

A Glimmer of a Clue

Chapter 1

*Come, fairies, take me out of this dull world, for I would ride with you upon the wind
and dance upon the mountains like a flame! –William Butler Yeats*

“That woman is going to be the death of me, Courtney.” Didi Dubois hustled from Open Your Imagination’s main showroom onto the slate patio.

I was standing at the far end, beside the rectangular table in the learning-the-craft corner, creating a fairy garden using a three-foot tall, wide-mouthed blue glazed pot. I loved spending time on the patio, an outdoor garden space with a skylight in its pyramid-shaped roof. Good vibes radiated everywhere.

“I swear her tongue is a dagger and her fingernails are talons,” Didi carried on.

With long strides, she made a beeline past the wrought-iron tables and ornate fountain carved with fairies and gnomes to the verdigris bakers’ racks. Recently, I’d doubled the stock of fairy figurines and fairy equipment and accessories we carried at Open Your Imagination. Customers had been thrilled.

“If she morphed into the tigress that she is,” Didi said, “she would eat me for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” Didi could be quite dramatic. When not working out or playing pickleball, like she obviously had today, judging by her outfit of spandex shorts and tank top, she dressed as dramatically as she came across, in colorful dresses and lacy shawls. “I need to make something that will calm my nerves,” she said loudly.

A few of the customers who were communing near the vines and Ficus trees that adorned the patio were glancing in Didi’s direction. She was oblivious.

“Any fairies about?” she asked.

The scuttlebutt in Carmel-by-the-Sea was that a number of fairies resided at my fairy garden and tea shop. In fact, there was only one—Fiona, a fairy-in-training. I'd come to meet her a little over a year ago when I'd quit my job as a landscaper for my father's company and dared to open my own business. I'd lost my ability to see fairies after my mother died twenty years ago. Fiona said it was the leap of faith to start something new that had opened my heart to the unimaginable again.

Fiona should have been a full-fledged fairy by now, with three full sets of adult wings, but she'd messed up in fairy school, so the queen fairy had subjected her to probation. Fiona was working her way to earning her wings. As part of the probation, Fiona was not allowed to socialize with other fairies, although she could attend one-on-one classes with a mentor the queen fairy had assigned to her. Because Fiona was classified as a righteous fairy, which meant she needed to bring resolution to embattled souls, she could earn her way back into the queen fairy's good graces by helping a human. Only last year did I learn that there were classifications of fairies in addition to varieties of fairy *types*. Classifications included intuitive, guardian, nurturer, and righteous. Types were what most people understood about fairies; there were air fairies, water fairies, and woodland fairies.

"Help, Courtney," Didi wailed. "I need to rid my mind of these negative thoughts."

"Sure thing. Pick a pot first," I suggested.

The size of the planter determined the number of plants and figurines a fairy garden maker would need.

Didi wandered among the many selections the shop offered and stopped beside a hanging pot dressed with moss. "I like this one."

“Terrific. That’s one of my favorites,” I said. “Next, pick some plants. I like the Pink Splash hypoestes and baby tears, but if you’re going to hang that in hot sun, you might want to consider succulents.”

“What’s that you’re planting?” she asked, circling my work in progress.

“This is a bonsai. To be specific, a dwarf jade.” It was one of the easiest to grow and recommended for beginners.

“I heard you’re making a pot for the Beauty of Art Spectacular,” Didi said

“Yep. This is it.”

The Spectacular, an annual fundraiser to raise money for community outreach programs in the arts, took place the first Saturday in September—two days from now. Wanda Brownie, the event chairwoman and mother of my best friend, had commissioned the garden that I was making. Because she desperately wanted to meet a fairy, I’d encouraged her to help me. I’d reminded her that working on a garden might open her spiritual portals, but she’d pooh-poohed me. Her loss.

“It’s quite pretty,” Didi said.

“Thank you.” For the theme, I’d decided to create an antique-style cityscape. As a focal point, I’d planted the twelve-inch bonsai at the rear of the pot and was currently creating a walkway to it using glass mirror chips. How they sparkled. “It’s taking a bit—”

Didi was no longer listening. She had moved away and was swaying in a bell-like motion, her beaded salt-and-pepper cornrows swinging as she gathered items: a dancing fairy, a reading fairy, and a miniature pig in a pink tutu. She appeared to be humming. That pleased me. I wanted those who came into my shop to find a sense of peace and well-being. Making a fairy garden was an imaginative adventure.

She returned to me. “Okay, now what?”

“You’re not very focused,” I joked. To date, Didi had made four gardens. Not once had she needed me to hold her hand.

“Tell me about it.”

“So, who has you wrapped around the axle?” Once a week, Didi and I played pickleball in a league. She was eons better than I was, but then she had been playing ten years longer than I had and worked out constantly at Sport Zone, the athletic club she’d inherited and managed since her husband passed away.

“Who do you think?” She smirked.

“Lana Lamar.”

“Bingo.” Didi rolled her eyes. “That woman thinks she is God’s gift to mankind. Honestly, she has no sense of anyone else. She’s a total narcissist. If only she were happily married like you, maybe she’d settle down.”

“Actually, I’m not married.”

“You’re not? Where did I get that notion?”

“I almost was. Years ago.” The day after our co-ed bridal shower, my fiancé announced he never wanted to get married. Ever. And, yet, he did get married, just not to me. He and his wife had three kids, last I heard.

“I’m sorry. My bad. I should have remembered that.”

“No worries.”

“Well, Lana is married, but not happily. She’ll mess it up like every other relationship she’s had.”

Lana Lamar was a forty-something antique and art critic who wrote a column for a number of syndicated newspapers. She'd been married once before, prior to marrying Elton. Lana believed she was beautiful beyond words. She wasn't. Nor was she objective and fair-minded, as she liked to claim. In truth, she was hypercritical of everything. Nothing cut the mustard. How did I know her so well? Whenever she wasn't working, she was at the athletic club using the StairMaster, which happened to be my machine of choice. Side by side, we would step for an hour. Lana was more than happy to talk about herself. The last time I'd run into her, she'd recited her latest review to me: *Without a doubt, Betsy Brahn's work adds up to a big ego trip. The last time I saw a painting as deluded as Miss Brahn's witless work, I was ten. Seriously, Miss Brahn, have you no one who will say this to you? Stop. Now. Quit painting. Spare us all.* *Find another career.* The harshness of her words had nearly knocked me off my machine. True to form, Lana had found my stumble amusing.

"What did Lana do this time?" I asked, offering a darling set of miniature fairy signs to Didi. One read: *Fairies love to read.*

"Ooh, I adore this." She set it in her basket.

"Lana," I pressed.

"She bought a third home. In Lake Tahoe."

"Okay." I wasn't following why that upset Didi. The more Lana traveled to her other homes, the less we would all see of her. Good riddance.

"Uh-uh, not okay. She thinks that because she won't be here as often, she deserves an exemption when it comes to the pickleball championship."

For fourteen years, Lana had been the reigning champion. Years ago, she'd trained for the Olympics as a long-distance runner, but a bout of mononucleosis had benched her. Ever since, she had striven harder. At tennis. At racquetball. At weight lifting.

"What kind of exemption?" I asked.

"Sport Zone has rules and regulations about how many rounds one has to play in order to compete in any competitive sport."

"Yes." I might have been a newbie, but I understood the rules. Even though I never wanted to compete, if I were to do so, I would have to wait an entire year before I'd qualify, and in any given season I would need to compete a minimum of six times to maintain my competitive status.

"Well, she doesn't want to comply with the rules. She believes she should be able to compete no matter what. No minimums. No qualifications. End of story. 'Once a champion, always a champion,'" Didi said, mimicking Lana's strident voice. "No strings attached."

"Give me a break."

"I know, right? The name Lana means 'child.' That about sums it up." Didi picked up a ten-inch-tall Schleich Griffin knight. He was clad in white-and-blue robes and holding an ice bolt and awesome spear. "I love this guy."

"He's pretty incredible but too big in scale for what you're planning."

"I could just buy him and put him on my bookshelf, couldn't I? Next to my voodoo doll."

"Let me guess. The voodoo doll is for Lana?"

She let rip with a rollicking laugh. "I made it on my trip to New Orleans. We went to a graveyard. . . ."

As Didi reminisced, Fiona flew to me. “*Pssst. Courtney.*” She hovered nearby, her green wings working hard, blue hair shimmering, her silver tutu and silver shoes sparkling in the sunlight that filtered through the overhead skylight. She whispered, “Didi is really negative. She needs something to lighten her up.”

Didi stopped talking and tilted her head. She was looking in Fiona’s direction, but I was certain she couldn’t see her. Negativity made it difficult for anyone without innate ability to perceive other beings.

“So what are you going to do about Lana?” I asked Didi.

“Block her at every turn, which means she’ll lash out.”

“She wouldn’t hit you—”

“There’s no telling what she might do. I’ve seen her attack other women. It’s not pretty. Don’t worry. I’m prepared. I’ve got my weapons.”

“The voodoo doll?”

“And other tools of the trade.”

That sounded ominous.

“The pen is mightier than the sword.” Didi raised a finger in the air to make her point.

“Oh, I see. A poem.” In addition to running the athletic club, Didi did live readings of her poetry at Harrison Memorial Library. “Will you read it aloud?”

“Perhaps I might.” Didi cackled. “Plus, I have a few more tricks up my sleeve.” She kissed my cheek and hustled into the main showroom to buy her purchases. “Thanks for the help.”

I wasn’t sure I’d given her much. On the other hand, sometimes a receptive ear was all anyone needed to erase negativity.

Fiona plopped onto my shoulder and fluffed her first set of adult wings, which she'd acquired after helping me solve a crime. She was quite proud of them. They were striated with filaments of blue and green. "Didi needs a potion or a spell to lighten her spirit."

"Can you do that?"

"My mentor is teaching me how."

"I mean, are you allowed to?"

"I'm allowed to practice." She mumbled a phrase that sounded like, "*By dee prood mahaw.*"

I'd heard her utter words in her native language before, but I could never determine what she was saying. Back in college, I'd read *The Canterbury Tales* in Old English, which our professor said sounded like Erse and Gaelic. Fiona's language reminded me of that class. I'd figured out a few terms she used, like *ta* meaning "thanks," *littlies* meaning "babies," and *furries*, meaning all small creatures like dogs and cats, but the rest sounded like gobbledegook. I did know that *By dee* meant "May God."

"Courtney!" Meaghan Brownie, my best friend since college, beckoned me from inside the French doors leading to the main showroom. "I'm so glad you're here." Her curly brown tresses bounced the more she waved. She, like Didi, loved wearing bohemian-style clothing. Her white crocheted dress draped her lithe form nicely.

I joined her. "What's up?"

"My mother needs two fairy gardens, not one."

"Two?"

Meaghan and I had met in our sophomore year in college. When she visited me one summer in Carmel, she fell in love with the place, gave up her pursuit of becoming a professor,

and decided to move here and devote herself to art and beauty. After Meaghan graduated, her mother, Wanda, moved to Carmel, too, and was now one of the premier artists' representatives.

"Can you make another fairy garden in time?" Meaghan asked as she toyed with the sleeve of her dress.

"Sure I can. No problem. Does your mother have a theme in mind?" I asked. "She wanted the first to be relevant to antiques, so I decided time should be the theme."

"*Time*. She'll love that. And how apropos for her."

In addition to managing the Beauty of Art Spectacular and representing artists, Wanda brokered antique deals, played a mean game of pickleball, and offered assistance at Sport Zone to help Didi Dubois. In addition, she'd even taken on the position of president of the women's association at the club. Meaghan worried that her mother's chakras were out of whack because she never slowed down. Wanda didn't give a hoot about chakras. After she'd kicked her abusive husband out of her life—Meaghan had been five at the time—Wanda had been determined to live life to the fullest.

"Let me see what you've done so far," Meaghan said.

"It's about time gone by."

"Dinosaurs?"

"No, silly, dragons." I led her to the project. "I found a miniature castle called the Dragon's Keep."

"It's so big."

"Not every fairy garden has to be made with teensy fairies," I said. "This one is oversized. I started with this ornate purple warrior dragon with a tooled letter opener as his sword." I lifted him from the setting. "Hold him."

“Oof. He’s heavy. And ominous.”

I replaced the dragon and said, “To combat him, I’ve added Eyela.” She was a radiant Schleich fairy dressed in a turquoise gown and sitting atop a white unicorn.

“Awesome. I love the sign.”

I’d set the stone-carved sign *Warning: Dragon training site this way* prominently in the front of the design and had created a primordial ooze behind and around the castle using a glue gun, a plastic bag, and lots of pebbles. In addition, I’d added a fiddlehead fairy—not the prettiest of fairies, closer in likeness to a gnome with huge pointed ears and hooked nose—at the top of the keep. Who would mess with him?

“As a contrast to the first garden, why don’t you make the second theme beauty?”

Meaghan said.

“Beauty it is. Pick out the fairies I’ll need.”

“Me? Shouldn’t Mom have a say?”

“She gave me carte blanche.”

Over the past few years, Wanda had become like a second mother to me.

“This will be fun,” my pal said as she browsed the figurines.

Meaghan was the reason I’d risked investing in Open Your Imagination. She’d known how unfulfilled I was when I’d worked as a landscaper.

“Select a few accessories, too,” I added, “like some twinkling lights and a lantern or two.”

“Is she here?” Meaghan peered past me into the patio. Though she’d chanced upon Fiona a while back—she had felt her presence and seen a glimmering—she had yet to have a face-to-face with her. Up until then, Meaghan hadn’t believed in fairies. The near encounter had changed

her mind. Now she wished Fiona would land on her shoulder and reveal every last wing of herself.

“She’s by the fountain.” I wiggled my fingers. “Playing with Pixie.”

My creamy white Ragdoll cat was on her hind legs batting the air, the flame markings over her eyes squinting with focus.

Meaghan squinted like the cat and shook her head. No luck.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “I’ve got to check on Joss. She looks swamped.”

From the patio, I could see everything that went on in the main showroom. The French doors and beveled casement windows of the L-shaped space provided a full view. My assistant, Joss Timberlake, who was in charge of all financial dealings for the store as well as making sure we had enough change on a daily basis for cash transactions and guaranteeing that monies were deposited in the bank account, was a whiz when it came to dealing with customers. At least four of our regulars were waiting in line at the register and yet none appeared to be put out.

I moved into the shop and felt the lovely breeze floating through the open portion of the Dutch door. Carmel-by-the-Sea was blessed with Mediterranean-style temperatures. The Cape Cod feel of the Cypress and Ivy Courtyard, of which we were a part, had set the standard for the interior décor: white display tables and white shelving, with a stylish splash of blue and slate gray for color.

“Hey, Joss, need help?” I said, towering over her the way Meaghan towered over me.

“I’m good to go.” She finished wrapping a set of fairy-themed wind chimes in silver tissue paper and then packed up a teapot and a pair of matching cups and saucers in Bubble Wrap.

From the outset, we'd stocked the shop with an assortment of tea sets, garden knickknacks, wind chimes, and bells—fairies, Fiona informed me, loved anything that made an angelic sound. We also carried miniature plants, pots, tool sets, and aprons.

After Joss packed the items into a tote bag and thanked the customer for her patronage, I said, “We've dressed alike again.”

Joss was twenty years older than me, but we had similar taste in clothes. I didn't think either of us needed to dress *up* for work. We were gardeners. Today, we were each wearing a T-shirt with overalls. Hers was green; mine was red. I loved how powerful I felt whenever I wore the color. “You look elfin,” I said.

Joss swept her pixie-style bangs to the right and rubbed her pointy ear. “What can I say? I'm partial to green. I'm surprised you're not, Miss Kelly, seeing as you're the one with Irish blood.”

“My skin tone doesn't go with green.”

“Good morning!” a lean man in a serge suit—our book rep—called as he entered rolling a dolly filled with boxes. A month ago, Joss had suggested that we start selling books about fairies, both children's literature as well as adult literature. We displayed them on a swivel stand by the Dutch door. I'd fallen in love with *The O'Brien Book of Irish Fairy Tales and Legends* and *Jamie O'Rourke and the Big Potato*, a beautifully illustrated Tomie dePaola folktale.

“I'll handle him,” Joss said, and hitched her chin. “I think those ladies could use some of your expert advice. Why don't you cozy up to them?”

Across the shop, by the antique white oak hutch that held a host of cups and saucers, stood a gaggle of ladies. As I drew near, I realized they were admiring a teacup fairy garden I'd set out last night. Although fairy gardens came in all sizes, from large pots to Radio Flyer

wagons to four-, six-, and eight-inch pots that were perfect for a tight corner, teacup fairy gardens were the ideal fit for someone who didn't have much space or a green thumb. I had adorned the pink-themed cup they were admiring with a moss base, silk plants, and a crouching pink and-purple fairy inspecting a snail.

"This is so cute, Courtney," one of the women said. "Promise me that you'll have a class so we can make one of our own."

"I offer classes already. Pick up a schedule sheet at the register and check out the dates I've set for workshops for the remainder of the year. Don't miss the holiday one. We'll be making—"

Crash! Outside the shop, pottery hit the ground. Followed by raucous shouting.