic-workers of the city against the smug Sweetness and Light corporation that had bought out the entire city to use as a back lot for filming inspirational movies. There had been open fighting in the streets: warlocks, witches, goblins and werewolves vs. fairies, pixies, talking bunny rabbits and the occasional Hollywood vampire.

“Are you all right?” Glen asked her.

Mendra wanted to break something. How dare he be so considerate of her feelings? Didn’t he realise they were at war? “I have to go,” she said, pushing herself to her feet.

“Don’t let us stop you,” said Luciana, rolling her eyes “If I’d known you like them prickly, Bluebs, I could have set you up with a curse hag.”

“I’ll see you out,” said Glen.

“Don’t bother,” said Mendra, heading for the door.

He followed her anyway. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere’s better than here,” she hissed. “Our parents have probably been trying to kill each other over in Prague.”

“It saves us having to wait for them to come home to do it,” he joked.

The smell of hollyhocks in the front garden made Mendra’s shoulder blades itch. “Funny. It’s just hilarious the way you have totally screwed up my life.”

“Stick around. Maybe I can repair some of the damage.”

“Why are you being so nice to me? It was just a fuck, Glen, a lousy one-night stand. Don’t try to make this more than it is.”

He gave her an annoyingly patient look. “If what we have is so meaningless, why have we barely spent an hour apart all day?”

“Because you tried to kill my Granpap!”

“You know that’s not entirely true.”

“I can’t get my family back until you are out of the picture.”

“Are you sure you want them back after the way they treated you?”

Any regrets she had about dumping him instantly grew wings and flew to Cuba. “And how would your lovely folks react if they knew I was a witch from a Dark Family? Would you give them up for me?”

“Mendra... I’ve never felt this way about anyone.”

*Emergency, emergency... red lights flashing, get out of there!* Mendra hesitated on the doorstep, momentarily caught by Glen’s deep, sincere brown eyes. In a parallel universe, he kissed her and she kissed him back, and somehow it all worked out for the best... But this universe was the one where he leaned in as if to kiss her, and she socked the eye before transforming herself into a flock of bats.

Bat travel was the worst. For a start, there were the orienteering issues of trying to find your way across a stretch of unfamiliar suburbia when your consciousness was spread

over a multitude of small flying rodents. Then there was the fact that bats, when it came right down to it, weren't at their best in the mid afternoon.

But, hell. It was a great exit.

Somewhere between "Fairyville" and Mendra's inner city flat, her mobile rang. The vibrations of the Addams Family theme tune threw bat radar into utter confusion, and she fell in a shower of membranous wings, scratchy claws and long black hair.

Luckily, a handy cemetery handy broke her fall.

Mostly reassembled, Mendra answered her phone on the fourth ring. "Yes?"

"Dahhhhhling." There was only one woman who could pronounce four 'h's in the word 'darling.'

"Hi, Mum."

"We've heard all about it, sweetness," said Valmai Melody. "Chat sent us a very detailed email, and it seems obvious to me that the old man's finahhhhhly lost it. Hallucinating fairies left right and centre — I mean, reahhhhhly. Does he expect us to believe our little girl is mindblowingly stupid enough to get hot and sweaty with a sparklebunny?" She laughed for quite a long time.

Mendra tried to resist the urge to stab her own veins with her fingernails. "Will you be home soon?" The thought of the older generations rampaging to the rescue was suddenly a huge relief.

"Of course, dahhhhhling. We'll be home any minute. Your father and I will handle evehhhhrying, and you'll be back in the bosom of the Family before you know it."

"What... exactly do you mean by handling everything?"

“Oh, honey pie, this shield spell that blew up in the old man’s face has obviously knocked something sideways. He needs some good old fashioned hexing to get him back on the straight and nahhhhrrow.”

Mendra squeezed her mobile tightly in her fingers. “Who exactly are you planning to hex?”

Even over the phone she could hear her mother’s frosty smile. “Who else, sweetpea? That son-of-a-bunny who set the wretched shield up in the first place. Mister Bluebell Britches.”

Mendra flew back to the Big House in Hemlock Street so fast that her bat wings had stretch marks. Chat was waiting for her by the gate. “Did they give me back my Family status?” she asked as she reassembled her arms and legs from the last few bats.

“Not exactly,” said Chat. “Grandmam used her Senior Crone’s pass to create an Exception Door in the barrier Granpap threw up, but he’s the only one who can actually reinstate you. And he started spitting bluebells again about ten minutes ago — looks like our anti-hex hex didn’t do much of a job.”

“Fan-frigging-tabulous,” said Mendra. She reached forward and felt the air between Chat’s left ear and the letterbox. Sure enough, there was a narrow doorway. “Do you know what they have planned for Glen?”

Chat looked embarrassed. “I’m not sure if I should tell you. It’s... you know, Family. Why do you care so much what happens to some stupid daffodil-shagger?”

She reached out and flicked Chat in the forehead. “He’s a person, you spineless wonder. Can you really stand back and watch our dearly beloveds take him apart?”

“If it’s a choice between him and me, damn straight,” Chat said, rubbing his forehead. “Rebellion isn’t exactly wise in a family where everyone has their own ceremonial axe. They want me to eat this joker’s major organs, I’m going to say, ‘spoon or chopsticks?’ So would you, a couple of days ago.”

Mendra hesitated. “Maybe. But not now.”

“So what happened? Poof, a big cloud of fairy dust and suddenly you’re less of a bitch than you were before Tinkerbell showed you a good time? He makes elves look butch, he can’t be that well equipped.”

“This isn’t about sex,” she said firmly, heading for the front door.

“So, what? You’re in loo-ove?”

Mendra whirled around. “Don’t say that word near this house! Don’t even think it!”

Chat looked panicked. “Shit, Mendra, I was kidding.”

She gave him a shifty look. “So was I.”

“Oh, you liar!”

“Just... shut up, can you do that, Chat? For me?”

The kitchen was the largest room in the Big House, and that was saying something for a building that included two Great Halls and three Ballrooms.

Exactly three square metres of the kitchen were dedicated to the preparation of food — and most of that was the fridge. The rest of it was a huge expanse of tiled floor -- easier to hose blood off -- and one massive granite ceremonial table.

Granpap was tied to the table, gibbering like the monster out of a 1930's Frankenstein movie. A fresh haze of bluebells surrounded him, and new ones kept springing up out his ears and nostrils. Mendra's mother, gowned in her best ceremonial Versace, was stirring something evil-smelling in a microwave-safe tupperware container. Her father, as usual, was sitting out of the way, reading a newspaper. He wiggled his fingers at her. "Hi, honey."

Uncle Chatsworth and Auntie Dimelza marked out arcane symbols on the floor, using two pastry brushes and the blood-coloured contents of another tupperware container.

"So," said Mendra, in what she hoped was a bright and non-threatening voice. "What exactly is the plan here?"

"That should be obvious," said a menacing voice right behind her shoulder.

Mendra was proud of the way she glanced casually over her shoulder, as if she was only barely interested in who was standing there.

It was Grandmam, in full battledress, ready for action. Mendra had no doubt that there was no sight in the universe more terrifying, or ominous.

The fishnet stockings were a particularly intimidating touch.

Grandmam had been around since the days of Marie Antoinette. Even now, she carried herself as if a full boned corset and wide metal crinoline were taking the weight. Today, she was in black lace and leather mode, short skirt and long boots. This was the woman who had parachuted into WWII France to sell rabid hippogriffs to the Nazis. Her hair was perfectly set in a bounce that was more appropriate for a Bond girl than a nanna.

Actually, she had been a Bond girl. It had been the most convenient way to smuggle enchanted firearms into Europe in the Sixties. These days, she was more into animal

torture, and to that end had a chain of pet boutiques ranging from one end of the country to the other. Any remotely fashionable witch's familiar had their fur styled and ears pierced at Trim and Catwax.

Grandmam's heels clicked against the granite floor of the kitchen. "Don't tell me you've forgotten the basic precepts of vengeance spells," she said with a sneer. "The only way to cure your Grandfather permanently is to take the snivelling creature who perpetrated the original spell, cut him open, turn him inside out and hold him upside down until every drop of magic in his body is a congealed puddle on the floor. Then we can build the hex to end all hexes — send his accursed family into oblivion and protect ours from their ridiculous sparkledust antics FOREVER."

Mendra couldn't help noticing a hint of black powder clinging to Grandmam's nostrils. Marvellous, she was snorting the mandrake root again. It would be a miracle if anyone got out of this alive. "You're speaking metaphorically about the turning him inside out and upside down, of course?" she suggested.

Grandmam smiled, thinly. "Henri, what do we have in the way of meat hooks?"

Mendra's Dad glanced up from his newspaper. "I'm sure we can scrounge something up, Arguerite."

Okay, no reason to panic. Mendra just needed a brilliant plan in brand spanking time. Maybe she could sidle outside and send Glen a text from her mobile, warning him to leave the country for a decade or two. That could work. If she had his number.

Shit.

"Where's the prisoner?" Grandmam asked.

"I'll get her," said Chat, sounding depressed.

Mendra whirled around. “We have a prisoner now?”

“How else to lure our little flower artist into a trap?” said Grandmam with a smirk.

The Addams Family theme tune rang out from within Mendra’s handbag. “I have to get that,” she said gratefully, and fled through the french doors to the garden.

Outside, she scabbled for her phone. It was an unfamiliar caller number, but she had no doubt who it was. She could feel him glaring down the aether at her. “Glen?” “Mendra, what have you done with my sister?” He sounded angry and forceful, in a Mr Darcy kind of way.

Mendra tried not to swoon. No time for this now, but she was going to have to remember for the future that his ‘bossy’ voice was sexy as hell. “Sister? What sister?”

“Luciana. The sister who was kidnapped by a warlock and a werewolf about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Haven’t seen her...” Mendra’s voice trailed off as she stared through the french doors into the kitchen. A petite, struggling blonde fairy in a pink ballet dress and Prada sandals was being handcuffed to the light fittings. “Oh, crap.”

“She’s there, isn’t she?”

“Glen, stay away. It’s a trap, obviously. My family are going to kill you.”

“What am I suppose to do, trust you to help her escape?”

“That’s optimistic of you. She wasn’t awfully nice to me when we met.”

The french doors burst open, and Valmai Melody stood there, her designer suit fluttering around her. “That’s him, isn’t it?” she demanded of her daughter.

Mendra lowered the phone. “It’s a phone sex line. I was feeling needy.”

Grandmam appeared beside Valmai. The two slender, striking figures in black looked like Best Actress nominees at an Oscar's after party. "Be True," Grandmam cursed.

Mendra held up the mobile. "Glen says hi. Can he have his sister back?"

Valmai stepped forward, her slasher movie fingernails outstretched towards her daughter's phone. She mimed as if pulling something long, heavy and resistant through the air towards her.

A scream started in Mendra's phone and stretched outward, the painful sound vibrating up her wrist.

The phone bulged, twisted and pulled apart to reveal a hand, and then an arm, and then a... Glen... He collapsed in a pile of yaargh! on the grass at Mendra's feet.

"That was a brand new phone!" Mendra yelled at her mother. "And... this is getting way out of hand." She didn't like the looks that her mother and Grandmam were giving her. Evil looks. The looks that women only gave each other when there were no men watching.

"So, your Grandpap was right," said Grandmam in an "Ah, so many Dalmations, so little time," kind of voice. "You have been fornicating with the fairies, grand-daughter of mine."

Mendra rolled her eyes at the word "fornicating." Honestly, it wasn't like Grandmam didn't watch the O.C. "I think you broke him." She crouched down beside Glen.

"They're coming for you," he said in a hoarse voice.

There was a buzzing sound overhead. Several dozen balls of light smashed against the invisible shield that domed over the Big House. Then a veritable hailstorm of fluffy balls of light exploded above them.

There was a cracking sound.

“Get — in — side!” said Valmai, dragging on her daughter’s arm. Grandmam already had Glen sprawled across her broad shoulders. They crowded into the kitchen together.

“The fairies are besieging us, then,” said Mendra’s dad, turning another page of his newspaper.

“It took them about half an hour to break through the shield last time,” noted Uncle Chatsworth. “When was that, ‘67?”

“1969,” said Auntie Dimelza. “We had to set that whole man on the moon thing up to distract the neighbours.”

“The shield’s a lot stronger than it used to be,” said Uncle Chatsworth. “Should take them at least forty five minutes.”

There was another cracking sound, louder than the first. “More like fifteen,” said Auntie Dimelza. “Fairy shield-crackers have improved a lot since then, too — haven’t you been keeping up with the journals?”

Grandmam dumped Glen on the floor and marched towards the struggling, bound figure of Luciana. “Now then, Young Chatsworth. How would you like to have a go at your first Fairy Sacrifice?”

Chat looked horrified. “Um, what an honour. I’ve never done any Old Style spells at all, you know, just — the modern nuts and berries kind of stuff.”

“I’ll sharpen the knives for you,” she said almost kindly.

Mendra edged towards Glen. “I don’t know how to stop it,” she said in a frantic whisper.

He gave her a dirty look. “Do you expect me to believe that you want to?”

“I don’t know what I want!”

“Obviously.”

Granpap, whom no one had been paying attention to for some time, suddenly hiccupped. His body, still bound to the table, bucked wildly against its bonds.

It started raining bluebells.

“Hurry,” said Valmai. “Arguerite, you must start the hex now, the shield is giving way.”

Grandmam spat out a mouthful of bluebells, and handed a wicked carving knife to Chat. “We need blood, bone and a gobbet of flesh. Get working.”

Chat looked from Grandmam to the tied and struggling Luciana. “Okay,” he said miserably, his fingers trembling on the hilt of the knife.

There was a loud cracking sound as the anti-fairy shield above the Big House gave way. Balls of light skittered everywhere, smashing against the windows and squiggling through the crack under the door.

The air buzzed and hummed like the nagging of a thousand bumblebees.

The Melody family threw defensive hexes, jinxes and curses through the air. Bluebells and sparkle dust showered around them.

Mendra found herself under the table, holding hands with Glen as if her life depended on it.

“We have to do something,” he said. “Our families are going to tear themselves apart!”

Mendra swallowed. “Give me a ring,” she said.

“Oh, and look how well that turned out last time...”

“Not on the phone, you nong. Give me a *ring*. Of the engagement variety. I like rubies, personally, but I understand you might have to improvise.”

Glen’s mouth fell open. “Do you know what you’re asking?”

“Can you think of anything else that’s going to keep this lot from killing each other?”

Glen looked at her, and many emotions crossed over his face. Mendra was pleased to see that they didn’t all involve horror and nausea. “Right,” he said, and balled his hand into a fist. When he opened it, his hand contained a shiny silver ring with a sapphire the size of a bluebell sticking out of it. “I tried for a ruby,” he said apologetically. “But blue is kind of my default...”

“I’ll take it,” she said, sticking out her hand.

“You’re really sure about this?”

She looked through the sparkles and madness to where Grandmam held Chat by the wrist, miming the actions he should use to cut off bits of Luciana. Chat had already thrown up once, but Grandmam wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You’re the one who wanted this to be more than a one night stand.”

“Okay, then.”

They climbed out from under the table together, and once they were on their feet, Glen slid the bluebell ring on to her finger. “Mendra, will you marry me?”

“Yes. Glen...”

“Bluebell.”

“Shit, sorry. Bluebell, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“No!” shrieked Valmai Melody from the other side of the room.

Everything stopped. The hexes and curses dribbled off into the corners of the kitchen. The balls of light solidified into proper-sized, pissed off fairy people. Bluebells kept raining from the ceiling, but everyone was used to that by now.

Every member of the Dark Family Melody and the Fairy Clan Glen stopped what they were doing and stared at Mendra and Bluebell.

“We have an announcement,” Glen said with a sickly smile.

“You can’t do this!” said Grandmam. She let go of Chat’s wrist. He dropped the (still mercifully clean) carving knife, pale but relieved.

“Just did,” said Mendra. “Welcome to the family, everyone.”

Glen squeezed her hand. It felt kind of nice.

Valmai Melody sank on to the kitchen stool with her head in her hands. “I don’t believe this is happening.”

A fluffy fairy woman, whom Mendra guessed was Glen’s mother, looked equally unwell, clutching the hand of a wiry, hippie-looking fairy male in a Hawaiian shirt and a beard — possibly Glen’s father. Or his disreputable older brother who’d had a very hard life. “Do you have anything to drink in this place?”

“Young Chatsworth,” said Grandmam in a lordly voice. “Put the kettle on.”

As if in a dream, Chat moved to obey her.

Grandmam herself went to untie Luciana's wrists, but the blonde fairy dissolved her own bindings. "Don't worry about me, Arguerite. Check that the old man's doing okay."

Grandpap sat up and spat out a last mouthful of bluebells. "I'm fine, young Lucie. You did very well."

She blushed and giggled. "I always wanted to be an actress, you know."

Mendra looked from one to another. "Now, hang on a minute."

"Are we missing something really important?" Glen demanded.

Valmai stared at Grandmam and Grandpap, who looked awfully pleased with themselves. "I'd like to know that myself."

"Luciana Violet Grimaldia Fiappacina Mabel Glen of the Clan Glen," said Luciana and Glen's mother in a horrified voice. "What have you done now?"

"You're always complaining about how he's not settling down and giving you grandkids," Luciana said sulkily. "I thought you'd be pleased I got him married off. And then this opportunity came up... a very lucrative business opportunity, I might add."

"Indeed," said Granmam. She pulled a sheaf of documents out from inside her corseted bosom. "Will you sign, my dear?"

"Oh, of course," said Luciana. She signed several of the papers, then handed them back to Grandmam, who did likewise.

"There we are," said Grandmam, finishing her last signature with a flourish. "As of Monday, Luciana's patented Lucie Violet range of hand-herbed shampoos, conditioners and curl potions will be available in every Trim and Catwax salon in the country."

Luciana took her copies of the contracts and simpered. "Of course, it's illegal for Dark and Bright Families to do business with each other..."

“Unless they are connected by a tie of marriage,” said Glen in a very hard voice.

“Betrothal’s good enough for a holding period of six months,” Grandmam said brightly. “After all, it’s not like either of you can get out of it now. A promise is a promise. And family is family.”

Mendra blinked several times. “You set all this up -- the bluebells, the hexing, the engagement... for cat shampoo?”

“Very good cat shampoo,” said Luciana. “I also have a range of herbal polishes for toads and bats.”

“We must discuss those,” agreed Grandmam.

“*Cat shampoo?*” shrieked Mendra.

“Let’s take a moment outside,” said Glen, steering her out the french doors.

Chat was already out there, sitting on the steps and looking somewhat greenish. “She knew,” he said unhappily. “She knew I was all talk -- that I didn’t have it in me to be the Big Bad like the rest of them. She counted on it!”

Mendra cuffed his shoulder as she went past. “I wouldn’t be too upset about it. Why on earth would you want to be like anyone else in this family?” She glared furiously at Glen. “And that includes yours.”

“Keep moving,” Glen said firmly, dragging Mendra further down the garden and out of Chat’s earshot. They settled near the frog pond.

“Were you in on this?” she demanded.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Mendra's stomach swirled. She sat down in a hurry on the mossy rocks. "A Lust Haze," she said quietly. "That's how she got us together. That's why I barely remembered anything of the nightclub, before getting back to your place."

"Me too," said Glen. "Damn it, I should have recognised the signs, I got spiked with enough of them at college."

"Flower painting college?"

"Be nice."

Mendra buried her head in her hands. "I don't believe this is happening to me."

He touched her hair. "Is it really so bad?"

"Are you kidding me? If I don't want to be banished from our world forever as an Oathbreaker, I have to marry a man who went to bed with me because his sister hexed him to. It's not only a blatant violation of my Magic Citizenship Rights, it's bloody humiliating."

"Mendra... maybe it wasn't my choice to go to bed with you last night. But when I woke up this morning, do you know what I thought?"

"Aargh, I've been taken hostage by an evil goth girl?"

He laughed. "No. I thought, wow. I want to get to know this girl better."

"Oh."

"And do you know what I found out when I did get to know you better?"

"If you keep asking questions, I'm going to keep right on making sarcastic answers..."

Glen rolled his eyes. "If you'd shut up for thirty seconds, I could tell you that I think you're funny and strange and somewhat twisted. And I'm completely crazy about you. Hadn't you noticed?"

Mendra stared at him. “I think I need to lie down.” He hugged her close, and she let him. She buried her face in his neck, and breathed in the scent of man and bluebells.

“Our families,” she moaned.

“They kind of deserve each other, don’t you think?”

“Can we kill them all?”

“After the wedding.”

“After the wedding,” she agreed.

It seemed appropriate to kiss for a while, so they did that.

“Just so you know,” she said some time later. “I’m not wearing a tutu and wings to the wedding.”

“I’m not wearing a pointy hat.”

“I hate hollyhocks.”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“And if you think I’m going to read our children those stupid fairytales with witches being pushed into oven and fairy godmothers being all ‘la di dah, here’s a dress that is entirely impractical because you can only wear it once’ and what’s wrong with giving a goddaughter a pair of jeans or a coupon or whatever so she can buy her own clothes...”

“Mendra, do you ever stop talking?”

“You said you’d marry me, too late to back out now...”

He kissed her again, which was just fine with Mendra. As long as he was kissing her, she could forget that she had a wedding to plan, two incompatible families (cat shampoo transactions aside) to unite, and a whole host of fairy in-laws who were pretty much going to hate her until the day she died.

Yep. Kissing was definitely better than thinking. If she squeezed her eyes shut tight enough, and pressed hard enough against Glen's warm, inviting body, she might possibly be able to fool herself into believing in Happily Ever After.

For at least thirty seconds.

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