

## CHAPTER 1

*Down by the spring one morning  
Where the shadows still lay deep,  
I found in the heart of a flower  
A tiny fairy asleep.*

~Laura Ingalls Wilder, "The Fairy Dew Drop"

*Slam! Slam-slam-slam! Slam!*

My insides did a jig. I dashed down the hall to the back of Open Your Imagination, dusting my hands off on my denim overalls while wondering what in the world was going on. Fiona, the teensy righteous fairy that appeared to me the day I opened my fairy garden shop, fluttered to my shoulder. Her limbs and gossamer wings were trembling.

"What's happening, Courtney?" she managed to squeak out. She hated loud noises. Hated surprises. I didn't like them, either.

Pixie, my Ragdoll cat, trailed us. She mewed.

"Don't worry, you two," I said. "I'm sure it's nothing."

I drew to a halt outside the storage room. The door opened and slammed.

When it opened again, I pressed a hand against it. "Hey! Stop! Meaghan, c'mon."

The door opened wide, and Meaghan Brownie gawked at me. Her face was red, her eyes were ablaze with fury, and her curly hair was writhing like wild snakes.

"What the heck has you so angry?" I asked. I'd sent her to fetch a box of gemstones. I had plenty, so coming up empty wasn't what was upsetting her.

"Nicolas!" She huffed. "He texted me. And . . . And . . ." She waggled her cell phone.

"Oo-oh!"

Nicolas was her ex-boyfriend, a temperamental artist. A few months back, she'd asked him to move out while her mother had needed comforting. He'd never returned.

“Oo-oh,” she repeated, before grabbing one of the Tupperware boxes filled with gemstones and skirting past me. She stalked toward the main showroom.

Pixie and I followed. Fiona flew above my pal, sprinkling her with a calming silver dust. Fairies couldn’t change human behavior, but they could offer potions that might help the human solve problems. In this case, to find peace.

“He’s so . . . so . . .”

Meaghan was not using her inside voice, but I wasn’t worried about her upsetting our customers. It was early. Nobody was in the shop yet. Not even Joss Timberlake, my right-hand helper. She’d asked for the morning off, so I’d invited Meaghan to help me prepare some items. Why did I need help? Because yesterday Violet Vickers, a wealthy widow who donated to numerous worthy causes, had ordered an additional dozen fairy gardens to be used as centerpieces for the theater foundation tea she was serving on Mother’s Day. Why *additional*? Because she’d already commissioned me to make a dozen very large, elaborate fairy gardens to be installed when Kelly Landscaping, my father’s company, completed the total redo of her backyard.

It was May first. I wasn’t hyperventilating. Yet. But I also wasn’t sleeping much.

“Let’s go to the patio,” I said. “I’ll bring some tea.”

“I don’t want tea,” Meaghan grouched as she breezed out the French doors to the patio, the folds of her white lace skirt wafting behind her.

The shop’s telephone jangled. I decided not to answer. Whoever was calling would call back. Meaghan, my best friend who I’d met a little over ten years ago when we were sophomores in college, needed me more. I followed her, glancing at Fiona wondering why the calming potion wasn’t working. Fiona, intuiting my question, shook her head.

“Isn’t it a beautiful morning, Meaghan?” I took the box from her and set it on the workstation table in the learning-the-craft area at the far end of the patio. “Gorgeous, in fact.”

The fountain was burbling. Sunshine was streaming through the tempered-glass, pyramid-shaped roof. The leaves of the Ficus trees were clean and shiny. I’d already wiped down the wrought-iron tables and chairs and organized all the verdigris baker’s racks of fairy figurines. Plus I’d removed dead leaves from the various decorative fairy gardens. Presentation mattered to me and to my customers.

Meaghan muttered, “Ugh.”

“Start at the beginning,” I said. “Nicolas texted you.”

“Yes.” She plopped onto a bench and rested her elbows on the table.

“What did he write?” I asked.

“He wants me back.”

I opened the box of colorful gemstones and ran my hands through them: hematite, labradorite, amethyst, obsidian, and more.

“But I don’t want him back,” Meaghan said.

Fiona landed on the rim of the box. Her eyes widened. “Are they for the fairy doors, Courtney?”

“Mm-hm.”

“They’re pretty.”

Not only was I making the gardens for Violet, but I had three upcoming fairy garden door classes scheduled. Fairy doors were miniature doors, usually set at the base of a tree, behind which might be a small space where people left notes or wishes for fairies. They could also be installed into a fairy garden pot.

“I mean, I used to,” Meaghan went on. “But I don’t anymore. We have nothing in common.” Idly, she drew circles on the tabletop with her fingertip. “I did the right thing, don’t you think? I did, didn’t I?”

Over the course of our friendship, I’d kept my mouth shut. Nicolas and Meaghan had never made sense. She was outgoing and personable; he was quiet, to the point of being morose. Granted, he was a talented artist, and she, as a premier art gallery owner, appreciated his gift, but that was not enough to sustain a healthy relationship. Not in my book, anyway.

“Did he text anything else?” I asked, not answering her question.

“No . . . Yes. That he loved me.” She flopped forward on her arms dramatically.

Pixie pounced onto the bench and nudged Meaghan’s hip with her nose.

Meaghan sat up, drew the cat into her lap, and petted her. “You should have seen Ziggy the last time Nicolas contacted me.” Ziggy Foxx, an eccentric gay man in his forties, was Meaghan’s business partner at Flair Gallery.

Cypress and Ivy Courtyard, where Open Your Imagination was located, boasted a high-end jewelry store, collectibles shop, pet-grooming enterprise, my favorite bakery Sweet Treats, and Flair, Meaghan’s gallery.

“Ziggy was finalizing a sale of one of Hunter Hock’s items, and when he heard me say Nicolas’s name, he nearly threw Hunter’s art across the room. Hunter was there at the time.”

Hunter Hock, an in-demand artist in his thirties, was known for small pieces of art. Not as tiny as paintings on almonds or bottle caps or even the insides of lockets. More like three-inch-square petite canvases. Many featured landscapes of Carmel-by-the-Sea, my home town and one of the most incredible places on earth.

“Oh, man, if Hunter could have leaped through the phone receiver”—Meaghan snorted out a laugh—“he would have strangled Nicolas. You know how he likes to protect me.”

Every man who’d ever met Meaghan had wanted to protect her. Not that she needed it. She was a force to be reckoned with. But there was something about her femininity that brought out the he-man in men. Me? Most men wanted to be my friend. Period. I was the girl-next-door type. Short blond hair, athletic figure. Meaghan towered above me and had curves.

I said, “I’d bet Hunter also didn’t like seeing Ziggy lose his temper.”

“Destroy a piece of his art? Oh, the insanity!” Her laugh turned into giggles. Fits of giggles. And then tears.

I hurried to her and threw my arm around her. “Hey, c’mon. Deep breaths. You’re beyond Nicolas. You have Ziggy.”

She arched her eyebrow.

“Okay, you have Hunter,” I joked.

She sobered. “I don’t have Hunter. He’s a friend.”

I twirled a finger. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“Like this?” She made a googly-eyed face.

“That’s the spirit!” Fiona spiraled to the roof, did a loop the loop, and returned to Meaghan’s shoulder. “No more crying. What’s done is done.” She caressed my friend’s hair.

“Thank you, Fiona.” Not everyone could see fairies, and Meaghan had struggled at first, but now, she was quite in tune with them.

“We move onward and upward,” Fiona added. My intrepid fairy knew what she was talking about. She’d messed up in fairy school, so the queen fairy had booted her from the fairy realm and subjected her to probation. But she was making the most of it. By helping humans

solve problems, she would earn her way back into the queen fairy's good graces—the queen fairy who, until a few months ago, I hadn't realized was Aurora, the first fairy I'd ever seen; the fairy who had disappeared from my memory when my mother died.

“When you're done with your pity party, Meaghan,” I said, “help me sort these stones before we open up.”

“And then I need to go to Flair.”

I turned on soothing instrumental music that piped through speakers on the patio, and we worked in companionable silence for an hour, organizing and preparing.

When Meaghan was ready to leave, she gave me a hug. “Thank you for talking me down from the ledge.”

“No thanks required. Nicolas wants you, but you don't want him. All you have to say is no.”

“No.” Meaghan shook her head from side to side. “No, no, no.”

“See?” I grinned. “That isn't too hard.”

“Until he comes near me and my knees turn to jelly.”

“You won't turn to jelly. You'll be strong. Stalwart. You've been seeing the therapist. She's given you mantras. Repeat those. Over and over.”

Fiona said, “And if those don't work, squeeze your eyes shut”—she demonstrated—“and picture what you want out of life.” She popped her eyes open. “What do you want?”

“A man who thinks I'm wonderful,” Meaghan replied. “A man who doesn't tear me down. A man who truly loves me for me.”

I hugged her. “That's my girl.”

She bounded to her feet. “Want me to unlatch the Dutch door on my way out?”

“I’ll do it.” It was time to open.

I followed her through the showroom. In addition to fairy garden items, we sold a variety of specialty pieces, including tea sets, gardening tools, books about fairies, and windchimes; fairies enjoyed tinkling sounds. I weaved between display tables to the entrance and swung open the door. I stepped outside and drew in a deep, cleansing breath. “Remember, Meaghan, I’m here if you need me.”

She jogged up the stairs of the split-level courtyard. “Don’t forget I brought you double-chocolate caramel brownies,” she yelled as she disappeared from view.

Given her last name, she’d been a brownie maker since she’d learned how to bake. I was lucky enough to reap the rewards.

I turned to go back inside.

“Courtney!” a woman called. Violet Vickers exited the silver Rolls Royce coupe she’d parked on the street.

Inwardly, I moaned. I adored Violet, but what did she need now? I didn’t have more hours in the day.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She triggered the car alarm and strode across the sidewalk toward me while smoothing the shawl collar of her lavender jacquard suit. “I tried phoning, but you didn’t answer.”

“Hi, Violet.” I beckoned her into the shop. “What’s up?” I asked, closing the Dutch door behind us, but opening the top half to let in the fresh air. “I’m getting ready to put the fairy garden centerpieces together this morning. Your big pots are done and all set for delivery.” I’d made the larger-sized pots in my backyard using items in my greenhouse.

“Lovely,” she said, as she was wont to do. “Has your father seen the big ones?”

My father, a pragmatist in every sense of the word, didn't believe in fairies. Opening my fairy garden shop had been a bone of contention between us. But at least he was coming around to acknowledging that I and others did see them. And he'd accepted that Violet expected twelve custom-made pots in her garden. No ifs, ands, or buts. Somehow he, as her landscaper, would make them work with his design.

"Not yet," I said, "but he has approved of the plant selections and color of the pottery."

"Excellent. What are the themes of the gardens, if I dare ask?"

"Love, love, love," I chimed. "As ordered."

Though she was pushing seventy, Violet applauded like a jubilant schoolgirl. She'd asked that the fairy gardens reflect love in all its glory. How could I refuse? Fiona, who was turning out to be quite the reader, had advised me from the get-go to focus on the greatest love stories of all time: *Romeo and Juliet*; *Wuthering Heights*; *Dr. Zhivago*; *Casablanca*. Creating Rick's Café with its Moroccan décor for the *Casablanca*-themed garden had been a challenge.

Violet tapped her chin. "Now then, the reason I needed to see you—"

Tires screeched outside. A door slammed.

Fiona flew to my shoulder. "What now?" she asked, quivering with newfound fear.

The Dutch door burst open, and Nicolas Buley charged in, his dark hair askew, apparent shaving mishaps checked by tissue, and his paint-splattered shirt untucked from his jeans.

"Where is she?"



