

FAIRY ROOT, IRON FLOWER

BY FRANCESCA AMENDOLIA

Chapter 1

Two hundred fifty-eight. Almost home. 259. 260. Step on a crack. Bring your mother back. Christina couldn't remember changing the rhyme. It had just happened. Step on a crack. 268. 269. Bring your mother back. 270. It wouldn't work. She stepped on the cracks anyway. Her feet knew where to go without her having to tell them. 275.

Then she turned the corner (276, 277) and had to stop. Something was blocking her way — a short, squat person wrapped in a long, leather coat. The grey leather was stretched across the figure's huge back so tightly that Christina could see boney lumps of spine pressing through the fabric. It was like staring at the hunched, stony back of a gargoyle. No, Christina thought. Not stone. This figure had the dangerous stillness of a cat tensed to kill. She could smell it. Like burning rubber. It turned her stomach.

Swallowing hard, she started to creep past, trying not to care that she was missing cracks, hoping to slip by unnoticed, but she couldn't help peeking up at the person's face.

It was a woman, and she was looking straight at Christina with eyes such a light grey that they were almost white. Her face was pale and soft as bread dough but her mouth was a gash of red, thin and wet. The woman surveyed her coldly, and Christina understood she mattered so little that she could be stomped on, swept away without another thought. Then the woman turned back to whatever she had been watching and Christina's gaze followed as if pulled.

Her mother.

Christina immediately forgot the pale, hunched woman, forgot stepping on cracks.

Forgot everything. For a brief, glorious second, the world was right again.

Except that it wasn't really. Her mother was still dead. And no amount of stepping on cracks would change that.

Once in a while, Christina would see someone going into the supermarket or just driving past, a woman with a kind face and wild black hair. And for an instant – for less time than it takes to blink – she'd know her mother had not died after all, that there had been some strange misunderstanding. These strikes of lightening joy crumbled almost instantly and left her with a dark, throbbing ache in her chest. The brief seconds of liar relief were still, Christina thought, worth it.

This woman was a little taller, a little younger. Her hair was as black as Christina's mother's, though, and just as tangled. "Wild woman of Borneo," Christina's father used to tease her. And she'd laugh and shake her head so hard that her hair danced like branches in a gale. Christina's hair was like that too, but she kept hers tightly braided.

Christina had started to run forward but stopped. The dark-haired woman held the hand of a little girl, her daughter maybe, and she was bent over, listening to something the girl was saying. She seemed completely unaware that she was being watched. Christina risked glancing back — the grey woman was gone. Vanished. Christina looked around nervously, as if the woman might be hiding in a tree or behind a fence. Then she shook herself. She wasn't hiding anywhere. That was ridiculous. She'd just walked away. Probably she'd been looking at something else. Probably she was just lost. Or crazy. Or both.

Christina turned back to watch the mother and daughter. They had stopped in

front of the small grey house right next to Christina's. It had been empty for as long as Christina and her dad had lived here and she thought of the overgrown yard as a secret extension of her yard, a hidden world that belonged to her. Now this woman was slowly walking up the path towards the front door while the dark-haired girl ran ahead of her. The little girl put one foot up on the doorjamb and wrenched at the doorknob with two hands, trying to tug it open. Her mother laughed and held out a key. The girl took it and headed back to the door.

Then the woman noticed Christina. She smiled, a huge, bright smile like the kind you save for old friends. Caught by surprise, Christina smiled back. She even waved, a little hesitantly. Then, embarrassed to be caught watching and worried about what the woman would think of her, she ducked her head and carried on up the path to her house.

Christina had just unlocked her own door when she heard the barking. It started low and then rose to the hysterical pitch of small doggy anticipation. She groaned and hung her head. If the dogs were here, Aunt Dot was too. Which meant Dad wasn't. Again.

She thought about pulling her key out as quietly as she could and just running away, to California maybe. Or Bombay. Or Swaziland. Somewhere very, very far away where no one knew her and she could simply be "that lovely but lonely girl" who lived in the mountains alone and silent, eating nothing but berries and roots, always slipping just out of sight like a phantom. Villagers would leave flowers for her, and bold young men, in love with the stories of her beauty, would seek the hills for her in vain. No one would ever see her face and no one would ever know her name. And one day, still alone and silent, but now as old as the trees around her, she would die, leaving only her

bare, white bones to be found.

She sighed and opened the door. The dogs leapt on her with complete and utter canine joy. And smell.

“Oh get down, you stupid dogs, get down.” Christina pushed them down which only made them happier. “Okay, fine,” she sighed. “Yes, I’m happy to see you too.” She knelt down and let one snuffle under her chin while she rubbed the other behind her ears. “Hey, no licking.” She pushed two cold wet noses away, trying not to inhale too deeply. “Where’s Auntie Dot then, hey dogs? Where’s Dottie? Where’s Dottie, doggies?”

Christina stood up, rubbing her hands on her jeans. The smell wasn’t so bad from up here. She took off her jacket and half-heartedly shook some dog hair off it before hanging it up.

She quite liked the two Scotties, but she hated how they smelled, of indigestion and old bathwater. Christina always noticed how people and places smelled, and knew right away whether she would like them or not. School smelled of frozen peas and dirty socks – not exactly pleasant but not horrible, although the art classroom mostly smelled of the beach in winter and lemons. Her father smelled of cloves, cotton and old books — except when he was sad, when he smelled of wet leaves. Home was fresh sawdust, rusty nails and apple peelings. Her mother had smelled of freshly sharpened pencils, bread and butter and dried roses. But she had never managed to work out what she herself smelled like, and that worried her sometimes. She hoped she smelled of nice things.

The two scruffy brown dogs went back to slumping on the couch. Now that they were quiet, she took a deep breath and listened to the house. The clock ticked loudly and unevenly. The radiators pinged. The upstairs window, the broken one, rattled in the

November wind. The refrigerator, as if in answer, rattled as it turned off. Home sounds – but with that almost imaginary extra falling echo that only exists when you're home alone.

“Dad?” she yelled. She waited a moment. “Aunt Dot?” she yelled, a little louder. “Anybody here?” There was no answer. “Phooey,” said Christina softly. Then she said it again, louder. “PHOOEY!” The silence after her shout only made the house seem emptier.

Christina walked to the kitchen, the dogs' eyes following her. “You know you're not supposed to be on the couch, right? Dad would have a fit.” She wrinkled her nose as she spied the familiar envelope on the kitchen table. “If he were here.”

She sniffed the envelope for lingering traces of her father's comforting smell, and then opened her letter.

Christina-mia, I'm sorry I couldn't wait to say good-bye. I'll be back by Friday and then I'll be at home the rest of the month, I promise. Aunt Dot will stay with you while I'm away, and you know how she gets – so be nice and mind your P's and Q's and whatever other letters she wants you to mind.

Christina giggled a little and then stopped before it turned into a sob.

I'll call if I can but I don't know what the phone service is going to be like out here. Don't wait up for it. I love you. xoxo Daddy

Christina folded the letter up carefully. “I bet there aren't any cookies, either,” she said out loud. She and Dad had planned to bake some that afternoon. She reached anyway for the heavy red jar, planning to scoop out the mixed crumbs of old cookies. Inside were a fresh batch of hermits, her favorite, and a paper heart. She pulled it out and read it.

Sweets for the sweet. See you soon, cara mia. She wondered when her father had baked them and felt a little bad for being cross at him.

She ate two cookies, taking in their soft spiciness and the sweetness of the raisins. Then she drank the last swallows of milk from the carton.

The front door banged open and immediately the dogs threw themselves off the couch and into a fit of hysterical barking. “Missy Chrissy? Chrissmiss? You home from school yet?” Aunt Dottie’s voice easily cut through the yammering dogs. Christina sighed. She hated being called Chrissmiss, Missy Chrissy or really, anything but Christina. But before she called back, she made her face smile. You could always hear in someone’s voice whether they were smiling or not and Aunt Dot would know if she weren’t smiling. And would want to Talk About It.

“Hi, Aunt Dot,” she called, stopping to stuff the milk carton into the trash and then heading towards the noise.

“Chris, come and help me carry the groceries in. Your father left us with almost nothing to eat. I don’t know. He’s always going places. Not that I mind coming to see my little Chrissy, of course, but when he called I was in the middle of a yoga class and I nearly slipped a disc reaching for my phone which at my age is no small thing, I can tell you. I keep the ringer turned up so I can hear it, my ears not being what they were, but in that huge room with all of us chanting, it sounded like the last trumpet. But I know your father so I keep a bag packed so he called and I left and here I am. Yes, I am, yes I am, good girl, oh what a good girl, yes you are. Yes you are.”

This last, Christina realized, was said to the dogs, but it was pretty close, really, to the noises Aunt Dot made as she swamped Christina with a hug and ruffled her hair and

pulled her shirt back into place. “How you doing, Missy Chrissy?”

“I’m fine, Aunt Dot,” Christina said, pulling away as politely as she could.

“Not home long? Not too lonely?” Aunt Dot was shooing the dogs back to the couch. Her pale grey hair clung to her head like fog on a mountain. “That’s good,” she continued, not waiting for an answer. “Come on. I got the boy at the supermarket to put them in the car for me. Can’t be carrying these heavy bags around at my age.” She took Christina’s arm in a grip that would have dented a marble statue and led her outside.

Aunt Dot’s car was a huge, cream colored 1973 Chevy Impala that was wider than most buses. She drove it like a bus too, taking corners in a great sweeping arc like a queen entering a ballroom, assuming that other, meeker cars would just have to get out of her way. Now it was docked in front of Christina’s house with the trunk wide open and the occasional car respectfully snaking past.

“I bought chicken for supper. You like chicken,” said Dot as she strode down to the curb.

“Yes, Aunt Dot, I like chicken fine. I hope you got milk, though, because we’re out.” Smugly, Dot handed Christina two gallon jugs of milk. She lugged them up to the

house and put them into the fridge. When she came back, she found Aunt Dot leaning on her car and eyeballing the house next door. Despite the cold, the front door stood wide open and as they watched, the dark-haired woman Christina had seen earlier came out, a pile of sheets in her arms. She started to shake them out, one by one, scattering dust into the wind.

Aunt Dot harrumphed. “New neighbors?”

“I guess.” The girl appeared from behind the house and ran through the front

door, almost tripping her mother.

“Squatters, probably.”

“They have a key,” said Christina, feeling weirdly defensive of this mother and daughter. “I saw it.”

Aunt Dot flicked her a sour glance. “You’re so sharp, you’ll cut yourself. Can’t imagine where they got it, then. That house was empty when your parents moved you here. I told them it was a bad idea to buy a house next to a derelict old place like that. You’ll be stuck here forever, I told them. Never be able to sell it. No one will want to live next door to some abandoned shack.”

“Actually, I like it,” said Christina, wishing she didn’t sound so sulky. “It never felt abandoned. More like it was waiting for its owners to come back. Like it was holding its breath.” She swallowed. “Mom liked it too. She called it Hawthorne House.”

Her aunt sniffed. Christina gritted her teeth. There was no point in arguing. They both watched as the black-haired girl reappeared in the front door waving a huge, old-fashioned feather duster and ran, hollering and whooping, towards the back yard again.

“Someone should put a jacket on that child. Catch her death out here,” said Aunt Dot. She handed Christina another bag, slammed the trunk so hard the car bounced and headed up towards the house. Christina hefted the plastic bag. There was some leafy thing poking out of the top and she’d bet anything there was tofu at the bottom. She turned and started up the driveway towards the delighted cacophony of the dogs, but listening to the distant sound of whooping.