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Opening extract from

The 13th Fairy

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To Alice and Scarlett



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Chapter 1

Hopping Mad!

Now, let's get one thing clear. I refuse to take the blame. You know what I'm talking about. That business with Sleeping Beauty. I have taken the blame for years and it's time to set the record straight.

Now, I will admit that I went a bit far. You shouldn't mess about with Curses when there are babies around. Curses can go wrong. I know that now. But I do have a bit of a temper. And I was very, *very* cross at the time. More than cross. Hopping mad.

But you would have been upset too. Imagine your twelve best friends got invited to a posh party in a palace and you got left out. How would you feel? Insulted, that's how. Hurt.

Well, I say "twelve best friends", but they're not my best friends at all. The Twelve Good Fairies. That's what they call themselves. It's a sort of club. A club that I'm not in. Not that I care. I prefer my own company. I can eat when I want and sleep when I want. Wear the same socks all week. Leave the washing-up. Do what I like. You won't catch me being friends with that lot. I'm not friends with anyone at all really, but especially not them.

The Twelve Good Fairies wear ballet dresses and have silly flowery names. They meet in the woods every Saturday night when the moon is up. Then they skip around in their soppy fairy ring, dancing on their tippy-toes and scaring the squirrels. When they're all puffed out, they have dewberry tea and fairy cakes, served on spotty toadstool tables by frogs in bow ties.

That's when they talk about me. I know, because one night I hid behind a bush and listened.



I never get invited to their parties. I wouldn't go anyway. I don't like dancing and pink doesn't suit me. I'm more of a black rags person. I wear a pointy hat. I refuse to have a flowery name. I prefer a broomstick to wings. I'd rather be a witch than a fairy any day. Of course, it wouldn't hurt them to ask me along, just to be polite. But they don't. Just because I'm not like them.

They can keep their stupid old club. I don't care.

Anyway. I was really fed up when I found out that the king and queen had a new baby and the fairies were all invited to the christening! Nobody told me. I only found out when I bumped into Fairy Bluebell at the Post Office. I needed stamps to send off the crossword. I do all the puzzles in the newspaper, every day. I haven't won a prize yet, but you never know.

Bluebell never speaks to me, but that day she was bursting with the news and she couldn't resist showing off.

"Good morning, Grimbleshanks," she trilled. "Tra la la. What a lovely sunny day. I see you're wearing those horrid old black rags again. Don't you find them very hot?"

I could have zapped her there and then, but I didn't want to burn the other people in the Post Office. See how thoughtful I am?

Bluebell waved a big gold envelope under my nose. "I'm here to reply to my invitation! Isn't it too, too exciting?"

"No," I said. "Buying stamps is very, very dull."

"I'm talking about the christening," she said.

"What christening?" I asked.

"The christening at the palace," Bluebell said. "There's a new royal baby. Haven't you heard? Oh, of course you haven't. I forgot. You live all alone and have no friends at all."

"I don't live alone," I told her. "I live with Bill."

Bill is my crow. His full name is Big Bill Beaky. He's lived with me for years.

Perhaps I should tell you how I came to live with Bill.

One snowy morning I went out for some logs and there he was. A big crow, perched on a branch of my apple tree. He had merry little black eyes and a sharp beak. His raggedy feathers were fluffed up against the cold, but he had a cheerful air.

"Cold mornin', ma'am," he said. Very polite, very respectful. And he had this wonderful voice. Not a harsh caw, like most crows. His voice was low, rich and sweet, like honey.



"It is indeed," I said. "Very cold."

"Yep," he said. "Winter's here, for sure. Worms is thin on the ground, I can tell you that."

I asked him in to warm himself by the fire. I made him some toast. We got talking. He told me he was a wandering crow who had travelled for many years in far-off lands and now he was looking to settle down. He said his wings weren't as young as they used to be. What he wanted now was a full belly and a warm fire, that's all.

He has lived with me ever since.

Bill eats bugs, in the main. He likes worms, eggs, frogs and mice for his dinner, too. He's very easy-going about food, although he's not keen on slugs. He says they're over-rated. I always bake him a beetle cake on his birthday. He loves that. He always says, "Aw, shucks. You shouldn't have, Miz Grim." That's the way he talks – in a warm, slow drawl.

Bill doesn't say much, but when he does it's always interesting. Sometimes he sings in his deep, low voice. Most of his songs are about his travels. My favourite one goes like this –

"I seen a lotta woe in
the time I been a crow,
but I'm livin' in a good
place now."

I could listen to Bill sing that all night. If he could play guitar, he'd be rich. But he's a crow, so he can't.

But that's enough about Bill. Back to the Post Office and Fairy Bluebell.

"Crows don't count," Bluebell said.

"Bill can count," I snapped. "He can count way past a hundred and add up and take away too, if you must know. And divide and multiply."

Crows are very clever birds. None of the fairies are as clever as Bill. They can't sing, either. Of course, as soon as I'd said how Bill could count, I realised that Bluebell had meant he didn't count *as a friend*. Which was not very nice.

But Bluebell didn't correct me. She wanted to talk about the christening.

"*We're* all going," she said. "We're getting new dresses and we're going to give the baby lovely magical presents, like Love and Joy and Peace. The christening is next Saturday at two o'clock. Are you sure you haven't got an invitation?"

"Must be my new postman," I lied. "He couldn't find the house, I expect. The invite must be delayed."

It wasn't, of course. It had never been sent in the first place. But I didn't want to let Bluebell gloat.

"You'll have to scrub up a bit if you do come," Bluebell said. "But I imagine they've decided not to ask you. It is a *palace*, you know. They have to think of the carpets. Your pointy hat and black rags won't fit in. And that awful, raggedy old bird of yours with his horrid sharp beak wouldn't be welcome. Not with a royal baby about. You'd both be a bit of a downer at a party. Oh, look, here's Primrose! *Coo-eee!* Primrose!"

Fairy Primrose fluttered over. She was clutching another large gold envelope in one hand and a card in the other. The card was covered in glitter and little red hearts and it said in dainty fairy writing –

Dear King and Queen

I would love to come to the christening.
I will bring a very magical gift for your new baby.

Love and kisses from
Fairy Primrose ***xxx***

Fairy Primrose and Fairy Bluebell fell into each other's arms.

"I'm posting my reply to the invitation!" Primrose cried. She was all pink and flustered.

"Me too!" Bluebell squealed. "Isn't it exciting? Everyone's going. Lilac, Rose, Violet, Snowdrop, Pansy, Daisy, Poppy, Daffodil, Holly and Marigold. Everyone except Grimbleshanks. She hasn't had an invitation."

They both stared at me with looks of pity. Well, pretend pity. In fact, they were pleased I wasn't coming. I gave a shrug, to show I didn't care.

"That's because there are only twelve gold plates," Primrose said. "Remember last year, Bluebell, when we went to the palace as guests of honour? When the king and queen got married? There were only twelve gold plates, I'm almost sure of it."



I was thunderstruck. Until now, I hadn't realised I hadn't been invited to the wedding either! Talk about adding insult to injury.

"Twelve gold plates and twelve fairies," Primrose said. "If you were there, there would be thirteen, you see, Grimbleshanks. You'd have to eat from the dog's bowl or something."

They both burst into charming fairy giggles.

"No problem – I'd eat off your gold plate," I said. My face was grim.

"I don't *think* so," said Primrose, and she tossed her curly hair.

"I don't think the plates are the problem," said Bluebell. She stared at me. "The problem is the rags and the pointy hat. And the crow. You don't fit in, Grimbleshanks. You don't have nice, pretty clothes like us. You would lower the tone. Anyway, thirteen's an unlucky number."

"Ah, go and boil your head in an acorn," I said and stomped off in a huff. I didn't bother to buy the stamps. I couldn't care less about the crossword any more. I just wanted to go and kick something.

I could hear them whispering and giggling about me all the way home.