

Excerpted from *The Fairy Chronicles: Volume IV*

## Helenium and the Really Very Confused House

When Helenium and her friends discover a painting that is a little too real, they end up trapped inside a mixed-up house that seems to have swallowed them. During their attempt to escape, the fairies encounter many unusual objects and appliances such as a slide projector that thinks it's a toaster, a bed in a fireplace, a pincushion that blows bubbles, a musical rug, and a toothbrush that acts like a blow dryer. They also meet a talking Dalmatian. After taking on challenges that include corralling a giant insect and tackling an enormous pile of laundry, the fairies finally realize that they are going to have to carefully listen to the words of the Dalmatian to find the exit they are seeking.



*To the house in Murray, Kentucky*

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## Chapter One

### The Painting

Helenium, Jasmine, and Pennyroyal were flying around together for a little spring break fun, when something quite unexpected and startling happened. Pennyroyal, who was traveling slightly in front of her friends, flew right into the wall of a house. The wall was stucco, rather than brick, but it was still as hard as concrete.

Jasmine and Helenium probably would have run into the house as well, if they hadn't noticed what happened to their friend in time to put on the flying breaks, because the wall Pennyroyal collided with was painted to look exactly like a stairwell, leading from the street to the second level of the large house.

Quite a few of the houses and businesses in this older part of town had staircases used by the public to gain access to courtyard balconies housing small shops and apartments. Many of the homes in this area were so large that the owners let out various parts of the houses, such as attics and storerooms above garages, as separate residences. This particular neighborhood also planted community rooftop gardens. So people often wandered freely up and down the various outdoor and courtyard staircases, even those that were privately owned.

The extensive rooftop gardens, and interesting architecture of the older buildings, made this a perfect neighborhood for fairy exploring, especially on a Sunday morning, when most of the area shops were closed and many of the residents had not yet risen.

Immediately following the hard collision with the wall, Pennyroyal landed in the dust, rubbing both her bruised shoulder and the bump on her head. With Helenium and Jasmine landing too, and helping her, Pennyroyal stood up

and tried to collect herself. She was a little shaky, so her friends stayed on either side of her to help keep her steady.

As they moved back slightly to study the painting of the stairs, Helenium said, “Oh, it’s a trompe l’oeil painting. You know, one of those ‘trick of the eye’ works. The scene looks so real that you have to look really closely to figure out that it’s not real.”

“Like an illusion,” stated Jasmine.

Helenium nodded. “Exactly.”

Pennyroyal thought the painting looked a little too real. Since she was still slightly dizzy, not to mention somewhat embarrassed at having flown right into a wall, she sat down in the shade of a bush for a short rest, where Jasmine and Helenium joined her.

Pennyroyal’s real name was Skylar Templeton, and she had blond hair. Her fairy dress was made of pale, violet-blue, curled flower petals; and her fringed, crinkly wings were a sparkling, translucent blue color. The pennyroyal herb was part of the mint family and was very aromatic. Since the plant was often used for medicinal purposes and to repel bugs, Pennyroyal was given both healing powers and the ability to ward off unfriendly insects. She carried a wand to match her fairy spirit. The long leaves of the pennyroyal stem were a medium-green color and were very soft and hairy. The pale, bluish-purple flowers grew in a droopy cluster at the tip of the wand and were shaped something like honeysuckle blossoms. The pennyroyal stem was the most fragrant and furry of all the fairy wands in the area.

Jasmine’s real name was Amy Scott, and she had been given the fairy spirit of a Chilean jasmine. She had small, sparkling green wings and wore a dark green leafy dress with lovely, milky-white, star-shaped flowers scattered over it. Jasmine also wore a cluster of fragrant jasmine flowers on a headband to pull back her long dark hair. Her wand was made from a curled wisp of enchanted cloud. Constructed by an elf, the wand would never come apart or drift away like a regular cloud. Jasmine’s fairy gifts included resistance to

disease and the ability to temporarily mesmerize others to the point that they were put into a kind of trance. She was also starting to have visions of the future, which was not unusual for Jasmine fairies, because jasmine plants were widely used in many cultures for mystical purposes such as foretelling future events.

Helenium had only recently found out about her fairy spirit. Her real name was Cairo Gibson, and she carried a bit of enchanted broom bristle for her wand. Her spirit came from a bright yellow helenium flower whose shape and petals resembled that of a daisy. Helenium's fairy dress and tall wings were brilliant yellow, and so dazzling that she could have been mistaken for a Sunshine Fairy, if such a fairy existed. She also wore a crown of helenium flowers atop her dark curls. In keeping with her fairy spirit, Helenium had a bubbly and cheery personality. Her fairy gift was the ability to attract and communicate with butterflies and moths.

The house Pennyroyal had collided with was a three-story structure. When she was fit to fly again, the fairies rose into the air and circled the house. Strangely enough, the home didn't have a door, or, at least, they couldn't find one. There were plenty of windows, scattered about in what looked like odd places. Some of the windows seemed too close to one another, while others were either too low or too high. And some were extremely small, while others were quite a bit larger than normal picture windows. All of the windows were heavily draped, so they couldn't see inside the house. As many times as they circled, the fairies never did see a door, just more windows. So they decided that one of the windows must act as a door for the residents of the house.

After only a few more minutes of exploring the outside of the house, the girls decided to start for home, mainly because Pennyroyal had developed a headache from the crash into the wall. They could always come back some other time to explore the strange house.

As they were flying away, Helenium looked back at the building. Halting in midair, she said, “Weren’t the drapes blue?”

Her friends also paused to look back, and Pennyroyal answered, “Yes. Oh, that’s really strange.”

All of the windows of the house were now draped with dark red curtains.

“So it’s a magical house,” said Jasmine, smiling, “as well as a doorless house with a neat trompe l’oeil stair painting.”

The girls were now more determined than ever to pay another visit to the mysterious house.

## Chapter Two

### Fairy Circle and Berrying

Jasmine, Helenium, and Pennyroyal rode together to Fairy Circle the next morning. Madam Finch was driving. Helenium and Pennyroyal admired the scenery as they traveled, but Jasmine was somewhat quiet. She was thinking about her latest vision of the future, which had happened three days ago. There was a local inn that housed a conservatory with seven magical doorways. Six of the seven doorways had already been explored by various groups of fairies on missions; however, the final doorway remained a mystery.

Fairies were cautious creatures with common sense, so they didn’t usually set out to explore important things on mere whims. Since patience was sometimes key to success, they often waited for signs, or direction, before setting out on missions or exploring adventures. Because some things were definitely meant to happen at later times, the fairies had wisely left the final door of the conservatory unexplored.

Jasmine's vision, which had occurred shortly after waking up three days ago, had been of her opening the final door. However, she hadn't entered. She had simply looked in, then closed the door again. So she didn't really know what the vision meant. Did it mean that she was supposed to visit the conservatory? Was she the one destined to go through the last doorway?

"A penny for your thoughts," said Helenium to Jasmine.

"I'm not sure they are worth that much," answered Jasmine. After a pause, she added, "I was thinking about the house, and the painting, and a few other things."

"What house?" asked Madam Finch.

When the girls explained which part of town they had been in, and described the house, the trompe l'oeil painting, and the curtains changing colors on the windows, Madam Finch smiled, and said, "Oh, that's the old Hinchester place. I think it was called Hinchester Villa at one time. You might ask Madam Zinnia about it. She's something of an expert on the older houses in this area, as far as their histories. She even knows about spooky things like bizarre events and *hauntings*."

The girls could see Madam Finch's eyes widen in the rear view mirror as she emphasized the word, *hauntings*.

"Do you feel better today?" the fairy mentor added, concerned about Pennyroyal's bump on the head and tender shoulder.

"Oh yes," answered Pennyroyal. "My mom gave me aspirin and warm milk last night, so I slept really well. I'm hardly sore at all today. And my head is fine—just a little bump."

The Spring Break Fairy Circle was very festive. Many brownies had been invited, since those attending school at Fraser House, the brownie orphanage, were also on spring break.

While visiting, the group enjoyed their usual fairy fare of lemon jellybeans, peanut butter and marshmallow crème sandwiches, raspberries, homemade fudge, and root beer.

However, today they also feasted on additional treats of sweet pickles, peach butter on toast points, and fried artichokes with honey mustard dipping sauce. Plum tea and strawberry lemonade rounded out the refreshments.

Grover, a black cat with one white paw belonging to Dusty and Morning Glory, was visiting today. He quite enjoyed lying on his side and having his tummy and neck scratched, and his paws stroked, by the many fairies and brownies. Madam Zinnia had a ball of yarn in her van, which was brought out for Grover to play with. What fun! After batting the ball around with the fairies and brownies, and getting quite tangled up with the yarn, Grover sat patiently waiting to be untangled, so the fun could begin again.

The fairies also played games, including breaking two piñatas filled with small gifts and candy.

Then they watched several exhibition brownie wrestling matches. This was the kind of wrestling they did in high schools, colleges, and at the Olympics, so it was a fairly safe sport, but very challenging, which was why many of the brownies liked it so well.

Several new fairies joined Fairy Circle today. Daisy, Azure, and Four o’Clock were very happy to meet their new friends. Daisy’s dress resembled Helenium’s, but was mostly white because her spirit was from a Shasta daisy. Azure looked just like a bright blue butterfly. And Four o’Clock’s dress was made of bright pink flower petals.

Also, Madam Cloudless was visiting from Oregon to help organize the Butterfly Fairy Convention planned for the summer. Since her fairy spirit was from a cloudless sulfur butterfly, she had large, lemon-yellow wings and wore a silky yellow dress that was nearly as bright as Helenium’s.

Snowdrop, Blue’s younger sister, had finally found out about her fairy spirit. Blue was so proud, introducing her around to everyone. With her delicate white dress and wings, Snowdrop looked like a Winter Princess Fairy. She was very excited to attend her first Fairy Circle, and she loved the



peppermint stick wand that Madam Mum had been keeping safe for her for many years.

Amidst all of the other activity, Helenium, Jasmine, and Pennyroyal managed to have a word with Madam Zinnia about the strange house.

“I am somewhat familiar with Hinchester Villa,” Madam Zinnia said. “It is a very old and mysterious property.” The fairy mentor smiled as she went on. “I believe the house is magical and that in order to keep the magic alive, something new must be added to the structure each year, so that the house itself can continue to grow and live, just like other living things. I don’t know who owns it now, but twenty years ago, when Mr. Hinchester was still living there, he used to add things like new roof shingles, porches, awnings, new attic rooms, flooring, and chimneys to keep the magic going. I don’t know what is currently being done.”

“New windows would be my guess,” said Helenium, “since there are so many of them.”

“And they are in such strange places,” remarked Jasmine.

Madam Zinnia nodded. “That’s a good guess. The rumor now is that a magical spirit lives there. But I don’t know anything else about that. However,” Madam Zinnia added, somewhat mischievously, “I do know that several people witnessed the entire house disappear completely for three whole minutes on a sunny April morning, just like this one, in 1967. Maybe when you go back, if you watch patiently, the house will perform its disappearing act for you too.” With this, Madam Zinnia winked at the girls and made her way to the refreshment table for a snack.

Very excited about the prospect of exploring further, Jasmine, Pennyroyal, and Helenium agreed to meet up together early the next morning for another trip to Hinchester Villa.

When Fairy Circle ended, all of the fairies and brownies piled into various vehicles and set out to a local farm for a very special event, berrying. Though it was a little early in

the season for this activity, the berry farm was ready for early harvesting, mainly due to the warm spring weather.

The fairies, brownies, and mentors all stayed in regular person form for the berry gathering. They wouldn't have been able to pick as many berries, otherwise. Plus, there were a few other people also gathering fruit today.

In addition to outside patches, there were several greenhouses of strawberries, grown in beds of sand, and a large raspberry greenhouse. Outdoors, a large hillside was planted with blueberry bushes, some of which were starting to produce ripe fruit. The gatherers had great fun hunting for the berries amongst the lush green leaves.

The berry-picking worked on the honor system. After nearly two hours of hunting and harvesting, the fairies and brownies pooled their money to pay for the number of pints and quarts collected, while guessing at how much they had probably eaten while berrying. On their way out, Madam Swallowtail stopped by the farmhouse to pay. She also bought several dozen fresh eggs from the farmer, because nothing was better than farm-fresh eggs.

Then the fairies, brownies, and mentors took their berries home to make jellies, jams, pies, and other such treats, and to eat fresh too, of course. Many of the brownies even liked to make things such as blueberry pancakes, tarts, and scones. And the boys often helped Melba, the cook at the orphanage, with the cooking and canning, since the grounds at Fraser House hosted extensive gardens.

### Chapter Three The Confused House

After an early breakfast the next morning, Helenium, Pennyroyal, and Jasmine met up together in the woods near

Helenium's house and headed to the mysterious Hinchester Villa.

When they arrived, they noticed that the windows of the house were again draped in blue. The fairies also found a door this time, in a place where they were positive none had been before. The girls approached slowly, because they were afraid that the door might suddenly disappear. They also couldn't be completely sure until they got closer that the door was real, and not another cleverly done trompe l'oeil painting designed to trick them.

When they were a mere five feet from the door, and could definitely tell that it was real, and not a painting, the door swung open, on its own.

"The house is inviting us in," stated Helenium, smiling happily. "It probably likes visitors."

The girls didn't get any bad feelings from this situation, and because they were so curious, they couldn't resist the invitation. However, they few forward slowly, naturally apprehensive about what they might discover inside the mysterious house. Jasmine's shoulders were tingling, Pennyroyal's stomach fluttered, and Helenium was flushed and couldn't stop smiling. All of the girls were excited with the prospect of a thrilling adventure. Just the thought of the possibility of encountering more strange and interesting things, such as paintings designed as illusions and drapes that changed colors, was very exciting.

A stairway leading to the second and third floors of the house greeted the fairies as they passed through the door and into a small entry hall. The door swung silently shut behind them as they crossed the threshold. Other than the house itself, no one welcomed the girls. And with the noticeable quietness surrounding them, the house seemed completely deserted.

Though the stairway looked inviting, the fairies decided to stay on the first floor, for now. Just beyond the stairs, a hallway containing six doors stretched out in front of them. As they passed the stairs to enter the hall, they noticed a

plaque on the wall with engraved letters that read, *Experiments and Whatnots*.

After briefly looking at one another quizzically, the girls shrugged and made their way to the nearest door. The doorknob was easy for Helenium to turn, even in fairy form, and the door swung smoothly open.

The first thing the fairies noticed as they entered the room was a large purple couch. However, upon closer examination, it was obvious that the couch was not what it appeared to be. The seat had no cushions, but housed a pop-up ironing board instead. And the back of the sofa was really a two-shelf bookcase. The only thing about the couch that was normal was the padded arms and a long cushion covering the top of the bookcase.

A floor lamp sitting next to the sofa was being used as a coat rack. The tall light, with a traditionally-shaped lampshade, had arms attached to it that were holding two jackets, a scarf, and a long raincoat. An actual coat rack on the other side of the room had obviously been converted to a lamp, which was currently turned on to illuminate a shadowy corner. A refrigerator sat next to the turned-on, coat-rack lamp. When Jasmine pulled the door open, the girls discovered an assortment of jackets, coats, and sweaters hanging inside.

“An unusual coat rack,” Helenium said, “right next to a coat closet made from a refrigerator.” Smiling, she added, “This is fun!”

A huge china cabinet against the longest wall of the room looked very strange. When they flew closer to it, the fairies discovered that the drawers on the bottom had temperature dials and a clock-timer just like an oven. A slide projector sitting on a small table next to the china-cabinet oven had obviously been converted to a toaster. And a fancy magazine rack on the floor nearby was being used as a sewing box.

On the wall next to the door, they discovered a tall bookshelf sprouting a showerhead and hot-and-cold faucet handles. A shower curtain, currently pulled to one side, hung

from a rod shaped like a half circle. The floor beneath the bookshelf shower was tiled and contained a drain.

An oven sitting next to the bookshelf shower had been converted to a computer and contained a built-in monitor, keyboard, speakers, and a printer. A huge fireplace near the oven computer contained an opening equal to about ten times that of a normal fireplace. Inside, instead of a grate, the fireplace contained a single bed. The makeshift bedroom actually looked very cozy, and the bed was covered with fluffy pillows and quilts.

In the final corner of the room, the girls discovered that an old console television had taken on new life as a clothes washer.

Smiling at the fun discoveries, and with their curiosity mounting, the fairies left the first *Experiments and Whatnots* room to explore more of the first floor.

The second door they opened contained an entirely upside-down room. Although the gravity of the room felt normal to the fairies, all of the furniture and accents were upside down, as though hanging from the ceiling. The floor of the room contained an upside-down chandelier directly in the center, so the ceiling was actually the floor and the floor was actually the ceiling. Flying up to the ceiling that was now the floor, the girls discovered that the furnishings weren't attached to anything to keep them from falling. Jasmine pushed on a small end table and found that it moved very easily, but didn't fall. Pulling on a magazine that was sitting upon the small table, Helenium discovered that the magazine moved easily and was attached to nothing. As she released it, the magazine returned to nearly the same position on the upside-down table.

"These must all be enchanted objects," said Pennyroyal, sliding a candlestick across another table, "since the room itself doesn't feel any different to us."

Her friends agreed.

After examining a few other items, and after having a brief, midair pillow fight with several throw cushions from

the upside-down couch and armchairs, the girls left the room to continue exploring.

Although the fairies were having a lot of fun in the strange house, they got a rather scary surprise when they exited the upside-down room. The door at the end of the hall, through which they had entered the house, which had looked perfectly normal up to this point, suddenly disappeared, leaving a completely blank wall just beyond the staircase. A noise that was similar to a loud *slurp*, mixed with a *gulp*, was heard at the exact moment of the door's disappearance.

The girls' mouths dropped open, and they were not sure of what to do as they hovered in the hallway. After the initial moment's shock, they flew speedily toward the wall where the door had been.

"Oh my gosh!" said Helenium, who was the first to find her voice when they arrived at the wall. "What should we do?"

"Don't panic," advised Jasmine. "We don't seem to be in any immediate danger."

"And where are all of the windows?" asked Helenium, suddenly spinning around.

The girls looked at one another in surprise, just now realizing that they had never seen any windows at all during their time inside the house. There were none near the staircase and none in the hallway. Nor had there been any in the two rooms they had just explored.

"I can't believe we didn't notice until now that this house has no windows," said Pennyroyal.

"Especially since there were plenty of windows visible from the outside of the house," added Helenium.

"We were distracted by all of the neat things in the house," said Jasmine, "so we didn't notice."

"There were lots of windows, right?" asked Helenium. "We could see them from the outside."

“Yes, you’re right,” said Jasmine, reassuring her friend. “Pennyroyal and I saw them too. But we didn’t notice when we came in that they had disappeared.”

“This is a confusing house,” Helenium said.

“Maybe it’s alive, just like Madam Zinnia said,” suggested Pennyroyal, “and it’s presently *confused*.”

“Either that or it’s a trick house,” said Jasmine, “like the trick painting.”

“Maybe a magician or illusionist designed it,” offered Helenium, “to make it like a hall of mirrors, or a maze.”

“Or a trap,” said Pennyroyal.

“I don’t really get that feeling,” responded Jasmine.

“Me neither,” said Helenium. “I don’t think the house means us any harm. And I think we are supposed to be here for some reason.”

“I agree,” said Pennyroyal. “And the house did invite us in.”

“I also get the sense that we are supposed to be here for some reason,” said Jasmine.

“Maybe the door disappears at a certain time every day,” said Helenium, “and we just have to wait until it reappears.”

“That’s a good thought,” answered Jasmine. “Meanwhile, I think we should keep exploring.”

The others agreed.

“Maybe one of the other rooms on this floor has an exit to the outside,” suggested Helenium, as they once again made their way down the hallway.

“Good idea,” said Pennyroyal.

The next door they opened revealed a tiny room, not much bigger than a coat closet. The room contained only one item, a small tree growing in a terra cotta pot. The branches of the tree were laden with hundreds of silver bells and whistles, instead of leaves.

“You never know when you might need a bell or a whistle,” said Helenium, reciting something Madam Finch had once said to her. “They can be very useful,” she added.

This was true, and many of the fairies and brownies in the area carried tiny silver bells and whistles in their pockets. Indeed, during one particular Fairy Circle, not quite four years ago, the mentors had passed out silver bells and whistles to everyone.

“This must be the fancy part of the house,” remarked Helenium, smiling broadly, “since it is filled with bells and whistles.” Her friends smiled too.

As they left the tiny room, Jasmine thought about a recent premonition she had had about bells and whistles. In her vision, she had seen another tree, full of bells and whistles, very like the one in this tiny room. For some reason, she didn’t want to share the information about her vision with her friends at this time, because she didn’t really know what it meant.

Sometimes her gift could be really frustrating. *When will I start to understand what my visions mean?* Jasmine thought. To the fairies who possessed the gift of foreshadow, the ability to see the future was often overwhelming and confusing. Her gift might give her the ability to predict the future, but if she couldn’t understand what she was seeing, what was she supposed to do with the information? Jasmine thought she might need to talk to Raven, who also had the gift of foreshadow, because it might help her to understand what she was supposed to do, or not do, with the visions she was receiving.

## Chapter Four

### More Experiments and Whatnots

Moving on to the fourth room, the fairies found that it contained an enormous rectangular rug. The rug was situated in the exact middle of the floor, and was surrounded by a



collection of interesting chairs and side tables, as though an audience was supposed to sit around the rug like a theatre-in-the-round. The girls fluttered around the room, but found nothing else interesting, other than the rug, chairs, and tables.

Alighting on one of the chairs, the fairies studied the rug more closely. The carpet had pictures of musical instruments woven into it. Suddenly having an idea, Helenium flew down from the chair and landed on a picture of a harp. Instantly, rich harp music filled the room. Taking their friend's cue, Jasmine and Pennyroyal also flew down to land on two more of the pictures of the rug. The sound of the trumpet Pennyroyal landed on nearly made the girls jump out of their skins, but it was soon tempered by the music from the baby grand piano under Jasmine's feet.

Deciding that this was very fun, but not wanting to delay in exploring the rest of the house, the fairies took off from the melodious rug and flew to exit the room. The music faded away as they entered the hallway.

They next door they entered revealed a room only about half the size of the rug room. Built-in shelves filled with small objects covered the walls. There were also several tables scattered about upon which sat assortments of small items. Several of the shelves and tables were labeled with the word, *Whatnots*.

These whatnots were just as interesting as the other objects the fairies had found throughout the house. On one of the tables, they discovered a pincushion that blew bubbles and a fat pen that turned into a hairbrush when a button was pushed. A toothbrush sat next to the pen, and Helenium was thrilled to find that it blew warm air like a blow dryer when the handle was rotated. There was also a knife that dispensed toothpicks and a fork that turned into a spoon.

On another table, a clear glass teakettle full of ice-cold lemonade sat next to a set of mason jars that were obviously meant to be used as glasses. The fairies had seen people use mason jars for glasses before, but they had never known anyone to use a teakettle as a lemonade pitcher.

One whole shelf on the far wall held cake stands displaying various, fancy, men's and women's hats. Just below the hat-filled shelf, the fairies found an hourglass-shaped egg timer meant to be used as a salt-and-pepper shaker. A huge glass piggybank sat beside the egg timer and was filled with water and goldfish. A sign next to the piggybank fishbowl read, *Feed at 10 a.m.* It was getting very close to 10 a.m., according to Helenium's watch, so Jasmine gave the fish a little food from the box next to the bowl by slipping the flakes through the coin slot.

Moving on to one of the tables, the girls discovered a radio that was really a camera, and a camera that was really a radio. A soda bottle next to the camera radio had been cleverly made into a flashlight. The girls had some difficulty figuring out that the candlestick next to the flashlight had been turned into a stapler. The stapler was sitting beside a set of coasters, and the top coaster of the stack had a built-in clock. Next to the coasters was a boot being used as a pencil holder. A shoebox full of gloves sat on the other side of the boot pencil holder.

Exploring another shelf, they found a book that opened up to become a small desk lamp. A set of playing cards that had become recipe cards were scattered on a plate next to the book lamp. The same shelf also contained a saltshaker that had been turned into a perfume bottle, a teddy bear that was now a ribbon dispenser, a bud vase full of fireplace matches, and a soda can that dispensed dental floss.

After hugging the teddy bear, they moved on to one of the larger tables in the room, upon which sat a blender that could percolate coffee and a four-tiered jewelry box in which a miniature herb garden was growing. The girls breathed deeply to catch the scents of mint, parsley, and thyme. A butter dish next to the herb garden contained a log of jelly that was somehow holding its perfect rectangle shape, just like a stick of butter.

Although the girls thought this room held the most interesting items in the house so far, they felt the need to

finish exploring the first floor, because in the backs of their minds, they wanted to find an exit door as quickly as possible. Being basically trapped inside the mysterious house, for the time being, was a little worrisome.

The final door on the first floor led to a room containing items that were either too small or too large based on what would have been considered normal. A tee-tiny sofa, which would have barely fit a cat, sat next to an enormous armchair that would have comfortably held an ogre. A gigantic table lamp was perched somewhat precariously on a tiny desk that would have been even too small for a kindergartner. An enormous pillow nearly completely covered a too-small bed, placed right next to a grand piano that was only about the size of a bowling ball.

Though the contents of this room were also interesting, the girls were soon ready to move on. They left quickly and headed down the hall toward the wall that had once held the door.

## Chapter Five The Gallery

Since no windows or other means of escape had magically appeared on the first floor, the fairies decided to head up the stairs to the second floor.

A large sign on the wall next to the second-floor landing read, *Gallery*.

This floor contained a wide hallway made of closely-spaced pillars, instead of walls. Two large rooms, filled with paintings, sat on either side of the pillar-formed hallway. Some of the artwork was hung on the walls and pillars, while other paintings were displayed on easels.

Directly at the end of the hallway, the fairies spied something very familiar—a trompe l’oeil painting of stairs. These stairs were the opposite of those depicted on the outside of the building because they led down to a street setting, instead of up to the second level of a house. However, the picture was very similar to the one outside and had obviously been painted by the same artist.

Smiling, the fairies moved into the hallway to begin viewing the art. As they passed the trompe l’oeil stair painting, Pennyroyal stated, “I’m not going to make the same mistake again.” She rubbed her shoulder, which was still a little sore from colliding with the outside wall two days before.

Circling the rest of the gallery, the girls marveled at the variety of the art collection.

Many of the paintings were obviously magical. As they came to hover in front of a beautiful landscape painting, they noticed that the scene changed to a completely different setting about once every thirty seconds. The girls held their breath as a flower-filled meadow turned into a mountain waterfall, which then changed to rolling farmlands, to eventually become a forest in autumn-gold dress.

A large, ornate frame directly next to the landscape painting held a portrait of a lion. This lion was even more real-looking than a trompe l’oeil painting because he was actually pacing and glaring at the gallery visitors. Helenium’s heart jumped into her throat when the lion roared at them.

A small painting of a jigsaw puzzle hung in one corner of the gallery. The fairies carefully avoided that corner, in case the puzzle in the painting was afflicted with the goblin curse designed to trap fairies.

Directly in front of another large picture, which was that of hot air balloons soaring over mountain peaks, the fairies breathed deeply, and smiled. They could almost smell the fresh air as they imagined what it would be like to ride in one of the balloons. They could barely tear their eyes away from

the scene, which was just like watching a movie on a large screen because the colors and details were so real.

Next, they passed a painting of a Dalmatian who had been watching them since they entered the gallery. He panted pleasantly and wagged his tail as they moved on.

A little farther along, a man juggling brightly-colored beanbag balls made the girls giggle and clap their hands. When the performer lost control of his act, causing two of the balls to fly out of the painting to land on the gallery floor, Jasmine and Helenium retrieved them for the acrobat. The beanbags were a little awkward to manage in fairy form, but they weren't heavy. As they tossed the balls back into the magical canvas, the juggler tipped his hat and said, "Thank you." Then he began juggling again.

Another trompe l'oeil creation captured their particular attention because it was so brilliant and colorful. The painting was that of a carnival scene as viewed from a back door, looking across a porch and down a hillside at the bustle of the fair. Both the Ferris wheel and hippodrome were lighted in the painting. The scene looked so real, the girls almost thought they smelled cotton candy and popcorn.

The next painting made Pennyroyal gasp, but she covered up her gasp with a cough when her friends looked at her. The picture was that of a house on a hill. And not just any house. This was the house Pennyroyal had visited on a secret mission that took her to national parks all over the world in order to eventually retrieve a magical ruby from a silver lion to help slow the destruction of the wilderness by mankind.

The house on the hill had obviously been magical, and was every bit as mysterious and confusing as Hinchester Villa. For one thing, even though the house from the outside appeared to have four floors, only three of the floors had been accessible from the inside of the house. So there was a secret or hidden floor.

Pennyroyal lingered longer than her friends in front of this painting. Hovering very close to the canvas, she gazed intently into the tiny windows of the floor she had been

unable to find inside the house. Details were hard to make out, but one of the rooms appeared to contain a swamp, complete with dark and scummy water, clouds of mist, and shadowy cypress trees draped with thick strings of moss.

Pennyroyal had never told any of her friends about the mission involving the house on the hill, and she didn't plan to say anything now either. Instead, she quickly flew to catch up with Helenium and Jasmine, who were now viewing a painting of a hermit crab in the process of switching to a larger shell.

They couldn't watch the hermit crab for long though, because a tap dancer on the far side of the gallery drew their attention. The dancer, who winked at them, was very talented, and the fairies watched her act for several minutes before moving on.

As interesting as all of the magical art was, they weren't going to be able to stay in the gallery forever. After examining a couple of the other paintings, Helenium sighed and said, "Since there aren't any doors or windows up here either, how are we going to get out of the house?"

The fairies were very surprised when one of the occupants of the paintings gave them the answer. "Take the stairs."

## Chapter Six The Floor of Challenges

Since most of the paintings in the gallery were obviously magical, the girls weren't sure why they were so surprised that the Dalmatian had spoken to them. The juggler had said, "Thank you," so they shouldn't have been surprised that the dog could also speak. But it would have been more normal for him to have barked, instead of using words.

The fairies smiled, but since they were still in a slight state of surprise, they didn't reply with words to the Dalmatian. Instead, they headed to the stairs and proceeded up to the third floor.

A sign on the wall next to the third-floor landing read, *Challenges*.

This floor contained a narrow hallway with twelve doors. Indicating the sign by the stairs, Helenium said, "Twelve doors. Maybe there are twelve challenges, like the Labors of Hercules."

"We probably have to overcome or successfully complete the challenges to get out of the house," said Jasmine.

"That's probably right," said Pennyroyal.

Helenium agreed.

Since they had no idea what might lie beyond any of the doors, Helenium opened the first one cautiously. At first glance, nothing looked either alarming or out-of-the-ordinary. A small sign on the wall inside the doorway gave them instructions.

*Alphabetize the albums in the cabinet, and match up the shoes in the closet.*

The albums were record albums of the old-fashioned vinyl kind, and they were the larger records, so the fairies changed into regular girl form for the task.

So far, the challenges seemed rather easy. At least, this one was. The girls were very good at alphabetizing things, and not many people would have had a problem matching up shoes.

However, there were nearly three hundred records in the cabinet, so the task took them over an hour, even with all three of them working diligently without any breaks.

After finally finishing, and taking deep breaths of relief and satisfaction, the girls moved on to the closet.

This was fun—matching up shoes from a massive pile of jumbled-up shoes, boots, and sandals. Even with the size of

the pile, this part of the challenge only took about fifteen minutes, since there were three of them working on it.

As they left the room, the girls *popped* back into fairy form to proceed to the next challenge.

The sight that met them inside the second room was very frightening, at first. The room was furnished like many bedrooms, with a bed, bureau, trunk, desk, and chairs. However, in the very center of the room, a giant insect, about the size of a refrigerator, sat on an enormous stool.

The insect was obviously magical apart from his size because he didn't look like any particular insect that the girls could recognize. Instead, he looked something like a cross between a shiny green beetle and a fuzzy bumblebee. But he had lots of arms, like a millipede, and his head was overly large. The creature also had some pink and purple striping on his green back, and three bright blue antennae extending from his head.

Keeping a close eye on the monster, Helenium read the instructions from the sign on the wall aloud.

*“I can never get him to go to bed. Get him to go to bed.”*

This was going to be incredibly easy, and not nearly as time-consuming as the record album and shoe challenge had been, because of Pennyroyal's fairy gift. Right away, she withdrew her pennyroyal stem wand and advanced to a position close to the center of the room. However, she was careful to stay back from the arms' reach of so many scary insect arms.

No insect ever wants anything to do with a pennyroyal plant. Even the bees that pollinate the flowers do so quickly, so they can get away from the scent of the plant as fast as possible. With the pungent aroma of both Pennyroyal and her wand, the giant insect immediately slid from the stool and backed away from the fairy.

The situation was almost funny, as far as how easy this was for Pennyroyal. With her friends watching, she simply



continued to slowly advance upon the monster, adjusting her position either left or right to get him to move in a specific direction. Within two minutes, she had succeeded in corralling the insect to the bed, and he was forced to sit upon it when she moved even closer to him.

“Lie down,” said Pennyroyal, pushing a bit nearer and higher, to get closer to his face.

With the fairy and wand so close, the creature leaned back and was eventually reclining on the bed. And because he actually was very tired, having stubbornly stayed up for so long, which was his usual habit, he fell asleep within just a few seconds, because everyone, even a giant insect, needs to sleep.

As Pennyroyal rejoined her friends near the door, Helenium whispered, “Good job,” with Jasmine nodding and patting Pennyroyal on the shoulder.

## Chapter Seven Cleaning and Laundry

The third room on the *Challenges* floor was absolutely huge and contained an enormous heap of dirty laundry piled directly in the center of the floor. The room was also incredibly filthy, with dust and debris strewn everywhere.

The instructions on the wall were easy to understand, but not much fun to think about.

*Clean the room and do the laundry.*

Thank goodness Helenium’s wand was made from a broom bristle. Right away, as Jasmine and Pennyroyal began tackling the pile of laundry, Helenium’s wand started to hum.

The humming got very loud as she withdrew the bristle from her belt. Then, without even waiting for her direction, the wand soared across the room to a broom closet. The hum of the wand became very rhythmic and even louder as the bristle began to magically command the mops, sponges, buckets, brooms, cleaning rags, and dustpans of the closet.

It seemed the girls were going to have to do very little cleaning, because the broom bristle wand quickly had things well under control. So Helenium *popped* into regular girl form to join Pennyroyal and Jasmine in the area of the washers, dryers, folding tables, and ironing boards.

There were three each of the washers and dryers, so after sorting the laundry by whites, light colors, dark colors, and delicates, they were able to get the challenge under way very quickly.

As they worked, the fairies noticed that the wall next to the folding tables contained a pattern of multicolored bricks. One of the pale blue bricks was glowing softly. However, the girls were really too busy with their chore to wonder long about the strange brick.

Although they had all done laundry before, they had never worked so hard, nor done this much at one time. This was truly a monumental chore and a terrific labor, which the girls imagined to be along the lines of what Hercules might have had to do.

As far as the rest of the chore, thanks to the efforts of the broom bristle wand, the cleaning of the room was shaping up nicely. Soon, two trash bins in the far corner were filled with dust and debris, and the floors were freshly mopped. While waiting on the laundry in the dryers, the girls washed and wiped down the other surfaces in the room, which was beginning to sparkle. The whole area was also starting to smell wonderful due to the detergent and lemon-scented fabric softener.

After nine loads of laundry, the girls took a deep breath and placed the last of the clothes, towels, tablecloths, and sheets in neatly-folded piles on the tops of the folding tables.

Then they surveyed the ultra-clean room with an enormous sense of satisfaction. As they were leaving, Helenium's wand, also feeling very satisfied, flew itself back into position on her belt.

## Chapter Eight

### "Take the stairs!"

Even though they felt very good to have completed this chore, the girls were somewhat frustrated because the cleaning and laundry challenge had taken so long.

"This is taking forever," said Helenium, feeling very cranky all of a sudden. "If we have to complete nine more challenges, we might never get out of the house."

"Why don't we head back downstairs," suggested Pennyroyal, "to see if the door or any of the windows have reappeared yet."

"Good idea," said Jasmine.

Helenium agreed. "Maybe just doing one of the chores would have allowed us to leave. I should have thought of that before."

Jasmine and Pennyroyal hadn't thought of that either. Perhaps visitors to the house were only expected to complete one of the challenges before being allowed to leave.

However, upon zooming back down the stairs, the fairies discovered that no doors or windows had yet appeared on the first floor.

Sighing in frustration, the girls next flew back up to the second-floor gallery, where they decided to examine the paintings again, to see if there might be any clues that could lead to a way to exit the house.

After circling the room twice, and not being able to discover anything useful, the fairies landed in front of the trompe l'oeil carnival painting.

“There has to be a way out!” said Helenium, in frustration.

To this, the Dalmatian responded, “Take the stairs.” The dog looked at the fairies very intently, tipping his head to one side as he spoke.

After only a slight pause of surprise, Helenium said, hesitantly, “Okay...thank you.” And the three headed once more to the staircase, to make their way back up to the third floor.

When they reached the *Challenges* floor again, the girls were very reluctant to tackle another task.

“If we are supposed to complete nine more challenges, we’ll never get out of here,” said Jasmine.

“Unless they are really short ones,” countered Pennyroyal.

“Only the giant insect challenge was a short one,” said Helenium. “The record albums and shoes took about an hour and a half. And the laundry took over three hours.”

“By the time we do everything, and get released,” said Jasmine, “our parents will be so frantic that they will probably have called the police.”

“And we’ll be in a lot of trouble,” added Helenium.

After looking at one another in fear for a few moments, Helenium said, “I think we are missing something here.”

“Probably,” agreed Jasmine, “because I don’t think the house really means us any harm. I think we are just not figuring something out. Or not finding the right clues.”

“Did the Dalmatian really mean for us to come back up the stairs to complete more challenges?” asked Pennyroyal. “Are we maybe missing an exit door somewhere up here?”

Unfortunately, upon examining every nook and cranny of the hallway and stair landing of the third floor, the fairies couldn’t find an exit. And they were very reluctant to open any of the remaining nine challenge doors, because they

would have felt obligated to take on the challenges in those rooms, instead of just peeking in and closing the doors again. Besides, none of the three doors they had already opened on this floor contained any exit doors or windows.

“What about checking the room with the musical rug again?” suggested Jasmine. “We didn’t stay there very long this morning. Maybe we missed something.”

“Good idea,” said Helenium. With this, the fairies whizzed back down the stairs to the first floor.

Inside the music room, the chairs and tables had been rearranged! The girls didn’t know why they found this surprising—probably because they hadn’t heard any noises. However, they really hadn’t been able to hear much of anything during the three-hour cleaning and laundry chore.

They flitted around the rug room for nearly ten minutes, but found nothing that would indicate an exit or a clue, or even anything strange, other than the rearranged furniture. They stood on the rug to listen to a cello, a piccolo, maracas, a soprano saxophone, and cymbals. And although they enjoyed listening to the music, they were disappointed not to have found any way to exit the house, or any clues to help them figure a way out.

With all three of them sighing heavily, and still not having any ideas as to how to get out of the house, the fairies slowly made their way back to the second-floor gallery. They alighted on the landing in front of the flight of stairs leading to the third floor. Looking at one another with dread, they shook their heads. Tackling yet another challenge seemed their only option at this point to find a means to exit the house, and they were all very frustrated.

“But there has to be some way out, other than doing the Labors of Hercules!” said Helenium, now in a slight panic.

“Take the stairs!” called the Dalmatian, loudly, from across the gallery.

The fairies moved into the room to hover before the Dalmatian painting, where they just stared at the dog. He was shaking his head at them in frustration. Then he took a

deep breath and sighed very heavily, as he said, "I know I'm a dog, but I am speaking people-language at present."

When the girls just looked at him in confusion, he said again very loudly, and very emphatically, "*Take the stairs!*"

At this, the three fairies obediently and meekly headed toward the stairs to return to the third floor to take on the fourth challenge.

They had just reached the first step when Helenium stopped. "Wait a minute," she said, suddenly having an idea.

Her friends stopped as well.

"Could it be that simple?" said Pennyroyal, also starting to understand what the Dalmatian was trying to tell them.

Jasmine, too, was catching on; and the three fairies all turned at the same time to face the trompe l'oeil stair painting at the end of the gallery hall.

Laughing, they soared together across the room. But they didn't fly into the wall as Pennyroyal had done two days before. In order to be careful, they landed in front of the painting. Helenium then reached out to touch the surface. Sure enough, this was a magical trompe l'oeil painting. Her hand and forearm immediately passed into the canvas to become part of the picture. Then they all three slowly stepped through and approached the first step leading down to the street.

Before flying down the stairs, Helenium called back to the Dalmatian in the gallery. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome!" he answered. A short bark followed his words.

As they exited the house at the street level, via the magical staircase painting, Pennyroyal turned and placed her hand on the stucco wall, confirming that the stair painting only worked in one direction. Smiling, she rubbed the cool stone surface lightly.

The girls were all smiling as they flew away from Hinchester Villa.

Heading toward home, the fairies suddenly realized that they were starving, having not had anything to eat during

their time inside the house, so they decided to stop at a local hamburger restaurant.

After all three of them phoned home to check in, they sat down to order. When they received their food, they talked about their strange adventure.

“I guess that’s how the owner of the house gets his cleaning and laundry done,” stated Pennyroyal, with a smile.

“And gets his pet monster insect to go to bed,” added Helenium. “And reorganizes his shoe closets.”

“But are we missing something?” said Jasmine, putting down her hamburger, with a serious look on her face.

“What do you mean?” asked Helenium, also stopping eating.

“I think our reason for being there probably had more to do with the paintings, or maybe the objects in the other rooms, rather than with the challenges and chores,” answered Jasmine.

After thinking for a moment, Pennyroyal said, “I agree.” She was pondering her second encounter with the strange house on the hill. Even though it was just a painting, and she hadn’t entered the house this time, there still must be some reason why she had once again come across the mysterious house with the secret floor.

Jasmine was thinking hard about the bells and whistles. *What did they mean?* She didn’t really know what to say to her friends, because she didn’t understand the premonition. However, she was sure that the tree of bells and whistles was somehow important.

By the time the girls had finished their burgers, Helenium came up with probably the best explanation as to why they had been swallowed by the house. “You know,” she said, “human beings are always making things more difficult, even really simple things. We just seem to want to make everything as complicated as possible.” With her friends listening closely, she tried to explain further. “We tend to look for the most difficult and complicated way, even when a simple and easy way is put right in front of us.”

“It’s probably because people like challenges,” said Pennyroyal.

“But sometimes it’s because we can’t ‘think outside the box,’” said Jasmine, quoting one of her teachers. “We have preconceived notions, and it’s hard for us to think of certain things in other ways.”

“Also,” stated Helenium, “our teachers and parents are always telling us to be better listeners. And we weren’t very good listeners today. At least, not early on anyway.”

“That’s right,” said Jasmine. “All we had to do was listen carefully to the Dalmatian. If we had done that, we would have gotten out more quickly.”

“It’s funny,” added Helenium. “In this case, the *art of listening* involved real art.”

“We weren’t very good visual observers either,” Pennyroyal stated. “The juggler gave us a clue, but we weren’t paying attention. I think he tossed the beanbags out on purpose, so we would know that some of the paintings could be doorways.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that,” said Helenium. “You’re right. We just weren’t paying close enough attention.”

After finishing their sodas, French fries, and fruit salads, the girls made their way back to their homes.

Unfortunately, both Pennyroyal and Helenium had to help with the laundry that very night. And Jasmine had to clean the bathroom. Never had any of them done so much cleaning and laundry in a single day.

This adventure began Helenium’s lifelong fascination with trompe l’oeil paintings. She had always loved art, and she even took art classes on the weekends at a local institute.

For the remainder of her spring break, Helenium began working on a trompe l’oeil painting of her own—a window with a view of a garden. Having an extra window in her bedroom would be wonderful, and would fill the room with sunlight from the Sunshine Fairy, even if the window wasn’t real and the Sunshine Fairy didn’t really exist.



