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Love Potions

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Chapter One

Okay, so finding a naked man in her bed wasn't *that* unusual. There had been one or two in the past – not at the same time, of course – but Sukie Ambrose had had her moments. Mind you, she had to admit, none of them had managed to look quite so spectacular at this early hour of a grey and chilly March Monday morning.

In fact the only thing wrong with this one, Sukie thought, staring at the lean, tanned torso rising and falling in sleep beneath her dark blue duvet; at the rumpled streaky ash blond hair which looked glorious against her navy pillows; at the superb cheekbones and the curve of long dark eyelashes, was that he was a complete stranger.

The initial terror which had kicked in as she'd switched on the light and found an unknown man sleeping soundly in her bedroom, was tempered by the sheer implausibility of the situation.

All right then, that – and the fact that he was truly beautiful.

Not that that made his presence any less scary, she told herself quickly. Some of the worst villains in history had been extremely attractive, hadn't they? Surely some of those mass murderers of the grim and grimy past had been lady-killers in every sense of the word? And how often had she peered at some serial wrongdoer on the television news thinking guiltily that she'd have fancied him if she'd met him at a party?

So was he a villain? Someone on the run? A fugitive from justice? A crazed killer suddenly overcome by the need to catch up on his beauty sleep?

Sukie shook her head. Doubtful. Not that she'd known any crazed killers, but somehow snuggling under an anonymous duvet simply didn't seem to fit the Tarantino image.

Mentally downgrading the criminality a bit, perhaps he was a burglar? A housebreaker, taking advantage of both her and Milla being away from home for the weekend, and making the most of the facilities before making away with their belongings?

Sukie somehow doubted that too. The sleepy village of Bagley-cum-Russet with its one high-banked main road, cobweb of tiny lanes, and one pub and two shops, was surely never going to be top of any mobster's must-visit list, was it? And she hadn't noticed any sign of a forced entry when she'd opened the cottage's front door. And everything downstairs had seemed untouched and normal . . . but then, exhausted after her journey and simply glad to be home, she hadn't really been looking for indications that they'd been burgled, had she?

She could really, really do without this . . .

Blinking wearily, she stared at the sleeping form again. He was out like a light. Could he possibly be ill? Maybe he'd wandered in from the winding village streets having suffered amnesia? Maybe he thought this was his home? Maybe he'd lived in Bagley at some time in the past and muddled up his cottages? No – Sukie discounted that one straight away. He was probably in his late twenties, as she was, and having been born and bred in Bagley-cum-Russet, she knew everyone who'd ever lived in the village.

He really was very, very pretty. And if he wasn't ill, and was far too clean and classy-looking to be anyone's stereotypical thug, why on earth was he in her bed? Unless . . .

What if he was a *squatter*?

That was it! One of that new breed of upmarket organised squatters reclaiming vacant properties as a protest

against homelessness and materialism. Oh dear ... Sukie felt more than a little sympathy with that particular cause, but could also feel a severe case of nimbyism coming on.

Sukie stared at him for a little longer. He really was sensational.

Should she wake him? Ring the police? Scream?

No, too late for screaming, and anyway she'd never been much of a drama queen. And the police would take ages to arrive and then there'd probably be forms to fill in and lots of questions and she was far too tired to even contemplate all that. Maybe she'd just sneak back out of the room, lock the door on the outside and wait for him to regain consciousness and ask questions later.

Dropping her holdall quietly to the bedroom floor and holding her breath while she wriggled the old-fashioned key from the lock, Sukie switched off the light and backed out of the room. Her hands were shaking as she locked the door from the outside. Damn ... Too noisy ... She paused, waiting for the explosion, but there was no angry shout from her bed. She pocketed the key in her jeans and listened again. Still no sound at all from behind the door. Clearly the intruder was exhausted.

Not as exhausted as she was though. Driving back to Berkshire from Newcastle through the night had seemed like a good idea at the time. Her three-day course – 'Advanced Aromatherapy: Essential Oils and Infusions for the 21st Century' – had ended late the previous evening. The delegates had been invited for a night out on the town, sampling every hot venue the Quayside complex had to offer, with the additional tempting promise of spotting premiership footballers and reality TV stars at every turn.

But after three rigorous days of studying, attending lectures, practical sessions and a rather sneaky written exam, and having already spent three evenings of galli-vanting with several like-minded beauticians to make the most of the Newcastle pubs and clubs after classes, all Sukie had wanted to do was go home to Bagley-cum-Russet

and crawl into bed and sleep for a week.

Not possible now.

Of course she could sleep in Milla's bed as Milla wasn't due back until later today from her hen-party in Dublin, but maybe this wasn't a great idea with a strange man in the cottage.

Oh, bugger . . .

Feeling bone tired and more irritated than frightened – after all the bedroom door was securely locked and the window, centuries old and much-painted over, opened only a few inches, so the interloper was safely imprisoned for now – Sukie tiptoed downstairs.

The sleeping man upstairs had put a bit of a dampener on the usual sense of euphoria Sukie normally felt on returning to the strangely named Pixies Laughter Cottage. It was her sanctuary, truly her home, a place she loved with all her heart.

She'd always hated having her cherished space invaded, and having it invaded by a naked stranger had thrown her completely. And, she thought with a weary grin, what on earth would her godmother have made of it all?

Cora, Sukie's maternal great-aunt and godmother, had lived all her higgledy-piggledy life in Pixies Laughter. Sukie had adored the elderly, eccentric Cora and spent an idyllic childhood with her in the low-beamed rooms, snuggled up in front of the log fire in the winter, playing wild games in the garden through long hot summers.

When Sukie's aspirational parents, living on the other side of the village in their up-to-the-minute stylised and clinically neat modern estate semi, had inherited the cottage they'd immediately planned to modernise it and sell it at some exorbitant sum to incomers.

Horrified at the thought of losing Cora's home, her happy memories and her childhood bolt hole, Sukie had begged, pleaded and eventually convinced her parents that she'd be the ideal owner for Pixies Laughter. After much wrangling a price had been agreed – nowhere near as high

as the Ambroses would have managed to extort from strangers – and Sukie, having convinced the bank that she'd be a great mortgage risk, had moved in. The modernisations – central heating and a bathroom – had eaten into her savings and a further bank loan and more, and her parents had refused to help on the grounds that if Sukie wanted the cottage so badly she took it warts and all and paid dearly for the privilege. So a year previously she'd taken Milla in as a lodger to ease the financial burden.

The whole thing had caused a few ructions at the time, but feathers were now more or less smoothed down... However, Sukie's parents' visits to Pixies Laughter were few and far between despite only living less than a mile away, and Sukie's visits home to the minimalist semi were equally rare.

Sad, really, she thought now, as she ducked under the lowest beam at the foot of the stairs, that she hadn't immediately thought of ringing her parents for advice on the current situation. Apart from the fact that they'd be extremely annoyed at being woken up before dawn, they'd probably feel it was her fault somehow and would trot out trite and irritating lines like 'you made your bed when you took the cottage on – if you've got a problem you've only yourself to blame'.

Nah, she'd deal with sleeping beauty on her own and in her own time, Sukie thought, clattering across the uneven hall floor. The central heating was humming gently, and in the tiny brightly-lit kitchen, Sukie did what any girl would do under the circumstances. She put the kettle on.

She was just scrabbling in the dishwasher for a clean mug when the kitchen door opened.

She screamed and dropped the mug on the ancient quarry tiles. The bits skittered across the floor.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Milla, her cottage-mate, tall, slender and blonde, wearing a very skimpy T-shirt and a black thong, blinked from the doorway.

'I could ask you the same thing,' Sukie snapped, rescuing

the broken mug from under the table and wondering how come Milla always managed to look so perfectly groomed and glamorous even when she'd just woken up. 'Why aren't you in Dublin? I didn't see your car in the lane.'

'Caught an earlier flight. Still a bit tipsy. Didn't want to drive. Left the car at the airport and got a cab.' Milla gave an elegant yawn. 'Collecting it later. Why aren't you in Newcastle?'

'Couldn't stand the pace. And – there's a problem.'

'What?' Milla flicked back her bone-straight silver hair and reached a slender hand into the dishwasher for two mugs. 'What sort of problem?'

'We've got an intruder. Upstairs. In my bed.'

Milla handed her mug to Sukie and laughed. 'He's not an intruder. He's with me.'

Sukie sighed heavily. She really should have guessed. Milla was always careless with her men. She'd once left one at a taxi rank in Reading while she nipped off to find a loo after a night out clubbing and completely forgotten about him. Rumour had it that the poor sap had still been standing there forlornly waiting as dawn broke.

'I should have guessed, I suppose. But couldn't you have labelled him or something? Like Paddington Bear: "Milla's Man – Please Don't Touch"? Anything to indicate that he wasn't a threat? And why—' Sukie wearily spooned granules into the mugs, '—is he in my bed, not yours? And who is he?'

'Whoa! Far too many questions! Anyway, I've no idea about the last one—' Milla perched on the edge of one of the oddment kitchen chairs crossing her long perfectly shaped legs, '—which is the answer to why he's not in my bed. Even I'm not that shallow. I do like to be on least first name terms before I offer B&B. Thanks.' She took the coffee. 'No, honestly, we only met last night. At the airport. Waiting for a taxi. I didn't even see him on the plane. He'd been to Dublin with a stag-party. He was about as hung-over as me so he decided not to drive

home either, and while we were chatting in the queue I discovered he came from Winterbrook so we shared a cab.'

Sukie raised her eyebrows. The relief was short-lived. Even for Milla it seemed a bit unlikely, not to mention downright risky.

'And you didn't ask his name? What he does for a living? Like murder, rape, pillage? Chatting up blondes in taxi queues with the intention of relieving them of their worldly goods and their bank accounts and maybe their breathing?'

'Sukie, sweetheart.' Milla shook her head. 'You read far, far too many tabloids. He was just a fellow-traveller in need of a good turn.'

Sukie slid onto the opposite chair. 'Not good enough. Why is he here? Why didn't he stay in the cab and go on to Winterbrook? It's only a few miles away.'

Milla smiled her sleepy-cat green-eyed smile. Sukie, who was of average height, curvy, with short, dark, spiky hair and blue eyes, sighed. She'd kill to look like Milla.

'He was sound asleep by the time we got here,' Milla lit a cigarette. 'Out cold. The taxi driver didn't want the hassle of unloading him single-handed at Winterbrook so he turfed us both out here. Poor bloke was almost asleep on his feet and I knew you wouldn't be back, so I gave him your room.'

'Wasn't that a bit risky? You didn't even know him?'

Milla blew smoke towards the ceiling. 'Like I said, he was practically comatose. And the cab driver legged it. I could hardly leave him outside in the lane, could I? So I woke him up, made him a cup of coffee which he didn't drink, pointed him towards your room and well, that's it really . . .' She stubbed out the cigarette. 'And he is rather cute, isn't he?'

'Very.' Sukie sipped her coffee. 'And I should have realised he wasn't one of yours anyway. He's got a chin.'

'Bitchy . . .' Milla stretched showing most of her slender toned midriff, then yawned again, still managing to make it

look endearingly attractive. 'I don't *always* date chinless wonders.'

'Yeah you do. Well, when you're not dating city traders with sharp suits, sharper tongues and estuary accents.'

'A girl has to maintain her standards,' Milla shrugged. 'You can't support my lifestyle on a labourer's wage packet, sweetie, as I keep pointing out to you.'

Sukie winced. It still didn't solve the problem of the stranger upstairs in her bed and the fact that she had probably never felt so tired in her entire life.

'So – how were you and him going to get back to the airport to collect your cars? Oh no – don't look at me like that. I am not – not – driving you all the way to – good lord!'

A thundering crash from upstairs rocked the cottage to its centuries-old foundations.

'I think he's awake.' Milla frowned at the ceiling. 'Probably needs the loo. He doesn't sound very happy.'

'No.' Sukie bit her lip. 'He wouldn't. I locked him in.'

'You did *what*?' Milla shrieked with laughter. 'Sukes, you're priceless! Then you'd better go and unlock him, hadn't you? And point him in the direction of the bathroom pretty damn quickly.'

By the time Sukie reached the top of the narrow winding staircase, the man was pounding on her bedroom door. She unlocked it and stood back, screwing up her eyes in case he was stark naked.

He wasn't. Well not completely. He'd managed to pull on a pair of faded jeans, which did absolutely nothing to detract from the stunning rest of him.

'Thanks,' he blinked at her through the long strands of ash blond hair. 'Door seemed to have stuck and I walked straight into those bloody beams. Does this place belong to the seven dwarves or something? Er – sorry, but where's the loo? Please?'

'Bathroom's along the passage. End door. And mind the beams.'

‘Thanks.’ He gave a weary, bleary smile. ‘Er – do I know you?’

Sukie shook her head. ‘Nope. And I’m not Snow White either. But this is my cottage.’

‘Is it?’ He looked confused. ‘Were you on the plane last night, then? I thought—’

‘No, that was my taller, thinner, prettier, blonder friend.’

‘Oh, right – sorry – but I must . . .’

Sukie stood aside as he pounded along the passage.

‘All okay?’ Milla appeared at the top of the stairs. ‘Is he in the loo? Good – I’m going back to bed, Sukes. Catch you later . . .’

Sukie sighed as Milla slammed into her bedroom, then casting one last lingering look at the cosy invitation of her own bed, dragged a blanket from the airing cupboard and trudged wearily downstairs to catch up on her beauty sleep on the sofa.