

Excerpted from *The Fairy Chronicles: Volume IV*

Tea, Sterling, and the Heart of Fire

When five fairies receive the exact same mysterious Valentine message, they set out on a journey to save all love in the world. With help from the brownies, they follow a series of puzzling clues to find the Heart of Fire. Once again led through one of the doorways in the magical conservatory, the fairies and brownies visit a few familiar faces including Ms. Moongill, the alchemist, and the Candy-and-Flowers Monster. When the many clues don't seem to be leading anywhere, solving the mystery becomes somewhat frustrating. Their persistence finally pays off when they are taken deep into the Forgotten Forest. However, the Heart of Fire turns out to be something totally unexpected.



To Ed

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Chapter One

The First Three Messages

“But most of them are quacks,” said Tea.

“Some palm readers are for real,” answered Moonflower. “Even some witches practice palmistry.”

“I know,” said Tea. “And there are real seers and prophets. But even if some real magical beings can read palms and tea leaves, or see things in crystal balls, they probably won’t be at any of the discount places that we can afford, like this one.”

“So...we’re just doing this for fun,” stated Moonflower. “It doesn’t have to really mean anything.”

The girls were standing on the sidewalk in front of a tiny house, looking at a sign in the window:

Madam Magarious
Palm Reader
use side door

This was a Saturday morning, and the weekend before Valentine’s Day, which was set to fall on the next Saturday. Since the holiday fell on a weekend this year, the area fairies and brownies were planning a special Valentine’s Fairy Circle. Tea had been helping to plan the event. But since she was very organized, and had almost everything that she was supposed to do finished, she didn’t have anything scheduled for this weekend. Both Moonflower and Tea were also caught-up with their homework and other school projects, so the girls had decided to spend the day together, seeking some magical fun and amusement.

Tea was not quite twelve years old. Even though Moonflower was nearly fifteen, she lived near Tea, and the girls liked spending time together.

Tea’s fairy spirit came from a tea rose, and her real name was Elle Southerland. She had shoulder-length, light brown hair; and her wand was a bit of enchanted spider web. Tea’s

dress and slippers were made of deep pink rose petals, and her wispy wings were very pale like cotton candy. Her fairy gifts were those common to most rose fairies and included resistance to cold, enhanced strength, and the ability to distract or entrance.

Moonflower's real name was Erin Young. In fairy form, she wore a creamy white dress made of softly glowing moonflower petals. She also had tall, milky-white wings and wore pearly-white slippers. Her brown hair was long and curly, and her wand was an enchanted icicle that would never melt.

Moonflower's special fairy gift was the ability to motivate and inspire others. She was also beginning to develop the ability to inspire love and passion, because the moonflower was a flower of passion. The petals of the moonflower were commonly used in love potions created by witches and wizards. Moonflower's fairy gifts were especially potent after dark because moonflowers only opened at night. She was also one of the rarest fairies in existence. In fact, the moonflower fairy spirit was every bit as rare as the elusive edelweiss fairy spirit of Austria. There was only one moonflower fairy in North America, as far as anyone knew.

Having finally made up their minds to go through with the visit to the palm reader, the girls nervously approached the side door. They were actually more excited than nervous, but being excited made them feel nervous, with tingles in their shoulders and butterflies in their stomachs.

Before making the six-block trip to Stewart Lane, which also housed the beauty shop where both girls got their hair cut, Moonflower and Tea had consulted their fairy handbooks to learn more about palm reading. This is the information the handbooks shared:

Palmistry: This practice involves telling fortunes from reading lines and patterns in the palms of the hands. Also called chiromancy, palmistry was regularly

practiced in ancient Egypt, China, and India. Generally, both palms are read to give information relating to personal traits and future events. Most people who have their palms read are seeking information about the future.

Before knocking on the side door, Tea said in a whisper, “You go first. Okay?”

“No,” answered Moonflower, also quietly, but firmly. “You go first.”

“But you’re older,” argued Tea.

“If I’m going to get any bad news about my future,” replied Moonflower, “I’d rather get it later than sooner.”

“I’d rather get bad news sooner than later,” responded Tea.

“Well, there you have it,” said Moonflower. “You should go first then.” With this Moonflower bravely knocked on the door, while Tea scrunched up her eyes, both in confusion and so that she could glare at her friend. She very much felt as though she had just been tricked into going first.

Madam Magarious was a very tall woman with short blond hair. She wore a tunic-style green top with fringes around the hem, and a straight brown skirt that fell to just below her knees. The palm reader also wore an excessive amount of jewelry around her neck, including many strands of beads and several pendant crystals; but she wore no wrist jewelry at all. Her only other adornment was a huge silver ring sporting an enormous peridot. As she solemnly invited the girls in, Madam Magarious studied their faces closely.

Taking seats at a small round table, Tea and Moonflower glanced around the darkened room. Several candles were lit, but the room was still very dim due to heavy curtains on the windows. The walls were lined with shelves containing books, candles, and many different types of crystals and minerals. A Scottish terrier occupied a red cushion in one corner of the small room. He wagged his tail at the girls but didn’t rise to greet them.

Sitting down at the table and glancing at Tea, Madam Magarious said, "I offer a discount to eleven-year-olds." Then, turning her gaze to Moonflower, she stated, "But not to fourteen-year-olds, I'm afraid."

The girls were very impressed that Madam Magarious had correctly guessed their ages.

"The cost of a reading is one dollar for every year of your age," the palm reader continued. "But eleven-year-olds get a half-price discount."

Smiling, Tea immediately reached into the pocket of her jeans and withdrew six dollars. Madam Magarious then gave her fifty cents change and held her palms out to receive Tea's hands.

After wiping her hands on her jeans, because they were the tiniest bit sweaty with nervousness, Tea placed her hands, palms up, into those of the fortuneteller.

"Hmmm..." said Madam Magarious, scrunching up her brow and studying the lines in Tea's palms closely. Both Tea and Moonflower leaned forward and held their breath.

It seemed a very long time before the woman spoke again.

"You are a very mathematical and precise person," she finally said. "Very organized, reliable, and efficient."

Both Moonflower and Tea smiled. So far, the reading was right on.

"You are very level-headed," continued Madam Magarious. "I suspect you tend to serve as a balance to some of your loftier friends. If you happened to see a UFO, I'm sure you would likely think it was a weather balloon and not an alien spaceship, unless the aliens actually stopped to say hello. Also, even though you have a lot of energy and passion, you keep a cool head and tend to question things a lot."

Again, the woman was correct.

"Now, let's look into your future, as far as romance. We are nearing Valentine's Day, so I'm sure you're interested."

Tea nodded, but found that her palms were suddenly sweaty again.

As Madam Magarious ran her finger along a particular line in Tea's hand, the *heart line*, she took a deep breath and said, "You won't meet the right one until after college. And according to your *head line*, your higher education will be extensive. So you don't need to rush the romance thing. There will be plenty of time for that when you are finished with school." Smiling, the palm reader added, "I see a dark-haired man in your future."

Also smiling, Tea withdrew her hands, thinking that the reading was over. However, Madam Magarious had something else to tell her. "I have another message for you." Looking very intently into Tea's eyes, the fortuneteller stated, "You will soon be involved in solving a mystery to save all true love in the world. Seek red hearts to find the Heart of Fire."

With a small look of confusion on her face at the message, Tea sat back in her chair and slid sideways slightly so that Moonflower could have her palms read next. However, Moonflower, suddenly looking very nervous, stated, "I think I would rather come back some other time to have my fortune told."

At this statement, Tea's mouth dropped open, and she glared at her friend. She had bravely gone first, and Moonflower was supposed to follow.

Standing up, Madam Magarious told Moonflower, "I look forward to your reading. Someone who shines so brightly at night must have a very interesting future to tell."

Tea and Moonflower also stood up, with Moonflower hurriedly leading the way out the door. Tea said goodbye to the palm reader and stooped to pet the terrier, Milton, who had risen to bid the girls farewell. However, Tea had trouble catching up to Moonflower, who had already made it to the front sidewalk by the time Tea exited Madam Magarious' side door."

“Why didn’t you get a reading?” said Tea, somewhat angrily, when she finally caught up to her friend. “There wasn’t any bad news for me, and I’m sure she wouldn’t have given you any either.”

“Because she’s for real,” stated Moonflower, defensively. “And her eyes were glowing funny when she gave you that message about the Heart of Fire.”

“Her eyes were glowing because of the candlelight. Yours were too,” said Tea. “That message about saving all true love in the world was just because it’s coming up on Valentine’s Day.”

“All the other stuff she said was correct,” argued Moonflower.

“That was stuff any grown up would have told girls,” said Tea, “because they all think we should focus on education and not on romantic things.”

Shaking her head, Moonflower said, “I still think she’s for real, and I guess maybe I don’t want to know anything about my future right now. I think the real future should remain a mystery.”

Tea sighed. She had cooled down somewhat about feeling tricked into going first, and she did understand the natural apprehension over not wanting to know about the future. “Let’s just go to my house and get a sandwich,” she said. Moonflower agreed, and the girls headed toward Tea’s house.

Meanwhile, across town, Brandtii was doing something she did nearly every Saturday. She was poring over the horoscope page of the local newspaper. Not only did she like to look up her own horoscope, she also liked to read the ones pertaining to her closest friends, to find out what kind of week they were all destined for.

Brandtii, whose real name was Marie Hargrave, was fourteen, just like Moonflower; but she went to a different school because the girls lived on opposite sides of town, in different school districts.

Brandtii's fairy spirit was that of a brandtii bat. She had dark brown hair and carried an invisible twig for her wand. Her dress and wings were made of soft, reddish-brown fur. Brandtii's special fairy gift involved extraordinary night abilities. She had more energy after dark, and was able to fly better and see better at night. Brandtii was also the Fairy of Superstition. Not only did she have extensive knowledge of superstitions, she also had the ability to discern which ones had merit and which ones were just silly.

Upon discovering which days of the coming week were best for performing the most important actions, and learning that she might have a brief conflict with either a family member or a close friend on Friday, Brandtii studied the last four lines of her horoscope closely. They seemed the most important parts to consider:

Tuesday will present the biggest challenge. Open a door for someone at least twice this week, and doors will be opened to you. You will soon be involved in solving a mystery to save all true love in the world. Seek red hearts to find the Heart of Fire.

The last two lines were the most surprising of the weekly prediction. Brandtii had never received a message quite like this in her horoscope before.

However, she had too many other things to do on this day to ponder the words for very long. Leaving the newspaper on the table for her father to read, she rose and went to her room to study for a history test.

Back across town, in Tea's kitchen, the girls were just finishing their peanut butter and marshmallow crême sandwiches.

"I think that's a good idea," said Tea.

Moonflower had just suggested that the girls go to a local carnival for the afternoon. She had also offered to pay for Tea's admission ticket in order to make up for chickening out of the palm reading.

The carnival was set up at the county fairgrounds, which was close enough to walk to. The girls reached the site in less than twenty minutes.

After purchasing carrots and tossing them to an elephant named Whoopee, they rode three of the rides. However, three was enough for Tea who became dizzy easily. Rather than risk either of them getting more seriously motion-sick, the girls bought popcorn and cotton candy and wandered through the game area.

Moonflower was disappointed when she missed all of the pegs of the *Ring Toss* game. However, she felt a little better when the carnival man couldn't guess her weight correctly and presented her with a small plush elephant. Tea won a tiny stuffed turtle when she threw a ball well enough to knock over five of six wooden pins.

Near the fairgrounds exit, a fortune-telling machine was set up. For one dollar, a person could grip the handle, and the genie inhabiting the machine would provide a fortune.

Having escaped the morning palm reading, Moonflower found she couldn't refuse this activity, especially when Tea offered to pay for her fortune. But since Moonflower was somewhat superstitious, the machine did make her slightly nervous. However, as soon as Tea slipped the dollar into the payment slot, Moonflower took a deep breath and gripped the wooden handle of the machine tightly. She held her breath as the multicolored globe lights on either side of the genie lit up spectacularly, flashing in a mixed-up pattern.

One minute later, the light-show stopped and a paper fortune card was spit out of a slot, right at knee level on the machine.

Moonflower smiled as she bent down to retrieve her fortune. However, her smile quickly faded and she turned rather pale as she read the card. Handing the fortune to Tea, Moonflower remained silent as her friend read the prediction: *You will soon be involved in solving a mystery to save all true love in the world. Seek red hearts to find the Heart of Fire.*

Chapter Two

Valentine's Fairy Circle

“But it’s just because Valentine’s Day is almost here,” stated Tea, on their way home. “That same message is probably spit out twenty times a day by that machine. Madam Magarious might have received that fortune herself at the carnival, and then decided to adopt it for use in her business.”

Moonflower shook her head. “I think it’s real,” she said.

Tea also shook her head. “I’m pretty sure it’s just a coincidence.”

They walked two full blocks without saying anything else which, for girls their ages, might have been some kind of a record for not speaking.

However, Moonflower soon shook off the eerie feeling that was plaguing her, and she said, “I agree that it might be a coincidence. And even if it’s not, I don’t plan to worry about it because it’s not a particularly bad message. In fact, if it turns out to be real, I would love to be part of an adventure to save all true love in the world.”

“Good attitude,” said Tea. But she was pretty sure that there was no such thing as the Heart of Fire.

Three blocks later, Tea left Moonflower at her house, since it was closest to the carnival, and slowly made her way home. However, in the back of her mind was a small thought that it really was almost too much of a coincidence that both she and Moonflower had received identical fortune messages on the exact same day.

On the following Saturday morning, very early, Tea met up with Sterling, the other planner of the Valentine’s Fairy Circle.

Sterling was ten years old, and her name was Jardin Mason. Her fairy spirit was that of a Sterling rose, and she carried a wand made of several strands of braided palomino horsetail. The petals of her dress were a shimmering, pale,

silvery-lavender color; and her lacy wings were a soft, gauzy gray. She also wore a crown of tiny Sterling rosebuds nestled in her pale blond curls. Sterling roses were very much considered to be flowers of love, so in addition to the normal rose fairy gifts of strength and resistance to cold, Sterling could also inspire love, which basically meant that she had an intoxicating nature that could sometimes cause people to lose their heads and do slightly stupid things around one another.

Sterling was definitely one of those “loftier friends” that Madam Magarious had referred to, a person for which Tea’s personality was meant to act as a balance. Tea was more down-to-earth and had a lot of practical common sense, whereas, Sterling was often overly melodramatic and tended to romanticize everything. However, due to these differences, the girls complemented one another very nicely as far as their friendship, and when working together on projects.

For the Valentine’s party, Tea had taken care of organizing the food, location, and invitations, while Sterling had worked on the more fanciful things involving the decorations and games. They did coordinate with one another though, which gave Tea the opportunity to talk Sterling out of having a kissing booth and a blindfolded kissing game. “There will likely be some kissing already without the extra promotion,” argued Tea. This was true because some of the slightly older fairies had brownie boyfriends. Harlequin and Bob were officially girlfriend and boyfriend. So were Marigold and Alan. Even though Cinnabar and James weren’t official, they always spent a lot of time with each other, as did Cricket and Michael. And Dande and Conner had been hanging out a lot together in the last year.

The Valentine’s Fairy Circle celebration started just before lunchtime. The many brownies and fairies of the region met in a secluded area of woods near a small grove of apricot trees. This was appropriate because apricot trees

were symbolic of love. The weather was very warm for the time of year, more like spring than late winter, so they didn't need to light any fires in fairy fire shields to keep warm.

The decorations for the celebration were magnificent, and included bewitched hearts and magical ribbons that swirled and danced around the gathering. Every so often, enchanted balloons in the tree limbs overhead would burst, to send clouds of glittering, heart-shaped confetti raining down upon them.

Several of the fairies and brownies put on a play of a familiar mythological love story involving Cupid, Apollo, and Daphne, a wood nymph. However, they changed the ending to make it a happy one, where Daphne and Apollo ended up living happily ever after in the clouds together.

There were also quite a few games, of the non-kissing kind, to entertain everyone, along with a massive amount of Valentine-themed foods and drinks.

Since the brownies were now regularly invited to Fairy Circles, and the fairies often attended parties and other gatherings at the brownie orphanage, most of the boys and girls were comfortable talking and playing games together. Scott and Conner were happily visiting with Apple and Dande. Ian, Richard, Frank, and Lucas made a point of refilling punch glasses and plates for many of the fairies, in a big effort to be thought of as gentlemen, instead of mischievous brownies. Blue, Cricket, Primrose, Raven, Clover, and Berylline were very flattered by the attentiveness of the boys.

The new leader of the brownies, Brandon, seemed rather stoic. He kept to himself, mainly just watching the activities. The fairies imagined that he was taking his duty of keeping brownie pranks in check as seriously as his predecessor had.

Though the party didn't have dancing, there was a variety of lovely music. Some of the tunes were fast and upbeat, while others were slower and more soulful. During a particularly sprightly song, several of the fairies and brownies wove pink, red, and white ribbons around a

maypole, even though it wasn't May. Many of the fairies and brownies also exchanged Valentine's cards.

Madam Finch, acting as a crystal ball gazer, was set up at a small table to give the fairies and brownies advice on love, mostly of the variety of waiting until they were much older to focus on such matters. Since it was becoming well-known that Sterling and Mark liked one another, Madam Finch gave Sterling a special warning about acting too soon on romantic feelings. And Tea thought it was especially funny when Madam Finch told her that she was destined to marry a man with blond hair, since that contradicted the information given to her by Madam Magarious.

At one point, Marigold and Alan were holding hands. But they weren't really comfortable doing this in front of others, so they decided to just sit by a tree and talk instead.

After nearly three hours of fun and games, the gathering wound down, and each of the partygoers took home boxes of chocolates and tiny bouquets of flowers as party favors.

Chapter Three

The Fortune Cookie and the Walnut

Brandtii and Honeysuckle stayed to help Tea and Sterling clean up after the party. Moonflower also volunteered for this.

Honeysuckle was the same age as Brandtii and Moonflower. Her real name was Rima Andrews, and she had light brown hair. Her dress was made of curly vines that crept around her waist and up over her shoulders in a sweeping tangle of bright green leaves with trumpet-shaped creamy white flowers dangling from the stems. Her white wings were very tall and feathery, and her wand was a bit of braided lion's mane. Honeysuckle's special fairy gift was

similar to that of rose fairies and included resistance to cold due to the evergreen nature of honeysuckle plants. She also had vigor and energy related to the rapid, hearty growth of the many varieties of honeysuckle.

Honeysuckle was also the Fairy of Longing and Desire, since honeysuckle flowers were considered to be symbolic of love and passion. All honeysuckle fairies were able to master a *Distraction Spell*, relating to the intoxicating scent of honeysuckle flowers, which could make others sluggish and susceptible to suggestion. However, Honeysuckle was not yet able to master this spell. The skill would likely develop as she grew older. She also had the ability to communicate well with bees because bees loved honeysuckle flowers.

They chatted while they cleaned up, and the conversation eventually turned to fortune telling, with many of the girls laughing about the predictions Madam Finch had given them.

Eventually, Tea and Moonflower mentioned their identical fortunes from the palm reader and the carnival machine; and Tea recited the words of the predictions for their friends. At this point, Brandtii gasped in surprise, and exclaimed, “I got the exact same message!” When Moonflower and Tea, both wide-eyed, didn’t say anything, Brandtii added, “This can’t be a coincidence. We must be about to set out on an adventure to seek the Heart of Fire.”

Sterling was already looking up Heart of Fire in her fairy handbook, with Tea and Honeysuckle looking over her shoulder. “No entry,” she announced after flipping the pages back and forth several times in the hopes that she had just missed it.

“So either it *is* just coincidence,” said Tea, “or nothing is yet known about the Heart of Fire, in the fairy world, anyway.”

“I don’t think it’s coincidence,” stated Sterling, as she dreamily added, “I think we are heading for a fantastic adventure to save all true love in the world.”

Brandtii definitely believed in the predictions. And Honeysuckle and Moonflower were leaning in that direction as well.

“You might be right,” said Tea. “But it really is the right time of year for those kinds of messages, so just don’t get your hopes up.”

In the evening, Sterling went with her parents to a local Chinese restaurant for dinner. At the end of their meal, while they were opening their fortune cookies, Sterling nearly fell out of her chair. This was the longest fortune cookie message she had ever seen, and the words were very familiar: *You will soon be involved in solving a mystery to save all true love in the world. Seek red hearts to find the Heart of Fire.* She couldn’t wait to get home to contact her friends.

Meanwhile, across town, Honeysuckle was just going up to her room after dinner, where she discovered a nut message on her windowsill. She retrieved the walnut quickly and read the message, at which point, she nearly fell off of her bed. After getting better hold of her shock, she read the message again: *You will soon be involved in solving a mystery to save all true love in the world. Seek red hearts to find the Heart of Fire.*

The note was not signed, so there was no way to know whom the message was from.

In a flurry of phone calls, instead of nut messages because that would have taken slightly longer, Honeysuckle and Sterling contacted each other, as well as Moonflower, Tea, and Brandtii. The girls decided to get together as a group early the next morning.

After receiving the phone call from Sterling, Tea called Moonflower and told her, “I believe you now. Five identical messages, given to fairies, are way too many to be a coincidence. There has to be something to this.”

Very early on Sunday morning, the five fairies met on a street corner near Tea’s house. During their brief telephone conversations, they had decided that it would be a good idea to revisit Madam Magarious, since she was the first one to

mention the Heart of Fire. They now also believed she was a genuine fortuneteller, and not a quack.

The palm reader was already up and about for the day, which was a good thing for the girls because some people might have gotten cranky over unexpected visitors at seven-thirty on a Sunday morning.

Madam Magarious was happy to see them. "I'm glad you returned," she told Moonflower and Tea, as the group crowded into the tiny room.

Tea introduced the rest of the girls to the palm reader. Milton decided to leave his corner cushion today to greet the visitors. Madam Magarious produced two folding chairs from a small closet, to add to her normal seating, so that everyone could be comfortable. She then also quickly scuttled out of the room to return a few moments later with a baking sheet full of warm cinnamon rolls and a stack of napkins.

The girls were very surprised and gratefully accepted the treat, since they had left home before having breakfast. Milton got a bit of a cinnamon roll too, but only a tiny bit because that kind of food really wasn't good for dogs.

"We wanted to ask you more about the message you gave me last weekend," said Tea. "We had never heard of the Heart of Fire before you mentioned it."

"That's exactly why I am glad you came back," responded the fortuneteller. "After you left, I started studying my books. I couldn't find anything useful by looking up Heart of Fire, or even the words *heart* and *fire* separately. But when I looked up magical events occurring this year, one of the chapters mentioned the Heart of Fire as being an object needed to stop a curse. However, the Heart of Fire is nearly a complete mystery. I even contacted another palm reader, and she didn't know anything about it either.

"Anyway," continued Madam Magarious, "evidently, a curse was enacted long ago by a bitter sorceress. She was incredibly powerful, and the curse was designed to destroy

all true love in the world. However, a sacrifice by another person enacted a different kind of magic to allow the effect of the curse to be delayed for five hundred years. The story is vague about the details of the sacrifice. But this year is five hundred years exactly.”

“And the Heart of Fire is the only thing that can break the curse?” asked Sterling.

“Yes,” Madam Magarious responded. “Whatever it is, it must be powerful enough to undo or stop that terrible curse. But if the Heart of Fire is not found, all true love in the world will begin to fade.”

“Then we need to get started in looking for it,” stated Brandtii.

“Yes,” said the palm reader. “I definitely think you are the right girls to take charge of this matter. And not just because of the message. I am getting another premonition too—one that tells me that you will have a better chance of success than others.”

“We got some additional messages relating to this,” stated Honeysuckle, “which is really why we wanted to ask you more about the Heart of Fire.”

Madam Magarious rose from her chair and took a crystal ball down from one of her shelves. Placing it in the center of the table, and gazing into the sphere for nearly a minute, she then told them, “Finding the Heart of Fire is vital right now because two people who are destined to meet and fall in love will miss each other if the curse isn’t broken quickly.”

By now, the fairies were not even the slightest bit skeptical of Madam Magarious’ skills, and they were anxious to begin work to find the Heart of Fire, especially if breaking the curse would help two people, who were meant to be together, find one another.

Chapter Four

Following the Clues

After thanking the fortuneteller for the cinnamon rolls and the information, the girls left to begin their mission.

Less than half a block from Madam Magarious' house, they met two brownies out for a walk. The brownie orphanage was nearly two miles away, but Mark and Jamal both liked to take long walks on Sunday mornings. Mark was rowan brownie, and Jamal's spirit came from lichen. In brownie form, both boys wore caps over their dark hair. Mark's hat was made of a leaf from a rowan tree; and Jamal's cap was covered with bits of curly, pale gray lichen fungus.

Right away, the fairies decided to share the nature of their quest with the brownies. This was an especially good idea because the girls had no idea at this point where to start looking for the Heart of Fire.

The boys were anxious to help and agreed to spend the day trying to solve the mystery and break the curse.

Sterling pulled her fortune cookie message out of her pocket to recite it for the boys. *"You will soon be involved in solving a mystery to save all true love in the world. Seek red hearts to find the Heart of Fire."*

"So we need to seek red hearts," said Jamal.

"I think we should go to Kraft Park to change into fairy and brownie form to begin," suggested Mark. "Then we can call a bird to be able to travel with you more easily."

Kraft Park was an excellent idea because it was nearby and very secluded. The fairies agreed immediately.

As they walked, Sterling kept her distance from Mark. Because she liked him so much, he made her very nervous. Sterling noticed that Mark avoided looking at her most of the time. He was evidently nervous too.

"I wonder if the Heart of Fire could be a stone or a jewel of some sort," speculated Brandtii. "Many jewels have magical powers, and there could be one related to love."

“But the Heart of Fire could be anything,” said Moonflower, “even a person.”

“Or a plant, or an elixir to heal love sickness,” added Honeysuckle.

The group wasn’t sure if guessing would help them at all in their search for red hearts; but brainstorming probably couldn’t hurt, especially with seven brains together at once.

When they reached Kraft Park, they changed to fairy and brownie form behind a thick row of pampas grasses. There were no other visitors to the park this morning, even though the weather was fairly warm for the time of year.

Jamal was just about to call for a bird when Honeysuckle and Tea noticed a small walkway by the azalea garden, very near the pampas grasses. Some of the stones inset into the walkway were red, which is what had drawn their attention.

The fairies flew slowly and low to the ground so their brownie friends could keep up. Landing directly in front of the first red stone, Tea smiled. Mixed into the brown and gray cobblestones, a distinctive trail of heart-shaped red stones led toward the duck pond at the rear of Kraft Park.

Walking, and keeping watch for other park visitors, the group followed the red cobblestones to the edge of the duck pond, where they got lucky again in their search for red hearts.

Red Zipper, a blue heeler dog belonging to brownies Brian and Dennis, was visiting the ducks this morning. He wasn’t really supposed to be out and about by himself, but he frequently was out on his own, for various reasons.

Red Zipper’s dark blue collar was stamped with a bright red heart. And because Zip was feeling very playful this morning, the fairies and brownies were definitely going to have to “seek” (or chase) the red heart, because he was not going to stand still for them. Zip was carrying something in his mouth that looked like a heart-shaped flat tin with red markings on it. The fairies and brownies felt this was likely an important clue they were meant to discover.

As Zip playfully led them on a game of chase, the group wound through the park, laughing. The fairies were pretty much able to keep up with the dog, but because he was so squirmy, they couldn't examine what he was carrying in his mouth when they managed to get close to him. Zip loved playing with fairies and brownies, and making them chase him.

"Stop, Zip!" called Jamal, after about five minutes. "This is important, not a game!"

Zip did stop for a moment, and he looked confused. People usually only said the word *stop* when they were doing something important. Plus, since the fairies and brownies were in fairy and brownie form, their voices were just the right pitch and tone to be understood clearly by animals. So Zip really did believe that it was important for him to stop.

"And please sit still for a moment," said Honeysuckle.

Then Sterling added, "Drop it," to get Zip to release the tin he was carrying.

Panting slightly, Zip did drop the tin, which landed at his feet. He lay down as the fairies and brownies gathered in front of him to examine his treasure.

The heart-shaped tin was currently empty but had evidently once held red herring. A large red heart adorned the label, just above bold red lettering.

"*Fire Brand Red Herring*," stated Tea, reading the label.

They examined the tin closely, but found nothing significant about it that might lead them to a Heart of Fire.

"This seems like a dead end," stated Mark.

"I agree," said Sterling.

The others nodded. Other than the words on the label, there was nothing fiery about the red herring can, so they were going to need to look for other clues.

Patting Zip goodbye, the fairies and brownies made their way back across the park. Zip picked up his can and made his way home. He was anxious to show his treasure to Dennis and Brian.

Jamal called a pair of red-bellied woodpeckers to help the brownies travel. The birds arrived just in time because Moonflower and Sterling spied a very unique butterfly near a privet hedge. The butterfly was bright red with dark red, heart-shaped markings on each of his wings. This was very exciting!

Mark and Jamal mounted the woodpeckers quickly, and the birds flew alongside the fairies to tail the butterfly. The travelers were hopeful that the beautiful red creature would lead them to the Heart of Fire, or at least to something else related to their quest.

After nearly fifteen minutes of following the butterfly's swoops and swirls, during which time he led them in a circling path back to Kraft Park twice, the group finally made it to the city zoo, where the butterfly landed on a fence post next to the red panda exhibit. The panda had a lovely, deep orange, heart-shaped marking on the fur of his back. This made the searchers very excited to have found another red heart.

No other zoo patrons were in the area of the panda habitat, so the fairies and brownies didn't have to worry about being noticed. However, after visiting with the panda for nearly five minutes, they found nothing that seemed to be related to a Heart of Fire. And the red butterfly had left the area, so they weren't going to be able to follow him again.

They decided to explore a little more of the zoo before leaving. Jamal and Mark remounted the woodpeckers, and the group rose high in the air to circle the perimeter of the zoo. There were no people in sight at all. Upon landing near the front entry gates, they discovered that the zoo didn't open until noon on Sundays, so they could safely explore a while longer without worry of being noticed.

They got lucky again very quickly. A Valentine Tree, decorated with dangling heart-shaped ornaments, was set up next to the gift shop. However, upon examining the glass, paper, and silk ornaments, they found nothing that might lead them to a Heart of Fire.

As they left the zoo, the fairies and brownies felt somewhat discouraged, having met another dead end. Flying fairly low, Brandtii spotted something unusual on a bus stop bench, so the group landed to examine her find. A jar of artichoke hearts with a red label was sitting somewhat forlornly at the end of the bench. Looking the jar over carefully, they couldn't find anything particularly interesting about it, other than the fact that it was strange for someone to have abandoned it there.

At this point, the group decided to switch back to regular human form for a while, to continue their search on foot, so Mark and Jamal sent the woodpeckers away with their thanks.

They were very near a street containing shops and restaurants, so they decided to take a short stroll through town to see if they could locate any other red hearts. Honeysuckle picked up the jar of artichoke hearts to take with them. For some reason, she didn't think anyone would be returning to collect it, and she was hopeful that the jar might end up leading them to another clue.

As they walked along the sidewalk in front of a bookstore, the fairies and brownies heard faint music. As they continued to walk, the music became louder, and they recognized the classic and snappy tune, *Heart and Soul*.

The music was coming from an art gallery with a beautiful red sculpture in the window showcase. They eagerly entered the store to examine the art more closely. The sculpture depicted a pair of fiery hearts, intertwined, as though embracing one another. The flames of the hearts seemed almost alive because streaks of orange and brown color were mixed with the various shades of red.

Unfortunately, as they studied the piece, the fairies and brownies didn't get any ideas about how the sculpture might save all true love in the world, so they doubted that they had actually found the real Heart of Fire. Plus, this sculpture depicted two hearts; and they were looking for a single heart,

or else the messages probably would have said *Hearts of Fire*.

In another part of the gallery, an art glass perfume bottle, red in color, was shaped slightly like a heart. And the stopper somewhat resembled a flame. However, again, the fairies and brownies didn't think they had found what they were looking for.

In the window of an antique shop, two doors down from the art gallery, they noticed a box filled with antique Valentines. But the lace, paper, and ribbon hearts were faded and discolored, and didn't seem to offer any clues relating to a Heart of Fire.

Turning from the window, somewhat discouraged, the group was once again faced with a promising sign. A woman walking by was wearing a pink pullover sweater with a heart motif on the front. The heart was deep red in color. As the woman passed, they noticed that she had a rather sad expression on her face.

Hanging back a little bit, and pretending to window shop, the fairies and brownies followed the woman to the end of the block. And they continued to discretely follow, as she turned left on Twilight Lane.

The group was hopeful that tailing the woman with the red heart sweater would lead them to something important related to the Heart of Fire.

Chapter Five Message in a Bottle

Twilight Lane led to Morning Circle, which was the beginning of the town suburbs. The houses in this area were spaced far apart and had very large yards.

As they followed the woman, they noticed that she still looked rather sad. She walked with her hands in her pockets and hung her head. The fairies and brownies didn't particularly need to worry about her noticing that she was being followed, because she never looked back.

At the far end of Morning Circle, the woman took the front walk leading to a two-story yellow house. A heart-shaped wreath made of dried cornflowers and pink ribbons adorned the door, but there wasn't anything particularly fiery about the decoration. The woman used a key to enter the house.

When the door closed behind her, the group of followers stopped by the trunk of a huge elm tree in front of a neighbor's house to plan their next move.

"It seems like we are chasing our tails," said Brandtii.

Jamal nodded. "I agree."

"We probably need to get out in the wilds somewhere to really track down what we are looking for," said Tea.

"Good idea," answered Sterling. "Since fairies received the messages, we will likely need to be in fairy form and in a totally fairy setting to solve this mystery and find the Heart of Fire."

The group next agreed to head toward a nearby stretch of woods to continue their search. However, before they left, Honeysuckle had a good idea. She quickly hurried up the walkway of the yellow house and deposited the jar of artichoke hearts on the sad woman's porch.

"Maybe an unexpected gift will cheer her up a little," said Honeysuckle, as she breathlessly returned.

They quickly walked down two more streets to reach the edge of the woods, where they entered and *popped* into fairy and brownie form.

Their instincts to head out into the wilds had been correct, because they soon glimpsed something very rare high above them. Since the trees had not yet budded out, the barren treetops provided a good view of a circling blazenbird.

Blazenbirds were magical birds, every bit as rare and mysterious as phoenixes and firebirds. However, they were also extremely fiery and dangerous, so the fairies and brownies would need to keep their distance.

Keeping the bird in sight, they followed as best they could, as the blazenbird stopped circling and headed north. The brownies were just about to call a bird to help them travel, so they wouldn't get left behind, when the group ran right into another magical creature who was also traveling in the woods today.

The Sweet-Smelling Man had been visiting the area for Valentine's Day and had decided to take a hike through the woods before heading off to his next destination.

As the fairies and brownies introduced themselves, Tea discretely looked up Sweet-Smelling Man in her handbook. Though she had heard of the five S-Men, she wasn't at all familiar with them, or their exact purposes. This is the information that the handbook shared:

Sweet-Smelling Man: The Sweet-Smelling Man is one of the five S-Men. He is a magical creature who travels the earth seeking out those who need a bit of a nudge in the area of romance. He is about fourteen inches high and looks to be made entirely of flowers and flower petals, though his appearance varies somewhat with the seasons. He has bright blue eyes and carries a pouch of flower petals—mainly from roses, moonflowers, and daisies—to toss onto people to inspire their motivation and resolve toward matters of love. The other four S-Men include the Saltman, the Sandman, the Stickman, and the Stoneman.

The Sweet-Smelling Man matched his description perfectly, and was covered with a variety of spring flowers. He was also wearing a small yellow backpack.

After visiting for a few moments, the Sweet-Smelling Man was preparing to leave when he suddenly remembered something. He pulled a dark green corked bottle from his backpack. Then he removed the cork from the bottle and fished out a small, rolled-up paper.

“I found a message in a bottle last week when I was near the seashore,” the Sweet-Smelling Man said. “Messages in bottles are often romantic, and since Valentine’s Day was coming up, I was hoping there was something to this. But I never figured out what it meant.”

The rolled-up paper turned out to be a newspaper article about the beautiful conservatories at the Inn of the Whispers. The last line of the newsprint stated, “*Visit the conservatories to kindle fires of the heart.*”

After Tea read the line aloud to the group, the Sweet-Smelling Man said, “I’ll leave the article with you, in case you can make anything out of it. But I want to keep the bottle to send a message.” He then winked at the fairies and brownies as he bid them farewell and hurried off through the trees.

The fairies could barely breathe.

“The Inn of the Whispers *again*,” said Sterling.

Two other groups of fairies had recently had some incredible adventures in a magical conservatory at this local inn.

The octagon-shaped conservatory was the smallest of three located at the inn, and the greenhouse contained seven magical doorways to other places. The doorways could only be used by magical beings, and the fairies had explored six of them so far.

As they hurried through the woods in the direction of the inn, Brandtii and Moonflower took turns explaining about the haunted inn, the conservatory, and the magical doorways to Mark and Jamal.

They reached the inn in good time and *popped* back into regular person form behind one of the storage buildings on the side of the hotel.

It was just lunchtime, and the group suddenly realized they were all extremely hungry. Figuring out what money they had between them, they decided to have lunch at the inn dining hall.

Before eating, Moonflower, Tea, and Sterling all called home to check in. The others weren't expected home until late afternoon, so they didn't need to call at this time.

While they ate hamburgers, tuna sandwiches, hot dogs, and chicken potpie, they continued to discuss the recent adventures through the magical doorways. Due to the success of the previous two fairy missions, they were hopeful that the conservatory would lead them to the Heart of Fire. The girls also explained to Mark and Jamal that the previous groups had numbered and labeled the eight doorways in clockwise order, starting with the door leading back to the inn.

After finishing their meal and paying the check, the group headed toward the octagon greenhouse. They were not surprised to find it completely deserted, because most people ended up visiting the two larger conservatories. Nor were they surprised to hear a few ghostly whispers as they entered the glass room, since this was how the inn got its name.

Fortunately, they didn't have to speculate which door to enter to seek the Heart of Fire, because the answer was very obvious. A skein of Red Heart yarn had evidently been dropped, or placed, directly in front of door #6, which was labeled *beach, bungalow, alchemist, candy, and flowers*. The fairies smiled, thinking of what their friends had told them about their seaside adventure over the Christmas holidays.

Both Brandtii and Honeysuckle loved to knit, and they both loved to use Red Heart yarn. Picking up the skein, Honeysuckle lightly stroked the soft red yarn as she placed it on a bench near the center of the greenhouse.

Deciding to stay in regular person form for a while to do their exploring, since the brownies couldn't fly, the group collectively held their breath as Sterling took hold of the lever-style handle of the door and pulled downward. The

door opened smoothly, inward, and the fairies and brownies found themselves facing a rocky beach scene, as viewed from a high cliff ledge. As they passed through the door, they emerged from a large boulder etched with a small octagon, which would provide the doorway home for them.

Making their way down the beach via a steep path, they walked along the shoreline for a while, exploring tidal pools and listening to the roar of the ocean, both from the sea and in various seashells they found.

While they were examining a heart-shaped red shell, a woman who was beachcombing stopped to say hello. She had a reddish-brown, heart-shaped birthmark on her arm.

In surprise, Sterling remarked, "I don't mean to be rude, but that is a very interesting birthmark."

"Yes," stated the woman, "I am lucky to have a heart shape, rather than something like a hammer or a semi-truck or an elephant, or something even odder."

As the boys and girls smiled at her words, the woman added, "By coincidence, my sister has a scar on her knee that is the exact shape of a heart." Then, pointing, she said, "In fact, she lives just over there. Let me introduce you to her."

The small house the woman indicated was tucked into a cluster of large rocks about halfway up the path leading back to the cliffs overlooking the beach. They could see someone sitting on the porch of the house, waving to them.

They made their way up the path and were soon introduced to the woman's sister, who seemed pleased to show them her heart-shaped knee scar.

Hanging on the wall next to the front door was an unusual piece of artwork. The fairies and brownies had never seen a Sailor's Valentine before. Made of seashells arranged in an intricate heart shape, the mosaic picture was housed in a flat glass case shaped exactly like an octagon. This particular picture was made mostly of bright red shells, streaked with pink and white.

As they admired the Valentine, the woman with the scar told them, "That is a very old and unique Sailor's Valentine

because crimson inferno seashells are no longer found on any beaches.”

After saying goodbye to the sisters, the group headed back down the path to the beach.

“We are definitely on the right track,” said Moonflower, as they strolled along.

“Agreed,” stated Mark. “The octagon shape must mean something.”

“And the crimson inferno shells *were* very fiery,” added Sterling.

Chapter Six Candy and Flowers

They continued walking for a while and soon came upon a man hard at work, sculpting sand into a giant heart. As they paused to admire his creation, the man winked at them and said, “For my Sweetheart. I hope she likes it.”

“I’m sure she will,” stated Sterling, earnestly. “I would.” Mark looked sideways at Sterling when she said this.

Just a little farther down the beach, they met a sailor with a large, bright red, heart-shaped tattoo on his arm. He was hurrying along, but did stop to say hello to them. “I’m going to see the Candy-and-Flowers Monster,” he said breathlessly. “I forgot to get my wife something for Valentine’s Day, and I am in *big* trouble.”

The fairies had heard about the Candy-and-Flowers Monster from their friends who had visited in December. The monster had been a very sad and unfortunate creature, cursed to throw other curses at passersby. However, when the curses left his throat, they turned into candy and flowers. The previous group of fairies had used the *Decurse Spell* to remove the curse on the monster to make him a much happier

creature. Now, he produced candy and flowers for others just to be nice, and not because he was forced to.

There was actually a small line of people waiting to see the Candy-and-Flowers Monster when they arrived at the top of the cliff. The monster was just spitting up a huge bouquet of the most beautiful tulips ever seen, wrapped in fancy pink paper and tied with a mass of purple and blue curly ribbons.

The yellow and orange monster was nearly as large as a small house and looked like a cross between a cat and a dragon, but he also had some feathers mixed with his fur and scales.

As they waited their turn, the sailor said, “Because he is so happy now, the flowers he coughs up are the prettiest and most fragrant of any in the world. And the candy is absolutely heavenly.”

When they reached the front of the line, the sailor told the monster, “I forgot to get Wanda a Valentine’s gift, and I’m in big trouble. Do you think you could help me out? I promise solemnly that I will remember her birthday next month.”

The monster shook his head in a somewhat scolding manner, but was smiling as he coughed up an enormous, heart-shaped box of chocolates nearly too large for the sailor to carry on his own. Struggling under the weight of the box, the sailor called, “Thank you,” as he staggered away to home.

Since there was already a short line of people building up behind them, Tea hurriedly told the monster, “We don’t need any candy or flowers. But we’d like to ask you a question. We are looking for the Heart of Fire. Have you ever heard of it, and do you know where we might look for it?”

The monster tilted his head a bit to one side, seemingly in slight confusion. Then he smiled and coughed up a small box of chocolates for them, this time of a rectangle shape, which he handed to Jamal.

“Thank you,” called Brandtii, as they moved off.

“Well,” said Tea, smiling, “it didn’t hurt to ask, even if he didn’t know anything.”

“I think he does know something,” said Jamal. “There’s a message on this box.”

Tucked under the ribbon of the box was a small slip of paper. Jamal handed it to Tea who read it aloud to the group. “Love is a mysterious maze, up and down and sideways. People can definitely get lost in the maze of love.”

Glancing back at the Candy-and-Flowers Monster, who was looking over at them, the fairies and brownies could almost see glowing hearts in his dreamy eyes. Then the monster purred deeply and sighed contentedly, as he spit up a huge bouquet of red roses for a man who was bowing and tipping his hat to the creature.

Moving a little ways down the cliff ledge, Honeysuckle said, “Remember what Eglantine and Apple said about the alchemist’s house—that it was just like a maze.”

“Maybe this clue means we are supposed to visit Mr. Silvanium,” said Sterling.

The others agreed.

The house was not hard to find because it was the only six-story structure on the beach and was very modern looking. Constructed of concrete, glass, metal, and stucco, the house looked somewhat out of place in the seaside setting.

The door of the house swung open on its own when they knocked, which was exactly what had happened when the previous group of fairies had visited.

Mr. Silvanium was always busy in his many laboratories, which occupied the top four floors of his house, so he used a unique greeting system to lead guests to his location.

The first thing the visitors saw upon entering the home was a gigantic, blinking red sign, similar to the ones used by stores to advertise merchandise and sales, with the following message displayed: *Welcome, visitors. I don’t like phones or buzzers or bells. Please follow the signs to my lab where I am working. Go right.*

Following an arrow directly under the instructions on the sign, the fairies and brownies headed right.

As they traveled down a narrow hallway, words and another arrow appeared out of thin air in front of them. This sign resembled a fancy smoke signal, and told them, *Turn left next.*

A large chalkboard about twenty feet from the corner they had just turned instructed the visitors to *Turn left again.*

A little farther down another hallway, they found a neon sign hung between two stairwells. *Down not up.*

Following additional lit signs, chalkboards, and two more smoke signals, the fairies and brownies continued to travel the maze of the house: *Go left. Up not down. Turn right. Up again. Left again. One more left.*

Eventually, they came upon a sign they had been looking forward to, and they smiled. *Gravity chamber. Don't worry, upside down is no problem on these stairs.*

Their friends had told them about the upside-down staircase. As soon as they had all stepped onto the stairs, the staircase suddenly flipped itself over so that they were walking upside down. And the gravity chamber was working perfectly to keep them from falling off. They felt just as though they were walking right side up. At the end of the long climb, the staircase flipped right side up again so they could step off onto a railed landing.

A small chalkboard in front of the group directed them to *Take the slide.*

This was also going to be terrific fun because the slide went upwards, instead of downwards. Sitting down on the polished wooden slide, Tea, Moonflower, Mark, and Brandtii were swiftly whisked upwards. Sterling, Honeysuckle, and Jamal followed. After many twists and swerves, the three arrived laughing at the top of the curvy slide about thirty seconds after their friends landed.

Next, words appeared on a chalkboard directly in front of them. *You're nearly there.*

They followed a narrow corridor, which dead-ended into a bright blue door. Mr. Silvanium opened the door to welcome them. The alchemist wore a white lab coat and eye

protectors. His lab was filled with interesting equipment and devices, of the sort the fairies and brownies couldn't particularly recognize.

After all of the introductions, Mr. Silvanium asked pleasantly, "What can I do for you today?"

"We were hoping you might be able to tell us something about the Heart of Fire," said Sterling. "It is very important that we find it, but we don't even know what the Heart of Fire is, or where to begin looking for it."

"Let me guess," said the alchemist. "You're on a mission to save the world."

No one said anything for a moment.

Smiling, Mr. Silvanium added, "Well, that's what fairies and brownies do, right? Take on missions to fix terrible problems and save the world."

Since he was a magical being, Mr. Silvanium could recognize fairies and brownies even when they were not in fairy and brownie form.

"Yes," stated Tea, smiling sheepishly. "You're right."

"I'm afraid I won't be of much use to you in this case," the alchemist said. "I think what you are looking for is something along the lines of a legend. I deal mainly with metals, and sometimes jewels, but not usually legends. I have never heard of a Heart of Fire.

"However," he continued, "Ms. Moongill will probably know something about it. She lives about a quarter of a mile from here, in a pale green bungalow with salmon-colored trim. She may be a little crazy, but she knows more about legends than anyone else around."

As they thanked him and prepared to leave, Mr. Silvanium said, "You'll need to take the elevator back down because the gravity stairs and slide don't work in reverse. Take the cliff path to the right when you leave."

After riding the elevator back down to the first floor, the fairies and brownies exited the house and made their way to the right along the cliff path toward the bungalow.

Ms. Moongill was a very superstitious woman, and her front porch was filled with brooms to keep vampires away. She was on the porch hanging up a new dream-catcher when the visitors arrived. Ms. Moongill was a tiny woman with red hair, and she wore a bright red pendant heart necklace. She greeted the boys and girls warmly and invited them into her tiny house, which was filled with wind chimes, crystals, statues, and other things related to her superstitions. Surprisingly, there were just enough seats for all of them in her sunny front room.

“You all look a little hungry,” said Ms. Moongill. She passed around a can of nuts and quickly went to her kitchen to get more snacks for them.

Honeysuckle had been carrying the box of chocolates that the Candy-and-Flowers Monster had given them. After tucking the paper message into her pocket, she opened the box so that they could all enjoy the treat with the other snacks.

Ms. Moongill returned in less than five minutes balancing a bowl of chips, a plate of cheesy crackers, a pile of napkins, and a tray filled with cans of soda. Mark and Jamal helped to relieve her of her load and pass around the treats and napkins.

“We were sent to you by Mr. Silvanium,” said Moonflower. “He said you might know something about the Heart of Fire.”

“Mr. Silvanium is such a nice man,” said Ms. Moongill, grinning. “A little crazy, but nice.”

As the smiling visitors looked at one another without commenting, she added, “No one I know has ever seen the Heart of Fire, and a lot of people are confused about what it actually is. Some think the Heart of Fire is a jewel of love. Others believe it is a person with cupid-like powers. But neither of those guesses is correct.”

Ms. Moongill smiled as she continued. “What you seek is a magical creature of some sort. I think it might be a bird. The Heart of Fire confuses people because the story has been changed over the years to protect this wonderful creature. It

is said that he holds the power to protect all true love in the world.”

“Do you have any idea where we might start looking for him?” asked Tea.

“As a matter of fact, I do have a small clue for you,” responded Ms. Moongill. “According to legend, you should seek the creature in a meadow.”

“A meadow?” asked Sterling.

Ms. Moongill’s eyes twinkled, as she added, “A purple meadow in a Forgotten Forest.”

The visitors all smiled. This was going to be an easy clue to follow because they were very familiar with the Forgotten Forest, and they had all heard of a purple meadow within the forest because it was a place other fairies had visited several years ago on an important mission.

Studying the excited expressions on her visitors’ faces, Ms. Moongill said, “I thought you might have a good idea about where to find a purple meadow in an enchanted forest. I’ve never bothered to look because there aren’t any meadows or forests around here.”

As the visitors thanked her for the refreshments and the information, and prepared to leave, Ms. Moongill said, “I wish you luck in your search. I hope you find what you are looking for.”

After bidding Ms. Moongill farewell, the group hurried down the cliff path toward the octagon-etched boulder. Directly in front of the boulder, they glanced around to make sure the area was clear so that no one would observe them. Then, one by one, they passed through the magical doorway to return to the inn.

Chapter Seven

The Heart of Fire

Since the time was not quite three in the afternoon, the group decided that they could still visit the Forgotten Forest today, if they hurried.

On their way out of the inn, Honeysuckle turned in the Red Heart yarn to the reception desk for their Lost and Found box.

“How funny,” stated the woman at the front desk. “This yarn was in the Lost and Found yesterday. I’m sure I saw it. I wonder how it got all the way back to the little conservatory.”

“Maybe the ghosts of the inn carried it there,” said Sterling.

The woman smiled and said, “This skein has been in the Lost and Found for a very long time. We have been hoping to meet someone who likes to crochet or knit, so that it could be put to good use.”

“We love to knit,” said Honeysuckle, looking sideways at Brandtii.

“You take it,” offered Brandtii. “I already have some red at home.”

On the side lawns of the inn, Honeysuckle secreted the skein of yarn behind a thick clump of bushes, so that she could return for it later. She didn’t really want to have to carry it for the rest of their journey.

The group also took the opportunity to change to fairy and brownie form behind the bushes, whereupon, Jamal and Mark called for two tawny eagles to help them travel.

Since the Forgotten Forest was some distance away, the brownies suggested that the eagles carry the fairies too. Eagles could fly faster than most fairies, so this was a good idea to save time. They split into two groups and were soon on their way.

A short while later, they were soaring high over the Forgotten Forest. The eagles made wide circles to help them

search for the purple meadow, which they found directly next to a white meadow.

Upon landing in the large clearing, which was full of lush green clover, completely covered with purple clover blossoms, the fairies and brownies explored the meadow, hoping to find the Heart of Fire. The eagles stayed in the meadow because the birds were planning to fly them home later.

They didn't have long to wait to discover what they were meant to find. Flying slightly higher, to get a better view of the entire meadow, Brandt and Sterling noticed an animal standing in the tree fringe at one end of the clearing.

As they cautiously approached, the fairies and brownies marveled at the magnificent creature stepping from the trees to stand before them.

He was a beautiful red stag with glistening, deep red fur covering his body. His enormous red antlers glittered like rubies and were intricately scrolled with fancy heart and spiral shapes.

"Are you the Heart of Fire?" asked Tea.

"Some people call me that," stated the magical stag.

"Oh, I get it," said Sterling. "*Heart* versus *Hart*. A hart is the same as a deer or a stag."

"Exactly," said Jamal. "But *H-e-a-r-t* would mislead people. So the name was probably changed to make the Heart of Fire harder to find, to protect him."

Since they were running slightly short on time, Tea came straight to the point and told the stag, "We received five magical messages telling us to seek you. A long time ago, a sorceress enacted a powerful curse to destroy all true love in the world. Another kind of magic delayed the curse for five hundred years. But we have now reached the year in which the curse will take effect." After taking a deep breath, she added, "Is there anything you can do to stop the curse?"

When the red stag didn't respond right away, Sterling said breathlessly, "It's really important to act quickly;

otherwise, two people who were destined to meet one another and fall in love will miss each other.”

The Hart of Fire’s dark brown eyes glowed warmly as he gazed down upon the fairies and brownies. After another moment’s pause, he said, “The nectar from the Amour-Blush Flower would probably work to counteract a powerful spell like that because it can be sprayed, and the magical droplets float easily on the winds. But there are no blooming Amour-Blush Flowers at this time, because it’s the wrong season.”

The meadow visitors were disappointed by the stag’s words. However, the Hart of Fire had more to say. “I believe I can still help with this. I will just have to dip into my stash of magic acorns. Excuse me for a moment.” With this, he turned and entered the forest.

Returning less than a minute later, the stag dropped a large, red, heart-shaped acorn from his mouth onto the ground directly in front of the fairies and brownies. With a swift slash of his hoof, he smashed the acorn, which produced a glittering red explosion that not only knocked the meadow visitors off their feet, but also filled them with warm feelings of love, brotherhood, caring, and happiness. They also felt very goofy for some reason.

“Sorry,” stated the stag, as the fairies and brownies struggled to catch their breath and stand up. “I should have warned you to stand back.”

The glistening red dust from the acorn floated high into the air and covered the purple meadow with pink light. Then the breezes caught the bits of dust to carry them far away from the Forgotten Forest.

“My acorns are very powerful,” stated the Hart of Fire. “That should work to break the curse.”

“Thank you,” exclaimed Sterling, Mark, and Honeysuckle, all at once.

“You’re welcome,” stated the stag. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you not to let others know of my location. I am hard to find for a reason. Protecting me helps to protect all true love in the world.”

The fairies and brownies all agreed to be careful about disclosing information regarding the Hart of Fire. In fact, they saw no reason to tell anyone that the *Heart* was really a *Hart*.

After saying farewell to the stag, they rejoined the eagles near the center of the meadow. The two birds, whose wings now sparkled with reddish-pink dust, were nuzzling each other's necks.

The tawny eagles dropped their riders off on the rear lawns of the brownie orphanage, which was pretty well convenient for all of the fairies to make their way to their homes.

Honeysuckle made a detour on the way to her house to pick up the Red Heart yarn from the bushes at the Inn of the Whispers.

Chapter Eight

Lava Pools, Artichoke Hearts, and the Red Velvet Box

In a very remote part of the world, a gentleman tourist with a long walking stick was hiking very near the base of an ancient but still active volcano. He was enjoying himself immensely when he came upon a series of four extremely unusual lava pools. Though he couldn't get close to them, due to the danger and heat, he was able to see that they were very uniquely shaped. Spaced evenly apart and in nearly a straight row, the pools formed a star, a crescent moon, a heart, and a spiral.

A local person also happened to be out hiking on this sunny afternoon, and he stopped to visit with the tourist.

"These lava pools are very unusual," said the man with the stick.

“Yes,” agreed the local man. “We call them the Crescent of Fire, the Star of Fire, the Coil of Fire, and the Heart of Fire. They are believed to hold magical powers, but they are very mysterious.”

As the tourist snapped a picture of the unusual features, the local man added, “Do you see that small plant at the edge of the Heart of Fire?”

From this distance, the visitor could just make out the glowing fronds of the plant at the edge of the heart-shaped pool, so he nodded.

“Well,” the local man continued, “that plant only grows in that one spot. It is believed to be a very potent love plant. Supposedly, a powerful love potion can be made from its leaves. Unfortunately, no one can safely get close enough to the pool to harvest any of the leaves.”

“That’s probably a good thing,” said the tourist. “Love is already powerful enough for human beings to handle, without any outside influences.”

Meanwhile, in an area of the far North, the Sweet-Smelling Man had just finished delivering a second walnut message to another fairy. Though he didn’t know the contents of the note, he imagined that this message was probably just as important as the one he had delivered to the honeysuckle fairy.

Back on Morning Circle, the woman who had received the mysterious jar of artichoke hearts on her steps earlier in the day had just finished going through her cupboards. She had plenty of canned goods at this time. In fact, she had excess. So she had decided to gather a few things to take to the local food bank.

After stowing the cans and jars into a canvas satchel, she walked to the food bank, since it was only four blocks from her house. While there, she met a man who was also donating a bag of food.

The two fell in love a short while later and ended up living happily ever after. Well into their old ages, they often joked about how they had met because of a mysterious jar of artichoke hearts.

In a snug den on the shadowy side of some rocky hills, a grue named Ruse was sitting in an armchair in front of his fireplace. (Grues were magical creatures that were something like a cross between trolls and ogres.)

Ruse was staring somewhat angrily at a red velvet box sitting on his fireplace mantle. But he wasn't mad at the box; he was mad at himself. This was the second time he hadn't been able to control the urge to look inside the box.

The red velvet box did not belong to him. Ruse was merely keeping it safe for the time being.

This latest uncontrollable urge caused him to seriously rethink keeping the box in his possession. Ruse sighed. He was definitely going to have to do something about getting the box back to its rightful owner soon. He knew he couldn't keep something this fiery in his house forever.

Ruse spent the evening reading some of his magical books, the ones he had inherited from his great-grandfather, in an effort to find out more information about the powerful object in his possession.

Reading well past midnight, Ruse took a short break to rub his eyes and think. Then he sighed and opened a particular book to read the last line of a specific chapter again:

Also known as the Heart of Humanity and the Heart of the Lion, the Heart of Fire is the equivalent of all human hearts and their capacities.

Some of the information he had read this evening was very confusing. There seemed to be whole chapters devoted entirely to the mystery of love, and how human hearts contain a powerful fire.

As complicated as all of this seemed to be, and with the misery and heartache that often went along with love, Ruse was very glad that he was not human. *How could anything be worth that much anxiety and grief?*

As he continued to ponder this mystery, Ruse eyed the red velvet box on his mantle warily, wondering if the object inside was somehow starting to affect him.