

## Chapter 1

*The fairies, it is said  
Drop maple leaves into the stream  
To dye their waters red.  
~ Kikaku, "Fairies"*

*Exhale, Courtney!* I was holding my breath the way I did whenever I got too stressed. My father always teased me if he caught me doing it. *Take it one task at a time, kitten*, he'd say. My unease wasn't because of the tea I was drinking in my backyard, and it certainly wasn't because of the lovely twittering of birds. I adored their merry song. No, it was due to the list I was composing of all the things I needed to address in the coming week: the Summer Blooms Festival, multiple fairy garden classes, and hosting the Saturday book club tea at the shop. Sometimes I overscheduled myself. You'd think by now I'd have learned not to. *Um, yeah. No.*

Suddenly, the base of the cypress tree started to glow and sparkle, and a shimmering fairy portal about six inches wide materialized. Seconds later, Fiona tiptoed through it.

"You're here!" I exclaimed, leaping from my chair. "You're alive. You're okay." Relief washed over me as I rushed to her. My bare feet and the hem of my pajamas were getting wet from the puddles left by the recent rain, but I didn't care. "I missed you!" I squealed and scooped her into my hands. I kissed her nose. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

Her gossamer wings were intact. Her silver dress and slippers were as clean as a whistle. I'd met my teensy fairy friend over a year ago when I'd opened my fairy garden shop in downtown Carmel-by-the-Sea. I'd believed in fairies as a girl, but I'd lost the ability to see them until that wonderful, fateful day.

“Did your mother chastise you?” I turned her in my hands searching for what, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t think her mother, the queen fairy, would harm her eldest daughter. “Your hair is a different color. It’s silver.”

“I asked for a favor. I was getting tired of the blue. It goes nicely with my outfit, don’t you think?” She grabbed the seams of her skirt and curtsied.

“It’s lovely. Your wings look bigger. Have they grown?”

“Not in a month.” She tittered and billowed them out.

A month. She’d been gone a whole month. Wow, time had flown! *Not*. Since she’d passed through the fairy portal in mid-May, I’d kept my nose to the grindstone, doing my best not to think about how I’d feel if she never returned from the fairy realm. To distract myself—as if the shop didn’t keep me busy enough—I’d invested in a garden plot, repainted my bedroom, and added more private classes to my weekly roster of fairy garden instruction.

“How I missed the smell of the ocean!” Fiona spiraled into the air, did a pirouette, and alit on my shoulder. “Can we go for a walk on the beach?”

“Of course.” It was Wednesday, but I didn’t have to be at Open Your Imagination as early as usual because Joss, my stalwart assistant, said she had a surprise for me and wanted to open the store on her own.

My Ragdoll cat, Pixie, pushed through her cat door and scampered to us. She rose on her hind legs and meowed to Fiona. Like me, she’d missed her friend dearly. She’d been moping. At home. At work. Every time I tried to soothe her, she would turn heel and bat me with her tail.

Fiona flitted to Pixie’s head and did a toe-heel-kick-step on the flame markings on the cat’s forehead. Pixie mewled merrily and swatted at Fiona, but the little fairy was swift and sailed to a branch of the cypress. From that viewpoint, she said, “The garden looks pretty.”

“Thanks.” After moving in, I’d landscaped it to my liking, adding wisteria, impatiens, and herbs that grew naturally beneath the towering cypress trees. Fairy gardens stood in the four corners of the yard. I’d set a copper fountain featuring a fairy pouring water into a shell at the center near the wicker table where I was having my coffee.

“You’ve planted roses,” she said.

“I did.” Along the paths leading to each of the fairy gardens, I’d planted white floribundas. They boasted peony-shaped flowers with bright, glossy foliage and emitted a fruity aroma with a hint of champagne. “I found them at Flower Farm. The owner, Daphne Flores, sold me fully-grown plants, but she’s renting me a quarter-acre of the farm so I can nurture them from cuttings and transplant them, too.”

Carmel-by-the-Sea was a beautiful town located on the coast of California about two hours south of San Francisco. It was blessed with a moderate climate and populated with some of the most artistic and eco-friendly people in the world. There were lots of farms and ranches as well as wildlife trails and parks. Nearly everyone I knew loved to tinker in their gardens.

“In fact, I’m thinking of cultivating other plants on the quarter-acre, plants that we use in the fairy gardens,” I said. “Hattie suggested I stop outsourcing it and do it for myself.” Hattie Hopewell was president of the Happy Diggers Garden Club. Every member of the club was a regular customer at Open Your Imagination. “Good idea, don’t you think?”

“When will you find time to do everything?”

“You know me. I thrive when tending a garden. Besides, sleep is highly overrated.”

Fiona giggled. “Well, gardening suits you. Your cheeks are rosy. You look very pretty.”

“*Tà*,” I said, using her native word for thanks.

Fiona fluttered to my cheek and kissed it. “Are you and Brady still, um, happy?”

“Yes. Very.”

Brady, the owner of the Hideaway Café that was located in the courtyard across the street from my shop, was now officially my boyfriend. We had a standing date on Mondays—our days off—and we got together occasionally during the week. He and I met in high school, and when we recently became reacquainted, it felt right to spend more time together. He *got* me like nobody ever had. Plus, he didn’t make fun of my ability to see fairies.

Fiona said, “Has he, you know, seen her yet?”

“Her?”

“The fairy at the café.”

Last month, we caught sight of a fairy in the vines on the café’s patio. I didn’t know her name; neither did Fiona. She was very shy.

“Not yet.”

I retreated inside, threw on a pair of shorts, an *I Love Carmel* T-shirt, and sandals, and with Fiona riding on my shoulder, strolled down Ocean Avenue to Carmel Beach, a spectacular arc of pale sand that stretched for close to a mile in length. The famous Pebble Beach Golf Links bordered the northern arc of the bay. Pixie had wanted to come along, so I’d slipped her into a cat carry pack—not her favorite thing—but I didn’t want her squirming in my arms on the walk. She wasn’t a full-fledged outdoor cat.

The ocean, like any other day, was lapping the sand with a steady *whoosh*. There were joggers and walkers as well as people sitting on beach towels drinking in the incredible view. A few brave souls in wetsuits—even in summer, the water could be chilly—waited on surfboards for a wave. I always hoped to glimpse an otter at play, but this wasn’t their spot. There were a number of locations nearby to see them, the best being Point Lobos State Preserve.

I kicked off my sandals, slung the straps over one finger, and traipsed barefoot through the sand. “Tell me what going back to the fairy realm was like,” I said to my righteous fairy.

“It was lovely and bittersweet.”

The day I met Fiona, I was surprised to learn that there were classifications of fairies. Four, to be exact—intuitive, guardian, nurturer, and righteous. Last month, I was even more shocked to learn that there was only one queen fairy and one righteous fairy. When the timing was appropriate, Fiona would become the queen fairy.

“Did you see your sisters?” I asked.

“Yes. We played and danced and rode fairy horses—”

“Hold on. You can fly fairy horses on your own in the realm?”

“Uh-huh, but not here. It’s much too dangerous.” She zipped off my shoulder and hovered in front of me.

“Was it all fun and games?”

She wrinkled her pert nose. “Of course not. The very first day I had to sit through three lectures, a dinner of honey and mallow—”

“That wasn’t punishment. Those are your favorite foods.”

“Not when you have to eat while memorizing two dozen new fairy rules. I got a tummy ache.”

“Two dozen?” I gawked. I knew a few of the rules. A righteous fairy had to help humans solve problems. A righteous fairy couldn’t purposefully insert herself into harm’s way. All fairies were not to be photographed, though they could pose for a painting.

“Rule number one,” she said, “never lie.”

“Yes, I know that one.”

“Rule number six, always honor your promise. Number fourteen, keep an open mind. Number fifteen, let your emotions guide you but not dominate you.”

I snuffled. “You know all these. They’re your stock in trade.”

“Yes, but we must be able to recite them backward and forward with the rule number.”

She crossed her arms and tapped the air with one foot. “It’s exhausting.”

“Well, you’re back, so you must have succeeded.”

“And one more thing. I have to mentor another fairy.”

“You? Have to be a mentor?” Merryweather Rose of Song, who it turned out was Fiona’s aunt, was her mentor. A guardian fairy with a lovely spirit, she could be a taskmaster. It was because of Fiona’s lessons with Merryweather that Fiona had been allowed to return to the kingdom. Fiona’s mother had booted her out because she had been acting like an imp and needed to learn to temper her mischievous ways. “Who’s the lucky fairy? Do I know her?”

“She’s not in the human world yet. Mother is sending her soon.”

“Do you know her?”

“She’s my younger sister, Eveleen.”

A single seagull soared toward us and cawed as if approving of Fiona’s new, enhanced role. Seconds later, it glided to the ocean to join the rest of its pals. Fiona dashed after the bird but quickly made a U-turn when a woman cried my name.

I spun around and spied, of all people, Hattie Hopewell, the flamboyant sixty-something leader of the Happy Diggers, striding toward me. An elegant man Hattie’s age was trailing her.

“Courtney, what luck to run into you,” Hattie said as she drew near.

“I was just thinking about you.”

“Positive thoughts, I hope.” She fluffed her ruby red hair, a tone she changed every couple of weeks.

“Of course.”

“I thought you’d be at the shop by now.” Hattie often dressed like she was ready to work in the garden, today’s outfit cargo shorts, colorful tee, and sandals. Her companion was clad in an Armani suit, silk tie, and expensive loafers. Clearly, he hadn’t planned on taking a walk on the beach. “Why aren’t you there?” Hattie asked. “Are you taking a day off?”

“A day off other than Monday?” Fiona joked. “Not on a bet.”

Neither Hattie nor her companion reacted to my fairy’s jesting. Occasionally, Hattie sensed Fiona’s presence, but she had yet to see her.

“Joss is planning some sort of surprise,” I said.

“Is it your birthday?”

“Nope.”

Hattie reached out to Pixie and scrubbed her under the chin. “Yes, you’re so pretty. So very pretty.” Pixie chugged her thanks. Hattie adored animals. She owned a pair of brindled Scotties. Fiona alit on Hattie’s shoulder and blew her a kiss. Hattie didn’t react.

The man cleared his throat while smoothing his neatly-shaven russet beard and mustache with his thumb and forefinger.

“Forgive my rudeness,” Hattie sputtered. “Courtney, meet Oliver Killian. Oliver is the owner of Garden Delights. You know the place, don’t you, dear? Not far from the precinct. Next door to Lagoon Grill and across the street from Lyle’s General Store.”

“Between 4th and 5th,” I said.

“Correct.”

I'd visited the police precinct more times than I cared to and had passed by all of the sites she mentioned. Brady and I had dined at Lagoon Grill, and I had stopped in to the general store. I'd never ventured into Garden Delights, but I'd meant to. "Have you always been in the flower business?"

"Yes." Oliver's intense blue eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Ever since my childhood when I played in my grandparents' garden, I've been captivated by nature and its beauty."

"What a lovely memory," I said.

"Oliver stocks the finest seasonal garden flowers," Hattie said. "And he boasts one of the best selections of pottery in the area."

"A friend of mine used to be part owner," I said. "Genevieve Bellerose." Thanks to my weekly blog about fairy gardens as well as the local gardeners web forum I'd created on my website—chat rooms were passé, but forums were a great place for people with like minds to converse—I'd met a number of creative women. Genevieve had known one of the others before I came into the picture, but now we'd all become friends and regularly met in person or on the forum to catch up.

"Genevieve." Oliver's voice had an edge to it. A sharp edge.

"She's enjoying being an influencer," I said.

Oliver snorted. "Is that what she claims to be?"

"She makes good money at it."

Hattie shook her head. "How does one do that?"

"She displays advertising on her blog and podcast," I explained, "and offers affiliate marketing click-throughs. Plus, she writes sponsored posts. For example, she might do a series of



posts on Instagram or send out dedicated notices on other social media sites. You should see her live chats and TikTok posts. She's really great on camera. A natural."

"A natural at taking potshots, you mean," Oliver said. "A natural for bad-mouthing products. And places. And people."

"Oliver," Hattie chided.

"I'm not kidding. When was the last time she said something nice about anyone?"

I followed Genevieve, but I didn't read all of her updates. Many I'd seen had been positive. She'd raved about Open Your Imagination. Had she vilified others? *An influencer influences*, she often joked.

"She shouldn't have quit the business," Oliver scoffed. "We had a good thing going until . . ." He didn't finish.

*Until what?* I hadn't known Genevieve when she'd been a partner in Garden Delights.

Hattie said, "Oliver, she sold you her half of the business for more than a fair price. I'd think you'd be happy about that."

Fiona floated in front of Oliver's face, tilting her head left and right. "He's not happy. He's miserable."

Hattie leaned toward me. "His wife wasn't pleased when Genevieve split, resulting in Oliver having to do all the heavy lifting, a.k.a., forcing him to become a workaholic, so she left him."

"I can hear you," Oliver said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I'm not!" he snapped.

“That’s the ticket, my friend.” Hattie trilled out a hearty laugh. A former lounge singer, she enjoyed making everything sound musical. “We buck up or we get bowled over.”

Bitterness flickered in Oliver’s eyes.

“Okay, enough chitchat,” Hattie said. “I hailed you, Courtney, because you’re taking part in the Summer Blooms Festival, and Oliver—”

“Oliver Killian!” I blurted like an idiot. “You’re in charge of the festival.”

“The same.” He smiled, one of his better features.

I’d attended the last few festivals and had thoroughly enjoyed them. For three days, the town would close four blocks of Junipero Street, from 10th Avenue to Ocean Avenue. There would be vendors selling plants and flowers, live music, and delicious food. I couldn’t wait to enjoy a blooming onion from the Awesome Blossom food truck.

“*Ooh*,” I crooned. “Lucky you.”

“Lucky? Ha!” Oliver chortled. “I was hornswoggled. The mayor tagged me and said, ‘You’re it.’”

Hattie batted his arm. “Oliver, you know you love it. You’ve helmed it every year for the past few years. The town is waiting with bated breath to drink in your expertise. They’ll be hanging on your every word. Oliver loves to be the center of attention, Courtney.”

Oliver blew a raspberry.

“Anyway”—Hattie continued petting Pixie, who was relishing the attention—“I thought you’d like to meet Oliver, seeing as your shop is taking part.”

Talk about being hornswoggled! Joss had convinced me to rent a booth, believing a presence at the event would help us win over new customers. I wasn’t positive it would be worth

the expense and headache, but she assured me it would be. A former accountant in Silicon Valley, Joss was a whiz with numbers.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Oliver.” I extended a hand.

When we shook, a seagull divebombed us and shrieked like a banshee.

