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Personally, I Blame My Fairy Godmother

Written by Claudia Carroll

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CLAUDIA CARROLL

*Personally, I Blame My
Fairy Godmother*

AVON

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‘Only when the tide goes out, do you discover who’s been swimming naked.’

Warren Buffet

‘They say that when you ask God for your heart’s desire, he’ll give you one of three possible answers. The first is yes. The second is, not yet. And the third is, I have something far, far better in mind.

Answer three is kind of where this story starts . . .’

Jessie Woods

Prologue

Once upon a time, there was a little girl whose favourite fairytale character was Cinderella. It was easy for her to relate to her heroine because, you see, they'd so much in common. Just like Cinderella, her mum had died when she was three years old, leaving only herself and her dad. Course, she was too young to remember; all she was aware of was that everyone – neighbours, distant relations she'd never met before or since – was suddenly an awful lot nicer to her. Money was tight and her dad had to slave away all the hours he could to support them. But no matter how busy he was, he'd always rush home and snatch time to read his little princess her favourite fairy story.

And so this child, whose name was Jessie by the way, grew up dreaming. But never about fairy godmothers or pumpkins magically changing into glass coaches with mice to drive them, which frankly she thought was all a bit daft and OTT. No, what Jessie really loved most about Cinderella's story was the very last sentence, 'And they all lived happily ever after.' Because that's what she wanted more than anything else. To live happily ever after in a huge big castle, far from where she came, where she could make sure her dad never had to work so hard or fret about money

ever again. Somewhere she could feed him more than just spaghetti hoops on toast for dinner night after night, which was pretty much all she knew how to cook. Somewhere miles from the corporation house they lived in, where they'd be able to afford a glittery tree and presents at Christmas and maybe where they could even take a holiday to the seaside, just like all the other girls in her class did. And most of all, somewhere she wouldn't have to worry about her dad any more. A place where he'd be happy; so happy, that never again would she have to listen through the paper-thin walls to the muffled sound of him softly crying to himself alone in his room at night, when he thought she was sound asleep.

Then, when she turned ten years old, a life-altering event happened that suddenly turned Jessie's whole little world upside down. Something which made her feel even more Cinderella-like than ever. If she'd been in a hurry to get out and make her dreams come true before, now she was in a race against the clock. But all the odds in life's lottery seemed to be stacked against her. Because how could a girl from the wrong side of the tracks ever hope to live a life of wealth and security? She wasn't brainy enough to be a successful doctor or sharp enough to be a rich lawyer, even if they could have afforded the college fees. And that's when Jessie realised exactly how she could unlock the low door in the wall that would lead her to this magical wonderland.

Fame, she decided, would be her key. Her escape.

Celebrity. Because nobody minded where stars came from or how little they had growing up, did they? She'd work hard, shake off her past, haul herself up and become a real-life rags-to-riches success story, with all the trappings, just like the presenters she loved watching on TV. And their job

seemed so, so easy. Talking into a microphone. Asking questions to interviewees, then nodding and listening. Sure any eejit could do that! And if there was anything Jessie was good at, it was asking questions and listening. It would be a doddle. She could do it in her sleep. She'd get paid a fortune, be able to afford beautiful things, be recognised everywhere she went and, most of all, be able to get far away from where she came and take proper care of her dad in a house so big you could nearly sign a peace treaty in it.

And of course if she just happened to meet Prince Charming along the way, then whoop-di-do . . .

NINETEEN YEARS LATER

Chapter One

‘Once upon a time, there lived a stunning, modern-day princess whose life was so perfect, it was like a beautiful dream. And here she lives, in her very own fabulous palazzo, with real-life Prince Charming, successful entrepreneur Sam Hughes. I’m speaking, of course, about the nation’s favourite TV girl, who’s kindly invited me into her breathtaking home today, the one and only Jessie Woods!’

‘And CUT!’

Oh God, I knew this was a bad idea. In fact, there’s so much wrong with that last statement, I don’t even know where to begin. For starters, my house is definitely *not* a ‘palazzo’, that’s just what pushy estate agents call it, just because there happens to be a lot of pink marble going on. Which looks great in photos but, take it from me, is like living inside an ice rink in winter. Well, either an ice rink or a mausoleum. It isn’t mine either, I’m only renting it from a couple who are away for a few years. If it was properly mine, I’d have to do a major rethink on all the pink; from certain angles, it’s like something Jordan vomited up. Oh, and I don’t live with Sam either, not officially anyway. He still has his own place down in the country because, get this, he thinks here is too small for

a couple. His home, by the way, is the approximate size of Versailles.

‘Jessie, do you think we could get a shot of you over here at the grand piano?’ Katie, the interviewer, trills across the room at me, to where I’m perched up on a bar stool, still getting make-up slapped on and nowhere near camera-ready. For the record, Katie’s absolutely lovely; young and spray-tanned and skinny, hungry for work and only delighted to be in front of a TV camera. Just like I was at her age. In fact, give her another two years and she could very well end up doing my job. She’s also bouncy and energetic and, when there’s a microphone in her hand, talks in exactly the same sing-song cadences that air hostesses do. Honest to God, she’ll be doing seat-belt demonstrations next. Plus, like most TV presenters, she talks in exclamation marks and uses the word ‘fabulous’ a lot.

‘Oooh, Jessie, I’ve just had a fabulous idea. Maybe we could film you actually tinkling away at the piano? Would that be OK, do you think?’

She beams at me, brightly, expectantly, and I haven’t the heart to tell her that the only thing I could possibly manage to bash out would be ‘Chopsticks’. The piano, like so much in this house, is kind of just for show, really. I mean, no one actually plays these things outside of concerts in Carnegie Hall, do they?

‘Oh, no, hold on, wait now . . . I’ve a far more fabulous idea,’ Katie thankfully changes her mind, but still somehow manages to sound like cabin crew cheerily telling you to clip up the tray in front of you, that there’s only fifteen minutes to landing. ‘Instead, how about a shot of you standing just here by the piano and talking us through

all the amazing photos you've displayed on it? Yeah? Wouldn't that just be, emmmmm . . . what's the word? Fabulous!

'Yes, Katie. That would be . . . fabulous.'

I am such a moron. When will I learn that it's a really crappy idea to let a film crew into your house to shoot an 'at-home-with, day-in-the-life-of' piece when a) I'm as hung over as a dog, b) on account of point a), I've had exactly seventeen minutes' sleep, c) I only barely managed to haul myself out of bed in time to clean up the living room for this lot arriving, so if they ask to see any other room, I'm finished. In this house, the law of mess transference applies; i.e., no sooner do I tidy one room than an equal and corresponding amount of clutter appears somewhere else. Plus, because the downstairs loo has been blocked for about three weeks now, the entire house is beginning to smell like low tide in Calcutta and I can't afford to get a plumber out. Ahhh, plumbers. God's way of telling you that you make too little money. Worst of all, though, is point d) in what's become something of a monthly nightmare in this house: my Visa bill has just arrived in a worryingly thick envelope and is now plonked on the fireplace looking accusingly at me, almost daring me to open it.

I'll come back to that last point later. What's immediately bothering me now is that the poor unfortunate make-up artist is having a right job of it trying to disguise the purpley bits under my saggy, baggy, bloodshot eyes, to make me look even halfway human. Because I'm supposed to be all glowing and healthy and radiant for this shoot, not pasty and washed out, with a tongue that feels like carpet tiles and a cement mixer churning round inside my brain.

Then another horrible tacked-on worry; my agent would put me up against a wall and shoot me if he could see the

minging state of me right now. In fact, it was his idea that I take part in this whole, lunatic *A Day in the Life* documentary, on the grounds that the TV show that I present is coming up to its season finale, which means my contract is up for renewal, which means, in his sage words, it's time to 'Beef up your profile and hope for the best.'

The show I front, you see, is a light, fluffy, tea-time, family-friendly programme called *Jessie Would*, where people text in mad, wacky ideas for dares and then I have to do them. Yes, all of them; the good, the bad and the downright unprintable. So basically, my job is whipped cream and as said agent is constantly reminding me, this is not a good economy to be whipped cream in. Particularly not when you're in debt up to your oxters, desperately trying to keep up this lifestyle with friends who insist on partying like it's the last days of Rome.

'Late one last night, was it Jessie?' the lovely make-up artist whispers sympathetically to me, brandishing a mascara wand in the same, skilled way that a surgeon holds a scalpel. I manage a guilty nod back. Wasn't even my fault either. In fact, if it were up to me, I'd have been in bed by half ten with a cup of milky Horlicks and two cucumbers on my eyes. Honest. But then you see Sam, that's my boyfriend, got a last-minute invitation to a launch party that a sort of rival-frenemy-business contact of his was having and we had no choice but to go along. Long story, but basically Sam's got wind of the fact that there's a vacancy coming up as a panellist on one of those entrepreneurial TV programmes where people pitch business ideas, some terrific, some crap, to a terrifying gang of business experts, who subsequently either rip them apart or else rob their ideas and claim them as their own. Sorry, I meant to say

invest in these wonderful commercial opportunities, *ahem, ahem*. Anyway, the guy who was hosting the launch party last night is already a regular panellist on this particular show, and Sam figured it would be the perfect way for him to network and get his spoke in early, as it were. And I'm not just saying it because I adore him, but he really would be wonderful on the show; Sam is young, charming, successful, has a finger in just about every corporate pie you can think of and genuinely believes that being good in business is a shamanistic power bestowed on the few. Plus, because he's a high-profile economist by trade, with an occasional column in *The Times* and everything, he's already done loads of bits and pieces on telly and one commentator even hailed him as something of a poster boy for the world of finance, 'who manages the not inconsiderable feat of making economics accessible to the man on the street'. Blah, blah, blah. In fact, pretty much every time there's either an interest rate hike or a bank collapse, some news show on Channel Six will be sure to wheel Sam out for keen yet insightful commentary on said crisis. Mind you, it helps that he's outrageously good-looking, in a clean-cut, sharply tailored, chiselled, TV-friendly kind of way. Darcy-licious. Conventionally tall, dark and handsome, like one of the junior Kennedy cousins, right down to the thick bouffey hair, the toothiness and the tan. The kind of fella that even gay men drool over. He's also incredibly hard-working, with about twenty different business interests on the go and basically hasn't slept for about the last five years or so. Oh, and as if all that wasn't enough, in his spare time he's written a soon to be published autobiography entitled, and I swear I'm NOT making this up, *If Business is the New Rock & Roll, then I'm Elvis Presley*.

Don't ask me why he wants this particular TV gig so desperately, although he often jokes and says that you're never closer to God than when you're on television. I think for a high-achiever like Sam it's just the next logical rung on the ladder, the jewel in the crown. Although, knowing him and his Type A personality, no sooner will he get what he wants, than he'll stop wanting it and start chasing some other rainbow. Politics, maybe. He's one of those guys that could basically turn his hand to anything and it wouldn't surprise me a bit if he ended up running the country in a few years' time. But for now, his one goal is to be a panelist on this investment show for budding entrepreneurs and knowing him, he'll basically drill his way through concrete to make it happen.

Anyway, I could talk about Sam all day, but I won't. Suffice to say that like a good little Super Couple (the tabloids' mortifying tag, not mine) I went along to the party with him, intending to only stay for just the one and somehow it ended up being 5 a.m. by the time we crawled out of there . . .

The funny thing is, people think that Sam and I have this glittering, red carpet, party lifestyle; what they don't realise is that it's actually work. Honestly. OK, so it may look like our lives are one big, long bank holiday weekend, but trust me, it takes it out of you. It is also costing me a bloody fortune.

'Stop looking over at the fireplace, keep your eyes to me, Jessie,' whispers lovely make-up girl as she gamely dabs concealer into eye sockets which still haven't properly opened up yet.

'Oops, sorry,' I mutter.

Shit. She caught me staring up at the Visa bill. Which,

now that I come to think of it, mightn't be too bad this month, I desperately try to convince myself. Because I really did try my best to be good, cut back and live within my means, as my accountant put it during one particularly stern phone call which I'd quite frankly prefer to blank out, after she discovered that the interest on my credit card was more than half what I pay in rent for this house. And that's only the credit card she knows about; I've another secret one, also maxed out, that I'm too scared to even mention to her, for fear the woman will have an anxiety stroke.

'You don't understand,' I hotly defended myself to her. 'Anyone who lives and works in the public eye has a lot of unavoidable day-to-day expenses.'

'And what exactly would these "unavoidable expenses" be?' she politely asked. The business-class flights for a trip to New York that I forked out for? The clothes and blow-dries and manicures and spending money which I needed for said trip? Not to even get started on the hotel we stayed in, which only cost about five times more than I could afford.

Sam's unstoppable drive and my chronic over-spending, you'll see, are pretty much the twin kernels of my life right now. Tell you something else too; toxic debt-related anxiety and a thumping hangover make for one helluva lethal cocktail. As the sainted make-up girl lashes on more bronzing powder than you'd normally see on the whole of Girls Aloud, I do a few quick mental sums.

OK. I'm three full months behind on rent. I can't even remember the last time I wasn't overdrawn. All I know is that the letters I keep getting from my bank manager are becoming progressively snottier and snottier. Phrases such as, 'Central debt recovery agencies,' and 'You realise this will

affect your credit rating for a period of XXX . . .' have even been invoked. Shudder.

And there's worse. Far worse. Up until last week, I was the proud owner of a flashy, zippy little BMW Z4 sports car, cherry red with bright lemon-yellow seats, which I know makes it sound like a packet of Opal Fruits on wheels, but trust me, the colour scheme did actually work. Anyway, I got it on one of those car-leasing HP deals, where the idea is you drive off in a brand, spanking new set of wheels immediately, then pay it off by the month. Perfect deal for someone like me; live now, pay later. Trouble is, I got so scarily far behind in repayments that, one night last week after way too many glasses of wine at some art gallery do, I crawled home at all hours in a taxi to find the car gone from my driveway. Just gone. Disappeared. So I thought it was stolen, natch, and was on the verge of ringing the police when I found a letter on my doorstep telling me it had actually been repossessed. Course I was way too morto to tell anyone the actual truth, so I decided the best humiliation-avoidance tactic was to stick to my original 'stolen car' story. Which I would have got away with too, only Emma Sheridan, my best friend and co-presenter at work, bounced into the production office a few days later and told me she'd just seen my 'stolen' car in the forecourt of Maxwell Motors with a big 'For Sale' sign stuck on it. Definitely mine, she insisted, sure how many other bright red Z4s are there on the road with lemon-yellow leather seats?

So I was rightly rumbled and had to confess all, but the thing about Emma is that she's not just a showbiz pal, she's a genuine pal. In all the years I've known her, there are two things I've never, ever seen her do; repeat gossip or eat

chocolate. As discreet as a nun in a silent order about her own private life and yet the only woman I know who's honest enough to admit to Botox. Bless her, when I came clean about my money woes, she even offered me a cash loan to tide me over. So now, whenever anyone asks me when I'm getting a new car, lovely, loyal Emma laughs and waves it aside and tells me it's nearly cheaper for me to get cabs all the time.

Whereas the actual truth is, the way things are going, I'll probably end up walking everywhere from now on. Barefoot. In the lashing rain. With newspaper tied with twine around my feet and bloodhounds baying at my heels. Singing the orphans' chorus from *Annie*, 'It's the Hard Knock Life.'

Worse, though, I think, as a fresh wash of anxiety comes over me, is that there doesn't seem to be any end to my money troubles. Ever. You see, with myself and Sam, there's always the next night out, the next weekend away, the next trip abroad. Easter is only round the corner and we've already booked to go down to Marbella which I can't afford and yet at the same time, can't get out of.

Honest to God, I sometimes feel like I'm stuck on a never-ending financial hamster wheel where I'm constantly stretching my almost-melted credit cards just to keep pace with him. I'm not even certain how it happened, but somehow I've got sucked into a world where appearances are everything and it's like I've no choice but to spend big just to hold my own against all my new, posher, wealthier friends.

This house being the perfect example. The logical part of my brain, which let's face it, I don't hear from all that often, tells me that it's completely mental; the place is ridiculously

expensive and way too big for me, but when it first came on the market . . . hard to put into words, but it was like all my childhood fantasies finally coming true. I just had to have it, simple as that. So now I'm a lone, single person renting a five-bedroomed mansion which I can't even afford to get the downstairs toilet unblocked in. Christ alive, let it be engraved on my tombstone. 'Here lies Jessie Woods. Fur coat and no knickers.'

On the plus side though, I really have made a heroic effort to economise this month. In fact, I distinctly remember suggesting to Sam last weekend that there was no need for us to bother eating out in Shanahan's on the Green, where the starters are so tiny, they'd leave a fruit fly gagging for more. Instead, let's stay in and I'll cook, I gamely volunteered. Well, the man nearly had to pick himself up off the floor he was laughing so hard. Honest to God, he was still sniggering two full days later. I'm the world's worst cook and have the burn tissue to prove it. And for some unfathomable reason, no matter what I do to food, it always ends up tasting like wood. Wood, or else feet.

But the point is that I'm *trying*.

Take last month's New York trip for instance. It wasn't even my fault. Well, not really. You see, Sam and I are really matey with this other couple, Nathaniel and Eva, who are old buddies of his, dating back to his school days, and we always pal around in a foursome with them. They're lovely, gorgeous people, but . . . the thing is, they just have so much more money at their disposal than I have. Nathaniel is chief executive of his family's recession-proof beef export business and basically keeps himself on a Premiership footballer's salary. He and Eva have been married for years and have two perfect twin boys, with an army of nannies to

take care of them, leaving Eva with a lot of free time on her hands for weekends away, charity lunches and shopping trips abroad. Which is actually how that New York trip came about in the first place; it was their wedding anniversary and nothing would do them but to organise this lavish trip to stay at the Plaza, where they got married. And of course, Sam and I, as their closest friends, were invited along. Now I know Sam would gladly have offered to pay for me if I'd asked, but he knows me well and knows I'd die rather than do that; I'm so much happier paying my own way. OK, I may be up to my armpits in debt, but at least I have my independence.

There's a fair chance I could end up in the bankruptcy courts, but I have my pride, which as my dear departed dad always used to say, is beyond price. Poor darling Dad. The best friend I ever had. There's not a day that goes by where I don't think of him and miss him so much that it physically hurts. But at the same time, half of me is glad he's not around to see the insolvent, overstretched financial disaster that I've become. 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be,' he always used to say and every time I hear his soft voice repeating those wise words in my head, honest to God, the guilt feels like heartburn.

But can I just add this? In my defence, on said New York trip I did suggest we stay in a cheaper hotel, or even rent an apartment between us all, but Sam just laughed at me and I didn't want everyone to think I was some tight-fisted ol' cheapskate, so, instead, I did what I always do. Put it on the Visa card and decided to worry about it later. Because the very, very worst brush you could possibly tar any Irish person with is to inflict them with the Curse of the Meany. You know, someone who doesn't stand their round. Who

goes out with no cash, then expects everyone else to subsidise them. Or, worst of all, someone who hangs around with rich people and automatically assumes they'll just bankroll evenings out and expensive dinners and weekends away, etc. And correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that why credit cards were invented? To help people like me who may have . . . cash flow issues. In fact, now that I'm thinking about it a bit more logically, if my accountant is going to get arsy about this month's Visa bill, then I'll just remind her that I have a job. My lovely, lovely job, that I adore so much that I actually look forward to going into work. A really good, well-paid, telly job too. And these days, sure that's like the Holy Grail.

Come to think of it, I don't even know what the big deal is. I mean, it's not like the bubble is about to burst or anything, now is it?

I just need a new accountant, that's all.