

Flora, Fauna and the Fairy Kingdom is an 84,000-word, multi-POV rom-com/romantasy. It pokes fun at issues of family, identity, and prejudice. It is the third book in the Unfettered Fairytale series.

## **Flora, Fauna and the Fairy Kingdom** **An *Unfettered Fairytale* (Book 3)**

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### **Chapter 1 • A Prologue**

*An English village, sometime before the Renaissance...*

Midge lumbered over to the fireplace, her pregnant belly about the size of a small house. This one—her third child—had to be a boy. Why else would her belly be so big? Her eldest, Aria, who had recently turned five, was singing a song—*again!*—that she’d picked up from church. She sang it constantly and if she didn’t learn a new song soon, Midge was going to have to turn her out into the yard. Her second daughter, Plié, in a constant state of motion at almost four, danced around her mother’s feet. Since Midge couldn’t actually see her own feet, she was certain the child would be trod upon at some point. Perhaps that would teach her to be more careful. Midge was about to turn both girls out into the yard, at least until she could get dinner on the table, when she felt that tell-tale wetness trickle down her legs. *Blast! This is not the best timing*, she thought. Couldn’t this baby have waited until she was done with dinner?

“Girls,” she said to her daughters, “go out to the workshop and get your father.” Miles, Midge’s husband, was a candlemaker who worked in a small shop next to their equally small cottage.

“Yes, Mama,” Aria replied, even though it meant stopping her song mid-stanza. Midge rolled her eyes, knowing Aria would soon take up the song again, but from the top.

Aria took Plié by the hand and led her to the front door of the cottage. Not that the door was very far away—it was a tiny cottage, with only one other room besides the main one they were in. But when the little girl opened the door, she stopped. There, on the other side of the threshold, with her fist raised as though she had been just about to knock, was the ugliest woman Midge had ever seen. Aria and Plié stepped back in unison, mutually frightened by the intruder. She was, indeed, a frightening sight.

The woman was small, with a head of wild salt-and-pepper hair. She was wearing a bedraggled black dress that only just qualified as being more than a collection of rags haphazardly stitched together. But what made her most distressing was the profusion of warts on her face.

“Oh!” the woman said, looking from Aria to Plié and finally to Midge. “Ain’t yer first then. Tha’s good. So has the contractions started yet?”

Midge blinked in surprise, uncertain that she’d heard the woman correctly. “I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“I said, has the contractions started yet?” she repeated, as if she thought Midge was a simpleton. “Yer water jus’ broke, am I right?”

Midge paused before answering. “Well, yes. But how did you—”

“I jus’ knows these things. Gets a feelin’ fer ‘em,” the woman replied. Then she paused, like she was considering whether to offer any more of an explanation. “I were walkin’ past jus’ now wit’ me boy,” she said, turning so that her son, who looked to be about Aria’s age, could be seen behind her. “And I says ta meself, ‘there’s babes ’bout ta be born hereabouts.’ So I stopped by ta see if I can be o’ any hep.” Then, almost as an afterthought, the woman introduced herself. “I’m Worts. This here’s Wally. An’ ya are...?”

“Midge. I appreciate your offer, but I was just about to send my husband for the midwife.”

Worts shook her head most certainly. “No time fer tha’,” she said as she entered the cottage. “Best be gettin’ ya inta bed.”

“Oh, I’m sure there’s still plenty of time,” Midge said, with the assurance of a woman who’s already given birth twice.

“Oh!” she hollered as the first jagged pain made itself known. She knew instantly it wasn’t the pain of early labor. That pain was more circumspect, like the labor was still in the deciding phase. This was the there’s-no-going-back kind of pain of later labor. The bear-down-or-die-trying pain that made women want to run away and hide in the woods. Midge grabbed her swollen belly with one hand and her sore back with the other and began to stagger to the bedroom.

“Go and get your father!” she hollered to the girls. Then she felt an other-worldly sort of comfort steal over her as Worts took her by the arm and helped her to her bed. She knew a good midwife could have a calming presence during childbirth, and that was what she felt from Worts’ soft touch. Midge knew herself to be in good hands.

“Now, doncha worry ‘bout a thin’,” Worts said calmly as she helped Midge onto the bed.

“Wally,” she hollered to her boy, “Pu’ a kettle on the fire an’ see ta the stew tha’s cookin’ there. Don’ let it burn.” Midge heard no reply from the small boy, but she could hear him bustle about the kitchen as he followed his mother’s instructions.

Then she groaned as she was taken by another contraction.

“Good. Tha’s good,” Worts said soothingly, almost as though she was repeating a prayer. “Won’ be long now.”

Midge heard the front door open again and a moment later Miles was standing in the bedroom doorway. He had that look Worts had likely seen before on many a father-to-be’s face as he gazed upon his wife in the throes of childbearing: Part terror, part resolution, and all guilt. He looked like he’d rather be anywhere and facing any manner of personal danger—fighting lions in a Roman coliseum, for example—than to be where he was and having to witness the painful

conclusion of what had once been a very pleasurable experience for him. Not to mention his cock.

“Aria said it’s time to send for the midwife,” he said in near shock, as though he had convinced himself that this moment would never have to come.

Midge opened her mouth to answer him, but all that came out was “Argggh!”

“Aye, best run an’ fetch the midwife,” Worts said.

Miles sprinted to the front door as though he was competing in the midwife-fetching Olympics and was gone almost instantly.

“I thought you said it was too late for the midwife,” Midge said through panting breaths.

“Oh, ’tis,” Worts replied with a snicker, “Bu’ it gets him outta the way.”

Midge would have laughed, but she was in too much pain to give quarter to any other feeling. When she’d given birth to Aria the whole process had stretched out interminably. The midwife on that occasion had taken two meals at the house while waiting for the big moment. Plié’s birth had gone a bit quicker, but this third one was galloping along at an astonishing rate. Young Wally had just managed to bring his mum a cup of tea when she sent him scurrying away so Midge could begin to push in earnest.

Before long—certainly before Miles had returned with the usual midwife—Midge was bearing down, and Worts was catching a tiny baby.

“Is it a boy?” Midge asked when she could draw a large enough breath to get the words out.

“This un’s a girl,” Worts said, placing the wailing bundle in her arms. “There’s still hope fer the twin.”

“Twin?” Midge asked with confusion.

“Oh, aye,” Worts said. “Look at the size o’ this un. Too tiny ta have been in there all ’lone.”

Midge looked down at the tiny baby in her arms. She had assumed it would be much larger, given how huge her belly had been, especially over the last month. No wonder it had slipped out so easily. Well, easily compared to the other two births. *I’m going to cry! Or maybe I should just scream?* She’d just given birth, after all, which was the most trying thing she’d ever done in her young life, and now she was going to have to do it all over again. *Instantly.* It was like finally being released from prison—catching a glimpse of sunlight and drawing the first breath of freedom—only to be pulled back into the dungeon and clapped behind bars again. Without even having the opportunity to commit another fun crime.

“I can’t,” she gasped. “I can’t do it again. It’s too much.”

“Ya can. An’ ya will,” Worts said, as she took the baby from Midge and handed it off to Aria.

“Hold this fer me, luv,” she said to Aria. “Yer mum’s still got a bit o’ work ta do.”

Midge took a deep breath, hopeful that it would keep any more contractions at bay. But it didn't, and before any time had passed, she felt another hard labor pain grip her midsection. And then she felt another baby move inside her as it headed toward the exit. Before she knew it, she was bearing down again, and Worts was handing her a swaddling bundle of screaming baby.

Just then Miles burst through the front door and staggered into the bedroom. He was wheezing, bent over almost double, and holding his gut as though he'd been chased all the way to their cottage by a demon. "She's right behind me," he choked out between gulps of breath.

"Send her back," Worts said, "We's all done here."

"What?" Miles asked in astonishment. He looked around him and saw Aria holding a baby. Then he looked at his wife, who was also holding a baby. "You're... you're," he said pointing at the two babies, "You're both holding babies. What... what happened?"

"Congratulations," Worts said to him, "Ya've had twins."

Miles went as white as the trunk of an aspen tree. "Tw- twins?" he stuttered. Then he seemed to recover himself. "Twin boys?" he asked in a hopeful voice.

"Like the flower o' the field an' the fawn o' the woodlands; twin girls," Worts replied enigmatically.

Miles looked at Worts as if she'd just spoken to him in Greek.

"All ten fingers an' toes accounted fer. Erm, I guess tha's twenty fingers an' toes, in this case," Worts said. "Good healthy girls, by the sound o' their wailing. Nothin' left ta do here bu' deliver the afterbirth. So ya might as well go turn the other midwife back. Unless ya wants to stay an' hep? Wally!" she hollered, "Bring mummy a bucket fer the afterbirth."

Miles, looking as though he was about to cast up his most recent meal, turned toward the front door and stumbled out. Midge knew from previous experience that her husband had a real aversion to the afterbirth. In fact, she was fairly certain she could hear him retching outside the cottage.

Moments later, with the afterbirth safely stowed in a bucket at the foot of the bed, Worts sat and stared off into nothingness. Her eyes went a bit glassy. Then she began to mumble. At first it was in that same soothing tone she'd used during the birth, but as it became louder—and distinct words could be understood—the tone ratcheted up into something more ominous sounding. At first the only words Midge could make out were "flower" and "fawn," as though the woman was repeating the odd little thing she'd said to Miles a moment ago. But soon another string of words could be heard.

"A schism!" Worts said in distress. "There's trouble in the world o' magical creatures. A schism. Powers lost. Loyalties divided!"

Worts swung her gaze over to Midge and looked most intensely into her eyes. It felt as if Worts was looking inside Midge. Or beyond her. Seeing something at a great distance. "Only the flower

an' fawn can repair the damage!" Worts said with terrible certainty. Then her voice lowered in volume and drifted off again. "Flora an' fauna," she mumbled a couple of times.

Then Worts' focus shifted, and she was seeing Midge again. The hideous woman smiled as though she hadn't just portended certain doom. "A prognostication," she said, licking her lips as if she'd just tasted something delicious and was delighted by it. "Hasna had one o' 'em in a long while."

Worts took a deep breath, stood up and took the bucket by its handle. "I'll jus' have Wally toss this here ta yer pigs," she said.

"We don't have pigs," Midge replied.

"Right. Chickens, then." And with that, the hideous woman walked out of the bedroom.

*There's trouble in the world of magical creatures*, Midge repeated to herself. *What could the strange old woman have meant by that?* As she puzzled it, the words "flora" and "fauna" kept coming back to her. Even though they'd been part of the odd woman's strange prophecy, they sounded sweet to Midge, bringing to mind the beauty and innocence of the natural world. What's more, they were two things that went well together.

"Girls," she said to Aria and Plié, "What do you think about naming the twins Flora and Fauna?" Both girls nodded.

"This one's Flora, then," Aria said of the babe she still held, "because she was first."

"That's right," Midge said. "Then you, my dear, are Fauna," she cooed to the babe she held in her own arms. Then she unlaced her kirtle, pulled down her chemise, and prompted the baby to suckle. As though Flora knew that nourishment was being distributed and she was missing out, the elder babe began to wail. Midge pulled out her other breast and bade Aria to bring the crying baby to her side.

"Hold her right there," Midge instructed, as Flora took the proffered nipple. Midge sighed in contentment. Not only was she suckling two brand-new baby girls at once—an activity that came with the sweet sensation of one who offers communion for and with a new life—but one of her other dear daughters was holding one of the babes for her. She felt a moment of nirvana. And then she heard the sound of raised voices.

"Three farthings?!" she heard Miles yell from the other room. "Wha'? Are ya off yer bleedin' head?" He slurred. He often lapsed into the lazy tongue of his youth when he was upset.

Midge smiled to herself. She hadn't heard Miles talk like that for years. It had taken her months to drill the proper pronunciation for everything into him when they'd first been wed. Midge had come from a better class of people—she could read and everything—and she'd insisted Miles learn to speak the way she spoke. Proper. The King's proper English. Not the way commoners talked—dropping vowels and 'H's and entire consonants like their mouths were buckets full of holes. She planned to raise all their children that same way, too. She had even begun reading lessons for Aria and Plié, but the birth of two more babes would put a damper on those plans.

Midge was lost in pleasant thoughts until, sadly, the clamor in the other room walked right into the bedroom, with Worts in the lead. “Please tell yer batty husband ta pay me fee,” she said to Midge.

“What is the fee, then?” Midge asked.

“Jus’ the usual—one farthin’ per birth an’ one farthin’ fer the prophecy.”

“But I didn’t ask for a prophecy,” Midge pointed out.

Worts laughed. “No one ever *asks* fer a prophecy. They jus’ comes ta me.”

Midge looked at her husband. “Pay her, please.”

Miles stomped out of the bedroom, clearly unhappy with the edict, and came back with three small coins, which he dropped into Worts’ waiting palm.

“An’ me boy an’ I wouldna mind stayin’ fer dinner,” she said to Midge. “Tha’ stew, which me boy were tending fer ya, smells good an’ ready.”

Indeed, the smell of a hearty stew was wafting into the bedroom, reminding Midge that it was well past dinner time. “Yes, please join us for dinner,” she said to Worts, clearly to Miles’ great dismay.

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