

A Hint of Mischief

Chapter 1

*'Tis merry, 'tis merry in Fairy-land,
When fairy birds are singing,
When the court doth ride by their monarch's side,
With bit and bridle ringing.*
—Walter Scott, "Alice Brand"

"Thief!" a woman cried outside of Open Your Imagination, my fairy garden and tea shop. I recognized the voice. Yvanna Acebo.

I hurried from the covered patio through our main showroom, grabbed an umbrella from the stand by the Dutch door, and headed outside, quickly opening the umbrella so it protected me from the rain. "Yvanna, what's going on?"

Yvanna, a baker at Sweet Treats, a neighboring shop in the courtyard, was dressed in her pink uniform and standing at the top of the stairs that led through the courtyard, hands on hips—no umbrella. She was getting drenched.

"Yvanna!" I shouted again. "Were you robbed? Are you okay?"

She pivoted. Rain streamed down her pretty face. She swiped a hair that had come loose from her scrunchie off her cheek. "I'm fine," she said with a sigh. "A customer set her bag down on one of the tables so she could fish in her purse for loose change. Before we knew it, someone in a brown hoodie slipped in, grabbed the bag, and darted out."

"Man? Woman? Teen?"

"I'm not sure." Her chest heaved. "That's the second theft in this area in the past twenty-four hours, Courtney."

“Second?” I gasped. Carmel-by-the-Sea was not known as a high-crime town. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. We had suffered two murders in the past year. Flukes, the police had dubbed them. “Where did the other theft occur?”

“There.” She pointed to the Village Shops, the courtyard across the street from ours. “At Say Cheese.”

“The thief must be hungry,” I said. Say Cheese had a vast array of cheeses, crackers, and condiments. “Were you scared?”

“No. I’m miffed.” A striking Latina, Yvanna was one of the most resilient women I knew. She rarely took a day off because she had a family of six to feed—two cousins, her grandparents, her sister, and herself.

“Call the police,” I suggested.

“You can bet on it.”

We didn’t have CCTV in Cypress and Ivy’s courtyard yet. Maybe I should mention it to our landlord. I returned to Open Your Imagination, stopped outside to flick the water off the umbrella, and then moved inside, slotted the umbrella into the stand, and weaved through the shop’s display tables while saying hello to the handful of customers. Before heading to the patio, I signaled my stalwart assistant Joss Timberlake that all was under control.

“Do not argue with me!” Misty Dawn exclaimed. “Do you hear me? I want tea. Not coffee. Tea!” Misty, a customer, was standing by the verdigris baker’s racks on the patio, wiggling two female fairy figurines. When she spotted me, she uttered a full-throated laugh. “You’re back, Courtney. Is everything okay outside? Did I hear the word thief?”

“You did.”

“Hopefully nothing too dear was stolen.”

In addition to my business, the courtyard boasted a high-end jewelry store, a collectibles shop, an art gallery, and a pet-grooming enterprise.

“Bakery goods,” I said.

“And no one got hurt?”

“No one.”

“Phew.” Misty gazed at the figurines she was holding. “I swear, I can’t get over how young I feel whenever I visit your shop. It takes me back to my childhood, when I used to play with dolls. I’d make up stories and put on plays. At one point, maybe seventh grade, I thought I was so clever and gifted with dialogue that I’d become a playwright, but that didn’t come to pass.”

Misty, a trust fund baby who had never worked a day in her life even though she had graduated Phi Beta Kappa and had whizzed through business school, had blazed into the shop twenty minutes ago, hoping to hire me to throw a fairy garden birthday party for her sorority sister. In the less than two years that the shop had been open, I’d only thrown three such parties, each for children.

“Let’s get serious.” Misty returned the figurines to the verdigris baker’s rack, strode across the covered slate patio to the wrought-iron table closest to the gnome-adorned fountain, and patted the tabletop. “Sit with me. Let’s chat. I have lists upon lists of ideas.” She opened her Prada tote and removed a floral notepad and pen.

Fiona, a fairy-in-training who, when not staying at my house, resided in the Ficus trees fitted with twinkling lights that surrounded the patio, flew to my shoulder and whispered in my ear. “She sure is bossy.”

I bit back a smile and said, “The customer’s always right.”

“How true,” Misty said, oblivious to Fiona’s presence.

To be fair, Misty was a force. She was tall and buxom with dark auburn hair, sturdy shoulders, a broad face, and bold features; I doubted she had ever been a wallflower. Every time I’d seen her at this or that event, always dressed in stunning jewel tones as she was now, her red silk blouse looking tailor-made, I’d been drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

Pixie, my adorable Ragdoll cat, abandoned the mother and child customers she’d been following for the past three minutes and leaped into Misty’s lap. Misty instantly started stroking the cat’s luscious fur. Pixie didn’t hold back with her contented purring.

“Sweet kitty,” Misty cooed.

“Pixie doesn’t like just anyone,” I said.

“Of course not. She knows a cat lover when she sees one, don’t you, Pixie?” Misty tipped up the cat’s chin. “Yes, you do. You know you do. I have three handsome friends for you to play with, Pixie. A calico, a tuxedo, and a domestic shorthair that I rescued. I love them all.” She returned her gaze to me. “Now, Courtney, where were we?”

“You want to throw a party.”

“For my good friend Odine.” She stressed the O in her friend’s name. I’d met Odine a few times and was pretty certain she pronounced her name with the accent on the second syllable. “She’s a descendant of one of the first families of Texas. She moved here when she was fourteen, and we became fast friends.”

“Nice.”

“And she’s the first of us to turn forty,” Misty continued. “I’m the last.” That fact seemed to tickle her. “She has always loved fairies. She displays fairy art everywhere in her house. Have you visited Fantasy Awaits in the Doud Arcade? That’s Odine’s shop.”

“I have.”

Odine Oates owned a jewelry and exotica art shop located in a nearby courtyard. Carmel-by-the-Sea was known for its unique courtyards. Much of the shop’s jewelry featured fairies, sorcerers, or mythical creatures. The art included distinctive pieces that she’d found around the world, including kimonos, vases, swords, statues, and so much more. For her wall décor, she had commissioned a local artist to recreate well-known fantasy artwork, including dragons and gnomes and the famous Cicely Mary Barker fairies, all depicted on four-by-six-foot canvases.

“I remember that place,” Fiona whispered. “You bought that necklace for Joss.”

A dragon pendant with an emerald eye. Joss adored dragon paraphernalia.

“It was scary there,” Fiona added.

To a fairy Fiona’s size, I imagined seeing giant-sized fairies, gnomes, and dragons would be frightening. She wasn’t more than a few inches tall with two sets of beautiful green adult wings, one set of smaller junior wings, and shimmering blue hair. Her silver tutu and silver shoes sparkled in any light. By now, she should have grown three full sets of adult wings and lost her junior wings, but she’d messed up in fairy school, so the queen fairy had booted her from the fairy realm and subjected her to probation.

“I want to have the party in my backyard,” Misty went on.

At one time Misty’s family had owned a grand Spanish estate on the iconic 17-Mile Drive, the road popular because it led to Pebble Beach Golf Link, beaches, viewpoints, and more, but she had downsized recently, wishing to live in Carmel proper so she could walk to restaurants and art galleries at a moment’s notice. She had purchased a two-story gray-and-white home on 4th Avenue with the charming name of Gardener’s Delight—many homes in Carmel

had names—and had hired my father’s landscaping company to revamp both the front and rear yards. Her gardens were the envy of all her neighbors.

“Here we go.” Joss placed a tray set with two Lenox Butterfly Meadow-pattern teacups, a plate of lemon bars, and the fixings for chamomile tea on the table. “May I pour?”

“Please,” I said.

“Boss, we have a ton of things to do,” she said, filling Misty’s cup first. “A shipment is coming in and a busload of tourists is about to disembark. They’ll be swarming the courtyard in less than an hour.”

“She won’t be long,” Misty said on my behalf. “I’m very organized. This will only take a few minutes.” She held up her notepad.

Joss pursed her lips, trying not to smile, which made her look even more elfin than normal.

“I like your shirt, by the way,” Misty said to Joss.

“This old thing?” Joss plucked at the buttons of the parrot-themed shirt she’d bought in Tijuana. “It’s fun. I like color.”

“So do I.” Misty opened her notepad, silently dismissing Joss.

Over fifty and seasoned in the picking-up-clues department, Joss winked at me and returned to the main showroom. Through the windows, I watched as she moved from display to display, straightening teacup handles, garden knickknacks, and strings of bells—fairies enjoyed the sound of bells.

Misty took a lemon bar, bit into it, set it on her saucer, and started reading the bullet-pointed list she’d created. “I want to have wind chimes everywhere.”

Something breakable inside the shop went *clack . . . shatter*. Joss *eeked*, and then Fiona shrieked, and my stomach snagged. Fairies hated breakage of any kind. Joss waved to me that she was all right and held up a multicolored wind chime. Was the accident a freak moment of timing, or was it fate?

Fiona zipped off to check on Joss. She couldn't help pick up the broken pieces, of course, but she could offer Joss a whisper of encouragement. Joss, like me, could see Fiona.

Misty hadn't seemed to notice the fracas, too intent on her list. "I want the guests to make fairy gardens. You'll instruct them, of course."

In addition to selling fairy gardens and items for fairy gardens, I taught a weekly class and gave private lessons about how to construct them. I experienced a childlike joy whenever I completed a project. So did my customers.

"I want party games and favors," Misty went on, "like you would for a children's fairy party, but more adult."

That would take a bit of thinking on my part. Children relished games like the lily pad relay and a fairy tale obstacle course. What would adults enjoy?

"And I'll want you to paint a mural on the wall facing the backyard."

"Me? Paint?" I snorted. My talent was purely in the gardening department. My mother had been the painter. A painting that she'd titled *Starry Night*, like the van Gogh painting, hung on the bedroom wall in my cottage. My father hadn't been able to part with any of the others.

"Hire someone." Misty flourished the pen. "I want the mural to feature lots of flowers and vines with fairies frolicking throughout. I saw one on the DIY Garden Channel and it was stunning. I'll download some pictures and email them to you."

Fiona circled Misty's head, waving an imaginary wand, I'd thought, until I realized she was mimicking Misty's gestures with the pen. I couldn't very well say *Cut it out*, so I frowned. Fiona stopped and soared to a Ficus branch so she could hold her belly while laughing.

Later, I would have to have a chat with my sassy fairy. Because she was classified as a righteous fairy, which meant she needed to bring resolution to embattled souls, she could earn her way into the queen fairy's good graces by helping humans such as myself. But she had to toe the line. She couldn't act like an imp all the time.

Only last year did I learn that there were classifications of fairies. Four, to be exact. Intuitive, guardian, nurturer, and righteous. Up until then, I'd always thought fairies were merely types, like air fairies, water fairies, and woodland fairies—Fiona being the latter. Also, up until then, I'd forgotten about fairies. As a girl, I'd seen one, but I'd lost the ability when my mother passed away. That is, until Fiona came into my life.

“All righty then,” Misty said, standing. “Come up with a plan.”

“Would you mind leaving me your list?”

“I'll text it to you.” She took a picture of her list, requested my cell phone number, and sent me a copy of it. “There you go. Oh, and I'd like to have the party Saturday.”

“In three days?” I gulped.

“No, silly, next Saturday. Ample time. Eons before you get hit with Valentine's Day traffic.”

Ten days! Ha! The last fairy party I'd thrown had taken me a month to prepare. On the other hand, because it had taken a month, the birthday girl's mother had thought she could make numerous changes to the menu, favors, and events. A tighter timeline might make this party, for adults, easier to manage.

“Can do?” Misty asked in shorthand. “There will be twelve of us.”

“Can do,” I chimed.

As Misty left the store, Fiona followed me to the modest kitchen behind my office. I set the tray fitted with tea goodies on the counter, filled the sink with soapy water, and started by washing the teacups.

“Something feels off to me,” Fiona said, perching on the teapot’s handle. “That’s the right word, isn’t it? *Off?*”

“Yes, that’s the correct word. What feels off?”

“She’s in too much of a hurry.”

“Or she’s not as organized as she claims,” I countered. “I’m sure everything will go as steady as—”

A teacup slipped from my hand and plunged into the water. When I lifted it, I realized it had cracked in two.

“Oh my.” Fiona clutched her head with her hands. “This is not good. Not good at all.”

“What isn’t good?”

“Misty. Her excitement for this party.”

Suddenly, my insides felt jittery, probably because I’d recently grasped that I should trust my fairy’s instincts. According to Fiona’s mentor, Merryweather Rose of Song, the more mature Fiona became, the more her intuitive instincts would kick in. In addition, Merryweather had been teaching Fiona how to cast spells—good spells, not evil ones—making certain that whatever new ability she learned wouldn’t go haywire.

“Go on,” I urged.

“She’s too eager.” Fiona fluffed her wings.

“She seemed fine to me.”

“What about the way she said her friend’s name?”

“I’m not following.”

“She said, ‘O-dine.’” Fiona stressed the *O* as Misty had. “But that’s not how you say her name. When we were at her shop, Odine told us how to pronounce it,” Fiona went on. “She chanted, ‘Odine. Odine. Odine.’”

My fairy was right. Odine had repeated her name, sounding much like a witch preparing for an incantation.

Fiona swatted my hair. “I’m telling you. Something’s off.”

And then lightning lit the sky, thunder rumbled overhead, and Fiona nearly swooned.

