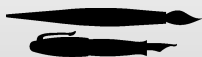


FORTUNE FALLS



JENNY GOEBEL



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For my mom—
Thank you for teaching me the things worth believing in.

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pass regular “luck tests” to see if they are worthy, ill-fortuned Sadie has always
been deemed as unlucky, and shunted aside for her luckier younger brother—
but when she finds an unusually intelligent black cat named Jinx, her fortunes
begin to change for the better.

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STEP ON A CRACK

Petey's sweaty little hand wriggled in mine. It was hard to hold on to, like a fish fighting to make its way back into a pond. If we'd been anywhere else in town, I probably wouldn't have cared. I might even have let it go. Instead I said, "Petey, stop squirming." Then I reached over and clamped my free hand around his scrawny upper arm, preventing my five-year-old brother from writhing out of my grasp. When he looked up from under his mop of wayward curls, I tipped my head ever so slightly in the direction of Tommy's mom, Mrs. Mitchell. It was all the reminder Petey needed.

Mrs. Mitchell had just dropped Tommy off at the Pot-of-Gold Child Care Center and was walking away, but even from a distance, it was impossible to ignore the halo cast encasing her head and neck as her fractured vertebrae healed.

It might be called a halo cast, I thought, but there is absolutely nothing holy about the medieval contraption screwed onto Mrs.

Mitchell's skull. Unfortunately, it was all too common a sight in Fortune Falls.

“Come on, Petey,” I said, collecting myself and turning my attention back to my brother.

But Petey’s face was now ash gray, the same color as the cement we were attempting to traverse. His small blue sneakers were glued to a solid patch of it, and cracks sprawled like spiderwebs down the path in front of us. One false move, and somewhere across town, our own mother would feel something in her back snap, and crumple to the floor in agony.

“It’s all right,” I reassured him, even though the stretch of pavement between us and Petey’s day care was particularly tricky. “Let’s pretend it’s just a game.” I acted braver than I felt as I hopped to the next piece of solid ground, still gripping his hand tightly. Petey eyed me warily, unmoving.

“It’s like hopscotch,” I said. “Just don’t land on a crack.”

Petey glanced over his shoulder, in the direction we’d come from.

“Nope,” I said with resolve. “If I have to go to school today, so do you. We’re not going home.” I hopped back next to him. “Shoelaces tied?” I lifted the bottoms of his pant legs to reveal the double knots I’d tied as securely as possible before we’d left the house. “Check. Path clear of leaves, twigs, and other tripping hazards?” We both scanned the sidewalk in front of us. “Check.”

I cupped Petey's chin in my hand and waited until his hazel eyes were looking back into my own. "Trust me?" I asked.

The flicker of doubt I saw there was a stab to the heart. Even my young brother was starting to see me the way everyone else did—as a vacuum for bad luck, a magnet for misfortune. Maybe he'd never been worried that *his* misguided footstep would cause our mother to cry out in pain and fall to the cold tile floor at the hospital where she worked. Perhaps all along his fear had been that *I* would step on a crack and break our mother's back.

I wanted to remind him that I hadn't been tested yet. Technically, I was still classified as Undetermined, but we both knew that didn't matter. My hand felt detached from the rest of my body as it started to slip from Petey's. But then he squeezed it with a ferocity that surprised me, and squared his boney shoulders in stout determination. "Check," he said in his tiny boy voice. "I trust you, Sadie." And this time he took the first step.

As I approached the crosswalk in front of Fortune Falls Elementary a short while later, a commanding red hand popped up on the signal. I waited by the side of the road as a shiny, tanklike SUV with dark-tinted windows whizzed by.

I didn't have to see who was riding inside to know that Luckies had caused the light to change. The vehicle never slowed. Obviously they'd expected the light to turn green as they'd approached the intersection. Most lights probably did for them.

Sure enough, after the SUV whipped into the parking lot, I saw Ian Silverman vault flawlessly from the staggeringly tall vehicle and land with both feet squarely on the solid pavement.

Ian had been in my homeroom when we started school back in August, when we were all still Undetermined. However, he'd turned twelve in September, which meant he'd been part of the first wave to take the Luck Test.

No one was surprised when Ian passed with flying colors and was transferred to a homeroom for Luckies only. That's how it would go for the rest of the year. Every few months, a new group would take the test. Those who passed would go from Undetermined to Luckies. Those who failed would be revealed as Unluckies. It might not seem like a big deal, having to switch homerooms, but that was only a temporary measure.

After sixth-grade graduation, the Luckies would move on to Flourish Academy, a day school. On the other hand, after the Unluckies graduated, they'd be shipped off to Bane's School for Luckless Adolescents—a boarding school

designed to keep the Unluckies from endangering those around them. I'd never seen it with my own eyes, but I'd heard it was awful.

Ian ran over to the basketball court where Simon Swift was waiting. Simon was still Undetermined like me, but there was no reason for him to fear the Spring Luck Test, which was now only a week away. I watched as Ian and Simon began swishing ball after ball through the hoops. It didn't matter where they shot from—behind their back, a great distance away—it still went in. Simon even banked a shot off a nearby tree, something only a Lucky would be able to do. Something I couldn't do if my life depended on it.

It was mesmerizing to watch them play. The dribbling sounded so pleasantly rhythmic against the cacophony of chattering students waiting for the bell to ring. For just a moment, I allowed myself to be hypnotized by their fluid movements instead of thinking about what the next week might hold for me.

A wall of muddy water shook me back to reality. The splash was cold and sudden. I whipped around in shock only to have a second spray kicked up in my face.

If I hadn't been so entranced by Ian and Simon's game, I would've noticed the giant puddle in the gutter. Instead, I'd stood dumbly on the sidewalk nearby as one car, and then another, had driven through it. Now I was soaked and angry

with myself for making such a careless mistake. Lights never magically turned green for me. I had to pay attention. I couldn't afford not to.

I wiped my eyes and lips with a dry spot on my sleeve, just as the bell rang and everyone else started piling in through the front doors. I sighed heavily. Mrs. Swinton wouldn't like it if I was late again, but she'd like it even less if I dripped dirty water all over the classroom carpet. So as the other students rushed off to their classrooms, I found my way to the girls' bathroom.

I spent the next ten minutes dabbing water off my clothes and wiping chunks of mud out of my hair. I splashed clean water onto my cheeks, but the mirror above the sink wasn't really a mirror at all, so I couldn't see if I'd gotten my face entirely clean.

An Unlucky student named Hannah accidentally broke the real mirror in the girls' bathroom two years ago. Not even an hour later, she was dead. A passing car had blown a tire, rammed through the fence, and crashed onto the playground. Hannah, sulking over the broken mirror, had been sitting close to the fence when the man's car broke through. The entire school was grief-stricken, but not entirely shocked. Breaking a mirror brought a seven-year curse—one of the worst in Fortune Falls—but most didn't outlive the duration. Still, Hannah's ruin had been particularly swift.

Two things changed after that. First, the Unluckies were no longer allowed on the playground at recess. Second, a construction worker removed the rest of the school mirrors and replaced them all with shiny metal sheeting. The metal sheeting was nearly indestructible, but it completely warped any reflections.

I could see a wobbly outline of my face, framed by my own unruly curls, but my features were all distorted and I couldn't tell if I'd missed any splatters of mud. It didn't matter, though, really. It's not like I could wash all the speckles off my cream-colored sweater or light blue jeans anyway. Or rinse all the Unlucky from my blood, for that matter. I'd have about as much luck doing that as a leopard would at changing its spots.