

A Sprinkling of Murder

Chapter 1

Do you believe in Fairies? If you do, clap your hands! —J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

“Do you see her? Is she down there?” I tried not to let my five-year-old customer hear the panic in my voice. Of course Fiona was down there. She wouldn’t have flown the coop. Okay, she was mad at me for telling her to make herself scarce, but honestly! “Look hard,” I said.

After a breathless moment, the curly-haired girl—Lauren—who was peering into a huge strawberry terra-cotta planter, popped upright, and spun in a circle. “Yes, I do, Miss Kelly. I see her.”

Once upon a time, when I was five, I’d danced among the flowers and twirled to my heart’s content, too.

“Call me Courtney,” I reminded her. Children who came into Open Your Imagination, my fairy garden and tea shop, didn’t have to be formal. The more familiar, the more fun. “And keep your voice soft. You don’t want to scare her.”

“Courtney,” she said. “I do see her. I really do.”

“What does she look like?”

“She’s . . . she’s . . .” Lauren wiggled nervously as if I’d really put her on the spot. I’d felt the same when I saw my first fairy. A week after my mother planted a

fanciful garden filled with yarrow, lilac, and a host of herbs to attract butterflies, I met her. I had been dressed in something similar to what I was wearing now, denim overalls, a lacy shirt, and a gardening apron. She had been as pretty as the sunrise.

Lauren waved her arms. “She’s green and silver and blue and . . . and . . .”

“Go on,” I encouraged. I hadn’t wanted to trust my eyes, either, but my mother had told me to *believe*. Meadows, rivers, and mountains, she said, were alive with spiritual beings who would give a helping hand to those who asked nicely. I stroked the silver locket that held my mother’s portrait. She’d given me the locket that Christmas. An image of a fairy was etched into the lid. The word *Believe* was engraved on the underside.

“Mommy,” Lauren called.

She and I were standing on the slate patio, a roofed outdoor garden space,. Her mother was sitting at one of the many wrought-iron tables. She smiled indulgently and whisked her hand, encouraging her daughter to speak. Muted sunlight filtered through the skylight in the pyramid-shaped roof. The ornate fountain carved with fairies and gnomes burbled in the background. A number of customers browsed fairy figurines on the verdigris bakers’ racks and spoke in hushed tones. A few others chatted about how pretty they thought the twinkling lights were that we’d woven through the vines and the potted ficus trees. A cluster of women was checking out the miniature Pink Splash hypoestes plants and golden Monterey cypress we had in stock.

“Tell me about her wings,” I prompted.

“They’re teensy,” Lauren chimed.

I noticed a lot of activity inside the main showroom, the French doors and beveled casement windows of the L-shaped space providing a full view from where we stood. One woman was scrawling her name on the sign-up sheet for the upcoming tea. We didn’t serve tea every day, only on Saturdays. So far, the response for this week’s tea had

been tremendous because we'd decided to pair it with a book club event. We were going to discuss *The Secret, Book and Scone Society*. Scones and tea . . . a perfect fit.

"And her dress?" I asked.

Lauren twirled in place, her tresses fanning out. "It's silver and looks like my ballet dress." She grabbed the seams of her pink tutu.

"So her dress is lacy?" I asked.

Lauren bobbed her head. "And she has blue hair and sparkly silver shoes, and she glows."

"That's Fiona," I said. Her *hair* was actually gossamer and caught the light, much like a prism or the lens of a camera. At certain angles, her hair could become a variety of other colors.

Lauren stopped moving and splayed her arms. "Why are her wings so small? She can't fly with those."

"She's able to fly but not long distances. She has to earn three sets of adult wings first, in addition to her current pair."

"How will she earn them?"

"By . . ." I tapped my chin. How could I explain it?

Fiona, for all intents and purposes, was a fairy-in-training. She should have been a

full-fledged fairy by now, but imp that she was, she'd done one too many pranks in fairy school, so the queen fairy had booted her out and subjected her to probation, during which time Fiona had to get serious. By helping a human, she could earn her way back into the ranks.

"Courtney, yoo-hoo." Lauren touched my arm. "How will she do it?"

“By doing good deeds,” I replied.

“Everyone should do good deeds,” Lauren said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, they should.” And not pranks like putting syrup in my tea as Fiona had

done earlier. I’d warned her that the queen fairy would frown on her antics.

Months ago, when I’d pressed Fiona for details of her banishment, she had been

vague. One major restriction was that she could not have fairy friends. Though more fairies existed in Carmel, she wasn’t to socialize with them. Yet.

“How did you meet her?” Lauren asked.

“She came to me the day after I opened this shop.”

“Like magic?”

“Yes, like magic.”

After Fiona had told me about her predicament, I’d asked her if the queen fairy

was a horrible, wicked fairy, and she’d blushed. *No*, she’d said. The queen was the most wonderful fairy in the whole world. When I grilled her for more information—like were other fairies on probation?—Fiona had dodged the question and instead educated me about her kind. In addition to types of fairies, like air fairies and water fairies, there were four classes of fairies: intuitive, righteous, guardian, and nurturer. Fiona was a righteous fairy, which meant she needed to bring resolution to embattled souls. Of course, there were rules in the fairy world. A righteous fairy couldn’t intentionally put herself in harm’s way.

“Have you always seen fairies?” Lauren asked. “No.”

At the tender age of ten, when my mother died, I had lost my ability to see them. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I rubbed the locket my mother had given

me, I couldn't see another. In the ensuing years, I grew serious. In high school, I studied hard to make my father proud. In college, I turned my attention to chemistry and earth sciences. After graduation, I joined my father's thriving landscaping outfit in Carmel-by-the-Sea and dedicated myself to working the land: *dig, plant, don't have fun, repeat.*

Until a year ago when Fiona appeared. At first I saw a sparkle and heard a *tinkle* and a *ping*. And then delightful laughter. She had flitted from behind a pot and introduced herself with a curtsy. When I found my wits, I asked why she would reveal herself to me. She explained that although the sorrow over the loss of my mother had squelched my ability as a girl to see fairies, it was my nose-to-the-grindstone attitude toward life that had continued to suppress me. When I made the decision at the ripe old age of twenty-nine to spread my wings and start a fairy garden business, *voilà*. My heart opened, and Fiona swooped in. She hoped she could save me so I could save her.

"There she goes." Lauren pointed.

A flicker of light shot from a pocket of the strawberry planter and disappeared in the vines by one of the French doors. Fiona. Still miffed. Tough. If we were going to remain friends, she would have to follow my rules: *no shenanigans*. I wondered if the queen fairy had given her the same guidelines.

"Can she come to my house?" Lauren asked.

"Sorry. No."

Fairies had few boundaries, so Fiona could leave the shop and cruise around

Carmel, but I didn't want every new believer thinking Fiona might drop in for a visit.

Besides, as of this morning, Fiona had wanted to remain close to me. She'd told me she feared something extraordinary or tragic might happen. *To me?* I'd asked. She wasn't

sure, but she wanted to remain *at the ready*. Needless to say, I'd been on pins and needles ever since her pronouncement. I didn't mind an extraordinary occurrence, like meeting a fairy, but a tragic one? Like my mother dying? No thanks.

Knowing she'd worried me, Fiona had played a trick to lighten the mood—the syrup. I'd snapped at her. She'd bolted.

Lauren pressed her face to the top of the planter, probably hoping Fiona would return, and said, “How old were you when you saw your first fairy?” Her words reverberated in the empty pot.

“Your age.”

“Was it in the last week of April, like now?”

“It was the first week in June.” I fingered the short-cropped hair at the nape of my neck as the memory came back to me full force. “Was it here in Carmel?”

“Yes.” I'd lived in Carmel-by-the-Sea all my life, except when I went away to college. How I loved living here. The town was charming and magical and bursting with positive energy.

Lauren stood up, her eyes wide. “Was it Fiona?”

“No, sweet pea. Another fairy. Her name was Aurora.” Like my mother, Aurora had a cheery disposition and had loved the color yellow and the aroma of honey.

“Is Aurora the one who taught you how to make fairy gardens?” Lauren asked. “No. I learned from a woman at the Renaissance Fair.”

My best friend had encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and attend a Renaissance Fair—in costume. While there, dressed as an enchantress, I had met a fairy garden designer. I was so enraptured with the whimsical creations, I begged the woman

to teach me the art. As I learned to design gardens, the woman gave me tips on how to attract fairies. I remembered laughing at the notion. My childhood memories of playing with fairies were fanciful and foolish. And yet . . . how I'd wanted to believe again. Following my mentor's advice, I had planted a garden of flowers and herbs that would attract butterflies. I set up bird feeders, filled birdbaths with water, and hung crystals from the trees. As a feeling of spiritual wellness rose within me, I had realized I needed to change my life. I gave notice to my father and with a small fund my nana had left me—she had helped my father and me cope with our loss until she passed away at eighty—I had invested in Open Your Imagination.

Lauren's forehead pinched with concentration. "What's a Ren-sen Fair?"

"*Renaissance.*" I adjusted the strap of my floral-print garden apron. I'd added an extra pair of pruning shears in one of the multifunctional pockets, and the extra weight was pulling it down. "It's a fair where—"

"All right, Lauren. Time to go." The girl's mother clapped her hands.

Startled, Pixie, my creamy white Ragdoll kitten bounded from her perch on one of the wrought-iron chairs and dashed to me. She swiped me with her tail. I bent down and scratched her chin. "You're okay." She was nearly six months old. "Don't be a scaredy cat."

Pixie sat on her haunches and squinted, which made the flame markings on her forehead meld together.

I ran a finger across them. "You'd better get used to noise. There's going to be a lot of it whenever children visit us. Scoot." I nudged her, and she scurried off.

"C'mon, little lady," Lauren's mother said. She waggled the white basket in which

they'd stowed their fairy garden choices. "Let's purchase the things we've picked out and head home."

At Open Your Imagination, I made fairy gardens and taught people how to build them. At the learning-the-craft corner of the patio, an area at the far right of the patio set with a modest-sized rectangular table fitted with benches, a couple of customers who had taken this morning's instructional class were still working on theirs. In addition to fairy figurines, I sold a variety of items that customers could use to create their own environments—waterwheels, gazebos, and the like. For a bit of whimsy, I'd stocked the main showroom with items for people, too, like tea sets and an assortment of garden knickknacks, macramé hanging plant holders and wind chimes and bells—according to Fiona, fairies loved tinkling sounds. We also carried miniature plants, pots, tool sets, and aprons. Although Open Your Imagination was modest in size, we offered plenty of choices.

Lauren grabbed my hand. "Come with us, Courtney. I'll show you the fairy I picked out. She has my name."

Many of the miniature fairies, gnomes, or trolls that we sold had a name. If we didn't stock a particular name, we could special order it. And, honestly, anyone could change a fairy's name. They weren't written in stone.

"She has beautiful brown hair like mine, and a crown of flowers, and she's sitting like this." Lauren plopped onto the ground, crossed her legs, and rested her chin on her fist.

"I know, sweetheart," I said. "I helped you find her. Remember? Along with the swing set and the slide and the bunnies." Every fairy garden should have a theme. Lauren

wanted hers to be about having fun, day and night.

Her mother bit back a smile and hoisted her daughter to her feet. “Upsy-daisy.” I followed them through the French doors into the shop.

“*Psst.*” Joss Timberlake, my elfin clerk and bookkeeper who had a penchant for really colorful shirts, like the short-sleeved fuchsia Hawaiian one she was wearing, beckoned me to the sales counter. “He’s here.”

“He, who?” I was five feet five inches tall, but I towered over Joss. I had to crouch to hear her.

“Him.” Joss caressed the ridge of her pointy ear and subtly hooked a thumb toward the front door.

Mick Watkins, who owned Wizard of Paws, the pet-grooming salon across the courtyard, was standing inside the Dutch door. There were additional businesses in the Cypress and Ivy Courtyard, including an art gallery, a bakery, a jeweler, a high-end clothing shop, and a collectibles store. If Carmel was known for one thing, it was its attractive courtyards and secret passageways. Our courtyard, which was multilevel and located between Lincoln Street and Dolores Street, with Open Your Imagination facing Lincoln, had been designed with a Cape Cod feel, its white clapboard buildings trimmed in baby blue and adorned with lots of plantings. The design was one of the main reasons I’d wanted to lease the property.

“What do you think he wants?” I asked Joss.

“Trouble.”

I didn’t know what I’d do without Joss. I was so thankful that on her fiftieth

birthday she’d decided to seek a simpler life and had left her Silicon Valley

accounting job. She was a whiz when it came to organizing the stockroom or balancing accounts and a decent person who cared about others, although occasionally, she could make snap decisions about a personality.

I said, "I've got this. Would you ring up this purchase for this sweet girl and her mom while I tend to Mick?"

"After I finish this sale." Joss was packing up an eight-inch pot, a small bag of soil, six two-inch containers of miniature plants, and a flute-playing, rose-colored fairy. Small-scale projects were often the first gardens that customers who were new to fairy gardening attempted.

I tapped Lauren on her freckled nose. "Good luck, young lady. Have fun making your garden, and, when you're done, encourage your friends to believe."

"I will."

Slapping on a winning smile, I crossed the parquet floor to greet Mick, a chunky man with a barrel chest, bulldog jowls, and thick brown hair.

"Hey, Mick." I jutted a hand. "Nice to see you."

Mick grunted, which made me bite back a smile. Over the past year, he had been vocally unhappy that I'd landed this particular lease. He'd hoped to expand across the courtyard, but our landlord had nixed the idea. One grooming establishment was enough, no matter how dog-friendly Carmel was.

Mick rubbed his jeans as though he were itching to respond to my offer of a handshake. I saw a flicker of light beyond him. Was Fiona toying with him? Had she given up being annoyed with me? Pixie, her whiskers twitching with curiosity, lingered behind Mick, too. She adored Fiona and often played chase with her.

“Can I help you find something, Mick?” I asked.

“Nope.” He had a booming voice. I suspected his barrel chest had something to do with its tenor. “I came in to tell you that Logan Langford’s on the warpath. He wants to renege on my lease.”

“Did he say why?”

“Ha! A mute has a larger vocabulary. But watch out. Next thing you know, he’ll be coming after you.”

“Thanks for the heads up.” I wasn’t worried. Our landlord had completely embraced the concept of the shop. He intended to create a fairy garden for each of his eleven grandchildren because he had loved the novel *Peter Pan* as a child. Seeing as he hadn’t started the first garden, I was pretty certain I could count on a longer lease. “Anything else?”

“That’s all.” Mick stole to the right wing of the shop and peeked in. Was he looking for someone? Was that really why he’d come in? He checked his watch and, peeved, charged toward the exit.

The upper half of the Dutch door was ajar, allowing a cool breeze to enter the shop. Carmel was blessed with Mediterranean-style temperatures, although intermittently fog drifted in. Not today. Mick opened the door and closed it with a *thwump*.

I returned to the sales counter.

“Whewie,” Joss said as she wiped the weathered white oak surface with a cloth.

“He’s sure not the guy you’d crown Mr. Personality, and here I believed he had a chance. Yesterday when he came in, he was all smiles.”

“He came in yesterday?”

“With Petra Pauli.”

“Councilwoman Pauli?”

During college, although I’d focused primarily on my landscape architecture

degree, taking urban design, site construction, computer applications, and so many chemistry classes I could have become a chemist, I’d also enrolled in a load of history classes. California history, in particular. Over the years, I’d enjoyed reading up on Carmel and knew the sagas of many of the original families. Petra Pauli’s father had been an Olympic pole-vaulter and went on to become a US congressman. Like her father, Petra had excelled at everything—cheerleading, debate team, academics. There wasn’t a blot on her record. It was obvious that she aspired to greater things than simply remaining a councilwoman. My guess? Mayor of our fine town followed by governor of the state.

“The councilwoman is a piece of work.” Joss brushed the underside of her nose.

“Yes, she can be a bit snooty.”

The city council had enacted a number of quirky rules over the years. One of my

favorites was not being allowed to wear high heels without a permit. To be fair, that rule

was prudent because a person in heels could trip on the cobblestoned walkways in town and suffer a sprained ankle. To make her voice known, Petra had added a few eccentric rules of her own, like banning silly string—that gooey stuff kids like to shoot at one another—in public.

“You were on an errand when they came in,” Joss went on.

“How do they know each other?” I asked.

“Mick grooms Miss Pauli’s collies. Hey, that rhymes. Fiona!” Joss called. “I

made a rhyme.” Fairies loved rhymes and all sorts of poetry. “Where is she?”
“Around.”

Years ago, Joss had traveled to Ireland on a fairy tour to romp with fairies at dawn. In Kerry, she’d explored woodlands. In Killarney, she’d walked the fairy trail. And in Dublin, she’d visited the leprechaun museum. But it wasn’t until she encountered Fiona that she’d really experienced the magic.

“Back to Mick,” I said.

“Supposedly, he wanted to show Miss Pauli the shop.” Joss rolled her big brown eyes. Was she intimating that there was more to their relationship? “FYI, he raved about you and Open Your Imagination. He said we needed more creative thinkers in town.”

“Well, I’ll be darned.”

Was Fiona working her magic on Mick? Any fairy, even a young righteous fairy, could influence a person. I searched for her but didn’t see her in the main showroom. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Pixie on the patio dancing on her hind legs trying to bat a shimmering wisp with her forepaws—Fiona.

A few minutes later, as I was rearranging fairy-themed greeting cards on the revolving rack, the front door opened again and in strode Mick’s wife Emily.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

“Who?” I slotted the last grouping of cards in a bracket.

“My husband, who else? I saw him come in here.”

Prior to today, Emily hadn’t ever spoken to me. I’d tried starting up a

conversation or two, but she’d snubbed me each time. She had never deigned to enter Open Your Imagination, either. With her long mane of hair, buckteeth, and flared

nostrils, she reminded me of an angry bronco. Even her voice had a nasal quality. I bit back a snicker as I caught my unintentional pun—nasal/*neigh-sal*. A horse’s whinny echoed in my mind. I blamed my father for my mental lack of decorum. He’d taught me how to pun. Perhaps I should add *no more puns* to my ways-to-improve-myself list, I mused. The list was getting long, but I could manage one or two more goals.

Emily sidled toward the left wing of the shop, running her finger along the shelving as she went as if she were inspecting whether we dusted or not. We did. Daily.

I strode to her, hand extended. “Emily, I’m so pleased to meet you finally. I’m Courtney.”

“I know who you are.”

“Mick has said nice things about you.”

“He has?” Her mouth fell open, as though she couldn’t believe it. Self-

consciously, she buttoned her beige cardigan and adjusted the hem of the sweater over her tan trousers.

“Mm-hm,” I murmured. Over the past year, in an effort to tamp down Mick’s displeasure with my scoring the lease on this location, I’d escorted a few dog-owner customers into his shop to promote his business. “On a number of occasions, I’ve heard him tell his clients how good you are with your German shepherd.”

“Shep.”

“Yes, Shep.”

“Is Mick here?”

“He was, but he left. Did you check Wizard of Paws?”

“Of course I did. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

No, but you are a tad caustic. I forced a smile. “Do you like tea, Emily? We’re

 serving high tea on weekends now. Our chef is an expert with muffins and scones, and you’ve simply got to taste the Brie and strawberry tea sandwiches.”

 “I drink coffee.”

 “We serve coffee, too. A variety of blends. Have you seen the porcelain cups we sell? Coffee always tastes better in a beautiful cup, don’t you think?” I gestured to the antique white oak hutch that displayed a host of cups and saucers. The Cape Cod exterior of the building had set the standard for the interior décor. White display tables. White shelving. A stylish splash of blue and slate gray for color. “If you have grandchildren, they might like the miniature red rose set—”

 “No grandchildren. No children.” A pained look crossed her face. “I’m sorry.”

An awkward moment passed between us.

 I broke the silence by saying, “Your dog Shep sure is a beauty. Mick said you’ve trained him to do agility courses. Are you considering putting him in competition?”

 “No. Not at this time. Mick is against it.”

 “Agility training is quite a challenge. You must be very talented.”

 “It’s not hard if the dog is gifted.” She folded her arms and set her jaw. Ice floes

 could be warmer.

Realizing I wouldn’t be able to melt this one, I said, “Well, feel free to take a look

 around. If there’s something I can help you with, let me—”

 “Did he meet *her* here?” Emily hissed. The venom in her tone took me aback. “Meet who

 . . . whom?” I stammered. Was it *who* or *whom*? English hadn’t been

 my favorite subject.

“His lover,” she said. “If he did, I’ll . . . I’ll . . .” Emily jammed a fist into her palm. She didn’t have to say *kill him*. Her eyes said it all.