

Wish by a Hazel Tree

An Accidental Enchantments Prequel

By Tia Nevitt

Chapter 1

Fayette felt cornered in the back room of the shop as her eyes darted from her father's to her aunt's. The pressure of their mutual gaze seemed to shrink her in her chair. She knew she should say something glad, some words of joy and congratulations. Outside, a nightingale, which had been fluting, silenced as if in expectation. In the corner, her other aunt, Tante Anne, sewed on while meeting Fayette's eyes with a slight nod.

Fayette looked back at her father. He and Tante Marie sat opposite her at a work table. "You're getting married?" she squeaked.

Her father cleared his throat as if he had been the one whose voice went shrill. "I thought it best, Fay. Especially since the accident."

"I'm fine, now," she said. "I just have a little limp."

"You need a mother."

"But how can my aunt become my—" She stopped, afraid she might say something hurtful.

"You don't want me to marry your father?" asked Tante Marie, her eyes sharp with accusation. "I thought you loved me."

Anxiety clenched Fayette's stomach. "I do love you, but...I just never..."

"She never expected this," Tante Anne cut in. "I knew you should have let me tell her."

"I'm to be her stepmother, not you," Tante Marie said to her. Anne flinched slightly, pursed her lips, and sewed on.

"I'm almost thirteen years old," Fayette said. "My mother died when I was nine. If I didn't need a mother then, why do I need one now?"

"You did need one, Fay," her father said. "That's why I asked your aunts to come live with us when ... when she died."

She looked at her father, who was by no means old, but was almost fifteen years older than Tante Marie. He was a neatly dressed man, as befitted his occupation as a tailor. However, his hair tended to be wild no matter how much Fayette combed and pomaded it for him. He was not tall, and tended to be slender. "Well, why didn't you marry her then?"

"Why, Fay—I hardly knew her, and I was still mourning your *maman*."

"You need a mother whether you realize it or not," Marie said. "You think you are grown up, but your most difficult years are ahead of you. And with your limp—"

"My leg just aches, sometimes." She tried not to think too hard about the fact that her leg would never, *ever* be what it once was.

"*Ma chere*," Marie said. Her eyes were a soft now, and she looked so much like Fayette's mother that it hurt. Tante Marie was an attractive widow, not even halfway through her thirties, her mother's youngest sister. With hair of wheat and eyes like the sky, she was as fair as many of the maidens who lived on their street. "You're still growing. It may get worse before it gets better. And it's hard for a girl your age to be ... to be different."

Marie's kind words made it more difficult, somehow. Especially since her temper was often sharp. Fayette glanced over at Tante Anne. She was closer to forty, was taller than her father and a good deal heftier. She probably was stronger than her father, too, if truth be told. She could understand her father wanting someone feminine and lovely like Tante Marie, but why could he not have considered Anne, who was plain, to be sure, but who was ... well,

more motherly? Fayette felt closer to Tante Anne than Marie, and Fayette could tell that Marie knew it by the way she always made Fayette feel guilty. Would this get worse when Marie was her stepmother?

She looked away from her aunt and her gaze stopped upon a manikin. Her father and Tante Marie shared an occupation as well. He was a tailor and she was a dressmaker. In fact, her clientele was growing, making her father's shop more in demand than it ever was. Every year, her fame spread, and every year, another comte or marquise's family engaged her services. The shop was now more a modiste's boutique than a tailor's shop.

Last, Fayette's eyes gravitated toward her father. His brown eyes held an expression she had never before seen, almost as if he were ... asking *permission*.

Fayette found herself asking, "Do you love her, Papa?"

He appeared startled at the question.

"Do you love her, or are you just marrying her to give me a mother?"

He shifted under the weight of her stare, and then looked almost panicked when Marie turned to regard him with her brows raised quizzically. "Well," he said, "I've grown to know Marie in the last three years, and I have found much in her to ... to admire, and I found that I ... I love her very much."

Marie turned back with a small smile of satisfaction, but Fayette's eyes stayed on her father. She normally found him so easy to read, but she could not make him out at all. Then, he looked at Marie, who had bent to retrieve something from her sewing basket. An expression crossed his face that Fayette had never seen before. In that moment, Fayette knew that for some reason, he *did* want to marry Tante Marie. Maybe it was love. Maybe it was something else. But one thing was clear. It wasn't to give Fayette a mother. And she wasn't sure how she felt about that at all.

Fayette stood up and without a word, kissed her future stepmother on the cheek, and then her father. Then, she limped out

of the workroom, through the kitchen, and out the back door to the garden.

It was a small garden—just large enough to supply greens, tubers, herbs and beans for the four of them. Originally, it had no trees, but now a hazel sapling grew in one corner. It wasn't big enough to sit under, so Fayette sat next to it, leaned her head back and looked up through the scanty leaves and twisty branches at the bright full moon.

Ever since her father and Fayette had planted the tree—they did it in memory of her mother—a nightingale had improbably paid it occasional nighttime visits. Improbable because nightingales weren't often glimpsed this deep in the city. Plus, usually they hid themselves within the leaves of larger trees.

It wasn't very peaceful outdoors in the early evening. The chatter of voices came from the inn across the way, and the carpenter down the street sometimes worked by lanternlight. Madame Babette—the baker's wife—spoke too loudly, and when her voice wasn't ringing up and down the street, her snores were. It was not the sort of environment in which a nightingale usually chose to sing.

But it often sung anyway, and when it did, it always seemed to Fayette that she was in a different place entirely, a place where there were chirping crickets rather than barking dogs, and where there was water babbling rather than wagon wheels clattering.

With a grimace and a twinge of pain, Fayette straightened her bad leg out before her. She still shuddered whenever she recalled the awful pain of the accident. How many times had she vaulted over the garden wall without effort? She couldn't even remember what she had been in such a hurry to do, and the accident had

happened less than a year ago. Well, it was the last vault she would ever do, over a wall or not. The pain of having her leg set had been even more awful, and nothing at all could be done about her knee. At least she had survived, and she could still walk. She was glad not only for herself, but because if she had died, her aunts would have had to leave for propriety's sake, and her father would have been alone.

Fayette frowned. Or would he? If, during all this time, he had been in love with Tante Marie, maybe he would have just shrugged off Fayette's death and married her.

Although she knew her father would never do such a thing, the morbidity of it appealed to the teenager that she was becoming. She spun herself a dreary fantasy of her funeral on the same day as her father's wedding to Tante Marie. Perhaps he would even wear the same suit—

Above her, the nightingale began to sing. It fluted for a long moment, and then began a rapid series of chirps. She tried to find it in the thin branches, but it evaded her gaze.

She heaved a deep sigh, and lay back upon the grass. The nightingale's song chased away the voices from the inn, the sounds of the hammer, and the barks of the dogs. The sharp smells from the herb garden and from mingled stoves up and down the street became the delicate scents of jasmine, of lavender and of other sweet smells that she could not identify.

And as it always happened when the nightingale began to sing, Tante Anne woke her up with a gentle touch some time later.

"I swear, child—we ought to erect a tent for you out here," Anne said.

"That would be wonderful," Fayette said. "But I don't think Tante Marie would like it." She struggled to her feet, waving off Anne's attempts to help her. "I had the strangest dream that the nightingale was speaking to me, and that I understood him."

"What nightingale?"

She looked up at Anne. "There was no nightingale?" Surely, they had heard it within the house?

Anne laughed. "It must have been part of your dream."

She shook her head and headed toward the house. Anne walked beside her solicitously.

At the door, she paused. "Tante Anne, what do you think of Papa marrying Tante Marie?"

Anne shrugged. "When two people decide to get married, there's only trouble to be had in trying to prevent it."

Fayette put her hand on the door. "I guess so."

She held the door open for her aunt, and then turned to glance back out in the dark garden. She thought she saw something there in the sapling just as she looked away, but when she looked back, it flew away, staying just ahead of her vision as she struggled to chase it with her gaze. By the next eyeblink, it was gone. She frowned. Birds did not move that quickly. And she was certain that it was no bird she had seen in her fleeting glimpse of it across the night sky.

Its shape had been much too human.

She stood there for a moment, lost in a sudden memory ... or maybe it was a dream she used to have. A dream of a little man doffing his cap as he stood in the corner of her room, no taller than her doll's cradle. Something about the flying shape reminded her of that old dream.

And had her wondering if it had been a dream after all.

Chapter Two

The wedding was on a Saturday morning a few short weeks later. Tante Marie crafted a dress for Fayette, a proper gown, the first one she ever had that was meant for a young lady, rather than a child. It had a square neck, modestly tucked with lace, a stiff stomacher, tight, elbow-length sleeves with the ruffle of her chemise along her forearm, yards and yards of deep pink satin over piles of petticoats, and pointed, high-heeled shoes with no back. The gown required her first-ever corset, which, due to her youth, was nothing more than a waist cincher.

Fayette sulked as Anne helped her dress, and she tried to ignore the girl in the mirror who looked so different from just a year ago. When had her hair changed from white-blonde to gold? When did her face go from round to pointed? And when had she grown a bosom? Had all this happened while her leg had healed over the last year?

“Now, *ma chere*, if you don’t start smiling, I’m going to have to lecture you like a proper aunt.” Anne grimaced as she pulled the laces of Fayette’s waist cincher. “And you know I don’t like doing that.”

Not a muscle of Fayette’s face moved as she stared at her reflection.

“Hmm,” Anne said. “You were much more gracious on the night they told you about it.”

“Yes, but I’ve had a chance to think about it since then.”

Tante Anne sighed. “Well, you’re not the first girl who’s had to deal with a stepmother. At least you have the advantage of being a

blood relative of your stepmother, the sister of your own mother, who's known you since you were born."

"It just seems so strange."

"I'll tell you what would be strange. To have some new woman come here and turn the house upside-down. At least you know your aunt, you already live with her, and the biggest change will be that she is moving down the hall."

Fayette knew that Marie's move down the hall would not be the biggest change. Marie would become the lady of the household. Currently, Anne and Marie's positions in the household were relatively equal, since Anne was the oldest, yet Marie was a widow. Nowadays, whenever Anne and Marie disagreed, Marie would bring up something that happened years ago to get Anne to give way. But once she had married Fayette's father, Marie would be the superior, and Anne, as a dependent spinster, would defer to her.

Fayette jutted her chin out. *She* would not defer, even if she were lame. She could not. She *hated* it when Marie used guilt against Anne. It did sound like Anne was once a terrible bully, but she was all kindness and humility now. Why did Marie have to keep bringing up things that happened when they were children? And once Marie and Fayette had the closer relationships of mother and daughter, Fayette had no doubt that she would have to be on her best behavior to avoid giving Marie things to use against her.

"Fayette," Anne said, her weathered face somber, "people often don't think I have much wisdom because I've never been married and never had children. But they've never done what I've done, either. To not marry, to not have children—that is a different kind of experience. And it brings a different kind of wisdom. I've watched a lot of people, married or not, and I see a lot of things. And as hard as it is for me to always be alone, I think it's even harder if you've once been married."

That was another thing Fayette liked about Tante Anne. She often spoke to Fayette as if she were grown up.

Anne sighed as she tied a ribbon behind Fayette's back. "I'm the oldest in the family, but since I've never been married, people think of me like I'm the youngest. I remember what Marie was like before she got married. She laughed more, and she ... she didn't brood as much. Once she was widowed, she ... well, you know how she is. Is your father different than he was when your mother was alive?"

All at once, it felt like something large had lodged in Fayette's throat. She recalled herself upon her father's shoulders, clinging to his thick hair as he walked through the house, ducking under doorways, pretending she was a giantess. She gulped. She didn't want to say it, but Anne was waiting. "He seems ... older. Like he got old all at once. And he isn't even fifty."

Anne nodded. "I've observed that bachelors seem to do well enough on their own, even if they become somewhat eccentric. But widowers—the usually want to remarry. It may even be that your father invited us to live here in the hopes that he might marry one of us. He may need a wife even more than you need a mother. Do you understand?"

Fayette looked at her aunt in the mirror. "Yes, Tante Anne."

"Now, let's see that smile again."

Fayette gave her aunt her best effort this time.

The wedding was lovely. All the neighbors brought fresh blossoms from their gardens, and several of Tante Marie's clients sent hothouse flowers. The weather even seemed to celebrate with an exceptionally fine spring day. Her father looked happy. Afterward, the entire street descended on the boutique for the wedding feast. She smiled and told her father and her aunt—no, her *stepmother*—and anyone else who would listen how happy she was. And she even meant it ... except for a tiny part of her who

cried one last time for her lost mother. She stood for far too long on her newly-healed leg, until at last, late that evening when she found herself unobserved, she slipped into the workroom, grabbed a dust cover, and went out to the back garden. She spread the cloth next to the hazel tree, and sat upon it.

Almost right away, the nightingale began to sing. She had not expected to hear it; it had been silent all day. She listened for a moment as it warbled and chirbled.

Finally, she said, "Why do you only sing for me, nightingale?"

A sequence of flutings was the only response.

"Is it just that you're used to my presence? Or are you just something I'm imagining?"

There followed a series of indignant chirpings.

"It seems as if no one else ever hears you. Like you are a ghost bird. Maybe a priest should bless this house." She frowned. "Except one already has."

The bird chirruped a long song. And she sighed. "It *does* seem like you are talking to me. I do wish I could talk to you, as well."

The bird cut off mid-note, as if startled.

She sat up. Everything looked different, yet the same. It was as if someone had captured the crisp quality of the dawn light and transported it somehow to the night. A gentle light bathed the house and garden without banishing the night. Fayette looked up. Through the branches of the young hazel tree, each star glimmered with an unusual intensity, even though they were not any brighter than before. The light of the Milky Way spangled across the sky.

"What's happened?" she whispered.

"I decided to grant your wish to speak to me," a tiny voice, sharp and unmistakably male, replied.

She spun her head around to the right.

“Not so quick,” the voice said from a point beyond her left shoulder this time, “Your wish made me able to bend the rules, but I cannot break them.”

“What rules?”

“I will let you see me from time to time, but only for the span of time between two eyeblinks. And only when you aren’t expecting it.”

“But why? Who are you?”

“Surely, you do not expect me to give you my name.”

“Well then, *what* are you?”

“A farfadet. Or a sprite. A house elf. A brownie. A leprechaun.”

Fayette blinked and she twisted around. “I don’t believe you.” She scanned the low garden wall. “It’s Monsieur Rousse, isn’t it?”

“That’s a good guess; he *is* a fair mimic. But I am not he.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you are some sort of fairy?”

“If you’ll think about it for just a moment, you’ll *know* what I say is true. Don’t you remember? I’ve lived in this house for long years—since you were a wee one.”

She felt her mouth move open to object, but no sound emerged. Memories bloomed in her head—images that for all her life, she thought were dreams. “Why, yes,” she finally said. “That seems ... right, somehow.” Her eyes flew wide at a sudden recollection. “I used to imagine that a little man would pop out of the wall!”

“We used to play together,” he said. “When you were in your toddering years.” He gave what sounded like a wistful sigh. “Fey have children but rarely—once every hundred years, if that. We love human babies because they look just like our own—except bigger, of course. Some fey steal the babies and leave changelings, but a farfadet would never do such a thing. We play with them, minding them when their mothers’ backs are turned.” The voice paused. Fayette was about to ask a question when he continued. “Once, when you were small, you pulled a cloth off a table, and upon the cloth was a pair of shears. Your mother said it was a

miracle that you weren't hurt, but I was that miracle, for I deflected the shears as they fell." He paused. "I still bear its bite."

"What do you mean—it never healed?"

"No. The sheers were of steel, and steel contains iron, and a feyling cannot endure the touch of iron."

"Can anything be done?"

"Worry not about it. Most of us have some iron-caused injury or another. It is not my only such injury, and it won't be my last."

"But why live among mortals if it is so dangerous?"

"You may as well ask a wildflower why he blooms in the field."

There was silence for a moment. Fayette tried to recall the incident and failed. However, another memory tickled her mind. "I think I remember the last time I saw you."

He exhaled. "I imagine you do."

"I stacking blocks with you, and I asked you if you were real. And then I looked up and you were gone. And I ... I never saw you again."

"We can only play with mortal children until they begin to question our existence. Then, we must employ our magic, which wraps the light around us like a cloak, making us almost impossible to see."

"So if I were to look at you now, what would I see?"

"You would see a farfadet. And when you looked again, I would be gone." He paused. "As I promised, you will see me some day soon."

She was quiet for a moment. Then, she asked. "Why did you grant—" She stopped when she realized that her question might hurt the farfadet's feelings.

"You have a question?"

"Well, I'm not sure ..."

"Go ahead and ask it."

"Well ... had I known you were going to grant my wish, I ..."

"You would have wished for your leg to be healed?" His voice was gentle.

She nodded, trusting that he could see her.

He sighed. "I'm a small feyling, and can only grant small wishes. Your wish was something I was able to grant."

"Why did you want to grant a wish for me?"

"Why?" He was silent for a moment. "Several reasons. One is I am fond of you, and I wanted to give you a secret. You are too serious for a child. You needed a secret—even from your Tante Anne. You can keep a secret, can't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"As for the other reason ... well, fey are prescient sometimes, and one day, I think your spontaneous wish to enable a mortal to speak to a nightingale won't seem so frivolous. I will help you, somehow. And also ..."

There was a long pause. "Also?" Fayette prompted.

"One day I'll have need of you. I don't know how, but I will."

She didn't know what to say in response to that. How could a magical feyling have need of a lame mortal child?

The silence stretched on until she wondered if he was gone. But she looked around; the house still glowed with light, and the stars continued their eerie gleam in the sky. The position of the stars reminded her of the lateness of the hour.

She sighed. "I supposed I'd better return to the feast."

He said, "Part of the magic I used on you to grant your wish will make this time we spent together seem like a dream. In time, it will fade like a dream, always on the edge of your memory, but never quite forgotten. And if you hear the nightingale sing, know that it is me."

With that, a hazelnut landed in her lap, and her eyes flew open. The house had lost its predawn glow, although the lights from the festivities still shone within. She looked around, and then up in the silent tree.

Had it been a dream? She closed her palm around the nut and her eyes narrowed. The hazel tree was far too young to be producing nuts.

She lumbered to her feet. Her leg felt somewhat better from the rest. She limped toward the house, the dream still bright in her mind, even as it dimmed on the edges. She put her hand on the latch and paused, trying to catch the dream as it continued to slide away from her. Unlike a real dream, it did not entirely fade away.

She went inside.

“Fayette!” her father boomed, his eyes bright with excitement. “We were about to search the neighborhood! It’s time for the toasts, and Marie and I decided that you are old enough to join us.”

Marie and I, she thought as she walked slowly toward him and accepted a cup. She supposed she would have to get used to the phrase. She met the anxious gaze of her stepmother aunt, and suddenly, a clear memory leaped forth from the dream. *You are too serious for a child*, the voice had said. And he was right. The accident had grown her up too early. She didn’t think there was anything she could do about that, but—

What was that?

Her gaze darted to the corner. A tiny man lifted his hat to her, and doffed an exaggerated bow. A smile bloomed on her face as she remembered the farfadet’s promise. He was wearing a—

Then she blinked, and the corner was empty. And Fayette wondered if she had seen anything at all.

She turned her smiling gaze to her Tante Marie, who smiled as well. Together, they lifted their glasses.

Dear Reader,

The above story is the prequel to a fairy tale retelling of Cinderella. The Cinderella story is the second in my *Accidental Enchantments* series, which is a series of sensual fairy tale retellings, framed for an adult audience.

When I write these retellings, I read all the versions of the original story, and I try to blend them together. This particular story draws from the lesser-known *Grimm's Fairy Tales* version, where Cinderella wished for "silver and gold" from a hazel tree in her yard. I decided Fayette needed a little magic in her life; therefore, the hazel tree and the granted wish are hers. The events in the Cinderella story, with the fairy godmother and the glass slipper, do not occur until Fayette is grown up.

This prequel is only alluded to in the final retelling. I do hope you enjoyed it. The first book in the series, *The Sevenfold Spell*, a retelling of Sleeping Beauty, is widely available on the Internet in eBook and audiobook format – just check your favorite online bookseller.

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