

# Chapter One

## Magic is About Breaking Rules

**T**here was once a teashop that wouldn't stay put. Unlike other, more sensible teashops, Dwimmerly End did not sit patiently at the end of a lane, politely waiting for customers to come and order cakes and cups of tea. Instead, Dwimmerly End wandered around quite merrily upon a pair of flamingo legs, bringing pastries and witchery wherever it went.

Upon a bright Tuesday morning in March, the teashop was strolling along a dusty country lane festooned with cherry blossoms and wildflower meadows.

Sunlight trickled through the windows of Dwimmerly End like a waterfall of jewels, sparkling across shelves of teapots and the glass-fronted cake counter. The enchanted wallpaper had changed with the season, now depicting

bluebells waving in the breeze, with hopping rabbits, croaking toads, and buzzing bumblebees.

Sitting in a plush pink armchair by the front window, apprentice tea witch Yesterday Crumb was brewing a magical tea, and it was not going well.

She gritted her teeth and willed something – *anything* – to happen to the mixture she'd concocted in the lemon-yellow teapot. It could even explode for all she cared. Some of her finest magical work had started with explosions.

'I've got a good feeling about this one,' said Jack Cadogan, the teashop's confectionery witch (and Yesterday's best friend), who was sitting across from her. He sipped his mug of hot chocolate, leaving behind a froth-moustache. 'What's this, attempt fifty-three?'

'Fifty-four.' Yesterday sighed, pouring her witch-brew into a teacup.

Jack's wolf snout crinkled at the stench. The tea smelt like it had come straight from a sewage pipe.

'Well,' said Yesterday, pinching her nose with one hand and clutching the teacup with the other. 'What's that Miss Dumpling says about never judging a cake until you've tried a slice?'

She took an investigatory sip. Moments passed, and she grimaced weakly, trying to convince herself she

enjoyed the putrid, rotten flavour. But it was no use. Yesterday had to spit the tea back into the cup. It tasted just as it smelt, and there wasn't a bit of magic in it whatsoever.

'I warned you,' she snarled at the teapot, dropping the teacup on to its saucer with a clang. 'I said if you didn't work this time, it would mean *war*.'

'Are you declaring war on a teapot?' asked Jack, cocking his head. 'You know, Madrigal calls you dramatic sometimes. I can't imagine why.'

Yesterday chuckled, despite herself. 'Every great tea witch in history has invented a brew of their own. Maya Singh invented Dreamer's Dandelion. Miss Dumpling invented Chamomile of Confidence. Even Ruta the Rubbish invented Hair-changing Hibiscus and her tea was so rancid even manticores wouldn't drink it.'

Jack shrugged. 'Most witches take years to invent their own brew. And you're trying to make a tea that turns you into a monster, not an animal. No one's pulled that off since Jumbling Jasmine was invented six hundred years ago!'

'Magic is about breaking rules,' Yesterday replied, 'not following them. Imagine how incredible it would be if we could turn into monsters! Imagine galloping like a unicorn or swimming like a sea serpent.' She paused, a

delicious possibility bubbling in her mind like a kettle on the stove. 'Imagine soaring like a dragon.'

She looked at a pad of paper on the table. Different combinations of ingredients were listed on the page, most of which were crossed out. 'So,' she muttered, 'mixing Fiery Fennel with Jumbling Jasmine doesn't work. What am I *missing*?'

'All kettles boil in their own time, Essie,' said Miss Victoria Dumpling, blustering into the tearoom from the kitchen, a plate of gingerbread men in hand. 'You simply can't rush these things, darling.'

'What if it's just . . . impossible?' said Yesterday, though she knew Miss Dumpling had very strong opinions about that word.

A puzzled look crossed Miss Dumpling's face. 'Impossible is as impossible does! When you first came here, Essie, you might have said it was impossible for teashops to walk around on flamingo legs. Making the impossible *possible* is precisely what makes a witch, well, a witch! Now, I dare say this will cheer you right up – I have an announcement to make.'

The other residents of Dwimmerly End joined them in the tearoom. Mr Wormwood, the gardener, shuffled in first. His skin was a darker shade of green these days, and he was walking around all stiffly since patches of

him had started turning into bark. It happened to dryads as they got older, and they became more and more like actual trees.

Widdershins the clockwork automaton was guiding him along. His official title was the helper-outer, assisting wherever he could, but he spent much more time in the tea garden with Mr Wormwood than anywhere else. Moss and mushrooms had begun blooming on his brass body, while ivy wove between his cogs and gears.

‘Morning, Widdershins, Mr Wormwood!’ said Jack, raising his mug. ‘All well in the tea garden?’

Widdershins guided Mr Wormwood to their table, where he plopped on to an armchair. ‘Oh, yes, sapling,’ creaked the dryad. ‘My flowers are as jolly as juniper, thanks to dear old Widdershins.’

The automaton blinked his brass eyelids; he might have blushed, if he were not made of metal. ‘I, um, don’t know about all that, sir . . .’

Pascal the tea spirit floated through the air and on to Yesterday’s lap. He whistled like a kettle as she stroked his warm teapot shell.

‘We are due to arrive in London in the next few hours,’ Miss Dumpling told everyone gleefully. ‘As you know, we’re on a gossip hunt, my dears.’ She looked at them all with a conspiratorial glint in her eye. ‘Our

target? Any information at all about the marvellously mysterious Nameless Queen – mother of our very own Yesterday Crumb.’

Yesterday held back a shudder. When she had first come to the magical teashop of Dwimmerly End a few months before, she had just run away from the circus, where she and her unusual fox ears had been put on show for everyone to gawk at. Her parents were a complete mystery. And, as she had fled the circus, she crossed paths with the sinister Mr Weep who placed a shard of ice in her heart.

Over her quest to break the curse, she learnt that Mr Weep was her father. He wanted nothing more than for her to take up her place as his princess, down in the Land of the Dead.

Mr Weep had preyed on her fears and her worries, knowing that she was a faerie who’d grown up in the company of humans and lost her magic and hope – she was what faeries called a *strangeling*, just like Jack. But, in the end, she didn’t need to change anything about herself. She didn’t need a crown to be important. She was, after all, a tea witch.

‘Rather fortunately,’ Miss Dumpling went on, ‘we will be arriving in London in time for the event of the season: the Wild Feast cooking competition! Anyone

who's anyone attends. There's parties and drama and scandals galore. The perfect opportunity to scope out rumours, whispers, and more salacious secrets than gossip-hunters such as ourselves could ever want.'

Yesterday nodded along. Even though she had broken his curse, Mr Weep would not stop until Yesterday agreed to leave Dwimmerly End and become his heir. That was why they had come to London and why they needed to find her mother, the Nameless Queen, so urgently. Mr Weep had been in love with her; the two of them had been *married*. Not only that, but Yesterday's mother had outwitted Mr Weep during her escape from his kingdom. And maybe she'd also learnt all of Mr Weep's secrets, including his weaknesses, that she could share with Yesterday. Then they'd have a chance at defeating Mr Weep once and for all.

There was only the rather enormous matter of actually *finding* her first.

'I don't see why we're not competing in the Wild Feast ourselves,' said Jack, with a disapproving frown. 'It's the biggest magical cooking competition in Europe. Dwimmerly End would be a shoo-in to win, I'd bet anything on it!' He nudged Yesterday. 'The winner receives the Grand Prize. They can ask for whatever they want from the Faerie Queen – riches

beyond your imagination, a lifetime supply of chocolate, *anything!*'

'Darling,' said Miss Dumpling diplomatically, 'you know I love a spectacle as much as the next witch. But the Wild Feast is far more dangerous than a cooking competition has any right being. And besides, we ought not get distracted from our true and tremendously important purpose.'

'At least we'll get to watch the Wild Feast, Jack.' Yesterday comforted her friend. 'We'll see all sorts of impressive magic. That'll more than make up for not getting to compete.'

'And you shan't be the only ones in attendance,' said Miss Dumpling. 'Being the social butterfly that I am' – her butterfly antennae sprang up from her forehead – 'I know plenty of well-connected faeries who will be coming to London to watch the Wild Feast, too. Once we've set up shop somewhere, I'll invite them all round for afternoon tea and a glorious chin wag. No doubt one of them will know *something* about your mother, Essie.'

'Will any of the guests be from the Seelie Court?' said Jack fervently, quickly recovering from the disappointment of not getting to compete.

'Certainly not,' said Miss Dumpling primly. 'They'll be busy judging the Wild Feast. And even if they weren't,

the Seelie Court is nothing more than a nest of cobras with formal titles and elegant gowns. In my wilder moments, I half wish the Unseelie Court had given them a good old trouncing during the Unseelie War. Oh, bless my crumpets, I really shouldn't be admitting that out loud, should I?'

Yesterday blinked. 'I know the Seelie Court rules the faeries and that it answers to the Faerie Queen, but who are the *Unseelie* Court?'

Miss Dumpling's eyes twinkled. Her eyes always twinkled when she was about to do something dramatic.

'How about a spot of gingerbread theatre, to tell the tale?' she suggested. She cleared her throat and addressed the gingerbread men. '*Ginger spice, cinnamon fresh, think and breathe and live like flesh.*'

All of a sudden, the gingerbread men leapt off the plate, made little pirouettes, and stood to attention, saluting respectfully to the witch.

Yesterday watched them in awe.

'Long ago,' said Miss Dumpling, 'the Seelie Court was ruled by two sisters, Queen Mab and Queen Titania.'

Two gingerbread men stepped forward. Icing formed into the shapes of crowns on their heads. The other gingerbread men bowed to them obediently.

'But a witch whispered in Queen Mab's ear, and the

two sisters fell out. Mab ended up starting a Court of her own – the Unseelie Court – and they waged a terrible war against each other.’

The gingerbread men split into two factions. Then, they charged at each other, punching and kicking and grappling across the table.

‘Mab and Titania slew each other during the Battle of Dragon’s Roost,’ Miss Dumpling continued. The crowned gingerbread men duelled fiercely, before disintegrating into piles of crumbs. ‘But the Seelie Court came out on top, leaving Titania’s daughter Aureliana to claim the throne.’

‘And what about that witch?’ said Yesterday. ‘The one who whispered in Queen Mab’s ear and started it all?’

‘She vanished,’ said Miss Dumpling, at which Jack gasped dramatically. ‘Rumour has it she was a strangeling, and that she encouraged Mab’s rebellion because the Seelie Court was cruel to strangeling kind.’

‘If that’s true,’ said Jack quietly, ‘it sounds like that witch was the goodie, not the villain.’

Being a strangeling herself, Yesterday couldn’t help agreeing. Anybody who was cruel to strangelings *deserved* to be overthrown, if you asked her. ‘I hope we do get to meet the Seelie Court, in that case,’ she said. ‘I’d quite like to tell them my opinion of people who don’t like strangelings.’

Miss Dumpling smiled brightly. ‘My darling dear, I don’t doubt that you would. But might I suggest we avoid getting involved in any political scandals? The Faerie Queen does not take kindly to those whom she views as her enemies.’

‘I once heard,’ Jack cut in, ‘that the Faerie Queen got so bored at the last Wild Feast that she turned the entire arena into molten chocolate. In another, she brought a competitor’s oven to life and it tried to gobble him up on the spot!’

Yesterday winced. Faeries did have an unpredictable side, and it stood to reason that the Faerie Queen and her Court would be the most dangerous of the lot.

‘But enough about that ghastly Seelie Court,’ said Miss Dumpling. ‘I believe we should make an event of our return to the capital – a grand London opening! That’ll really get the word out. Soon enough, the whole town will be clamouring for our cakes – and their gossip shan’t be far behind.’

Yesterday smiled, her sourness dissolving like sugar in hot tea. She was extremely fond of all the preposterous things Miss Dumpling liked to do whenever they arrived in a new village, town or city.

‘Why don’t we dye the unicorns pink, ride them through the street, and launch fireworks off their backs?’

said Jack, already exploding with ideas. ‘Or . . . I know! I’ve been working on this new concept: I call it the Bubble-gum Hot Air Balloon . . .’

Just then, Madrigal the not-raven flew in through an open window in a flurry of white feathers. Clutched in his claws was a rather tattered-looking newspaper called *The Rambling Redcap*.

‘Madrigal, darling, did your location-scouting for the teashop go well?’ asked Miss Dumpling, warily eyeing the newspaper.

Madrigal dropped it on the table. ‘See for yourself,’ he grumbled, and they all craned their necks to read the headline.

*WHO WILL THEY TAKE NEXT?*

*Another mysterious faerie disappearance leaves some wondering if we need a stricter Strangeling Act!*

*‘Lock them all up and throw away the key,’ says Robin Goodfellow, Spymaster for the Seelie Court in a new, exclusive interview!*

‘Apparently a djinn’s gone missing,’ Madrigal explained. ‘A proper wish gardener, at that.’

‘It says here he’s not the first to disappear,’ said Jack,

skimming his way through the article. ‘A dryad, a pixie, and a mermaid have vanished too.’

‘And they’re blaming strangelings for it,’ said Yesterday, folding her arms. ‘No surprises there. Look – *“there is evidence to tie all four disappearances to strangelings, although the Court cannot reveal more at this stage of the investigation.”*’ So ridiculous!’

Jack finished the article. ‘Sounds like a real mystery’s afoot,’ he said. A mischievous grin formed across his face – a grin that Yesterday knew all too well. ‘Maybe we should investigate. I’ve got a great trench coat I could wear, plus we can probably find a pipe to complete the look.’

‘Nobody is playing the detective, and there will certainly be no smoking, Mr Cadogan!’ crowed Madrigal peevishly. ‘We have important business in London, and the last thing we need is a side quest. Perhaps coming to London was stuff and nonsense after all.’

‘But we can’t turn back now,’ Jack protested. ‘I’m not scared. I’m Jack Cadogan!’ He jumped up, standing tall with his hands on his hips, brave as a hero from a myth.

Miss Dumpling gave him a little clap. ‘Quite right, Jack. We in Dwimmerly End are firm sourdough, not wobbly panna cotta! And we shan’t let a few rotten raisins spoil the pudding.’

Jack cheered, but worries buzzed in Yesterday's mind. They needed to find her mother soon. Who knew when Mr Weep might strike again?

And on top of that, the Seelie Court wasn't tremendously keen on strangelings like Yesterday. They thought her kind were dangerous, claiming that strangelings didn't know how to use their magic properly.

*Was* coming to London during the Wild Feast a mistake after all?

Yesterday shook the thoughts out of her head, like shaking flour from an old apron. They were arriving in London and the teashop was bound to be furiously busy – full of chances to learn new spells and meet new faeries. She couldn't afford to let her anxieties get the better of her. She had to trust that Miss Dumpling knew what she was doing.

Yesterday pushed out her chair, rising to her feet. 'I'd best be going,' she announced. 'I have some magic to be getting on with.'