

THE FUGITIVE FAIRY

BY FRANCESCA AMENDOLIA

Chapter One

Abby closed the screen door so carefully there was hardly a click. It still sounded loud. Everything did in those breath-holding minutes before dawn. She paused, her hand still on the door, listening for any sound from the sleeping house.

Nothing stirred. Not even her wake-with-the-sun parents. Abby almost laughed but stopped herself. She was never the first one up. Only this day. Only once a year.

The concrete stoop was cold under her bare feet and her skin prickled with goosebumps. Jumping off the steps, she ran lightly across the gravel path and onto the cool, soft grass beyond, past the tomato and basil plants, over the rough, dry stone wall and into the back field, to the little rise that was the highest point on the farm.

Above, the sky glowed. To her left, a field sloped down until it met the stream. And in front of her, stretching from her feet to the shadows of the trees, dozens of rows of strawberry plants fanned out.

Abby bent down and buried her hands in the damp earth, little clods of earth and tiny pebbles rubbing against her skin. All around her hung the earthy tang of ripening berries. She closed her eyes and breathed it in deeply. It smelled of long hot days, empty and exciting as Christmas stockings on Christmas Eve. She clenched her hands and gripped handfuls of dirt. Mine, she thought. It wasn't quite true, she knew, but right now, she was the only one awake and she could pretend Strawberry Fields Farm was hers and hers alone. She dug her toes into the dirt, pushing them down.

And now she wouldn't have to waste time going to school. Not for a while, anyway. "Summer," she whispered. "It's summer." Later this morning she'd paint the small stand. She and George were going to finish the tree house. This summer she would finally manage to dam the stream and make a pool deep enough to swim in. Maybe Dad would even let her drive the tractor and there would be piles and piles of strawberries.

Abby opened her eyes as the sun leapt into the sky. She felt her heart leap in answer and her body followed. Whooping, she threw her hands into the air and jumped for joy.

And caught it.

Not that she knew she'd caught joy, not at first. At the top of her leap, her hand brushed something solid and simply closed around it, like catching a fly ball she couldn't quite see.

Right away, she knew she'd never held anything like it before. It wasn't an insect. She knew how it felt to hold their fragile, almost unnoticeable weight. But it wasn't a bird or an animal either.

Abby opened her hand and froze, her breath hot as noon. Around her, the birds were waking up and chattering madly to one another. Somewhere a cicada rattled its chainsaw buzz and a screen door slammed.

She barely heard any of it because on her palm sat a muttering, rumped, red-faced little figure. He had angry blue eyes, bright yellow hair and wore a long, golden tunic over filthy rubber boots and muddy tan trousers. He scowled up at her and pointedly rubbed his head. Then he pulled a tatty blue knitted cap down over his ears, just covering their tiny pointed tops. "Well?" he yelled. "What are you staring at, you massive great

oaf? And shut your mouth. Do you think I like seeing that huge red yaw so close to my poor frightened self?"

Abby shut her mouth. Then she opened it again. Then she shut it again. He pinched the skin of her palm impatiently. "What's wrong with you anyway?"

"What are you?" she managed at last.

The small creature squinted up at her in suspicious amazement. "What do you think I am?"

Abby brought her hand a bit closer to her face. He was almost exactly like a tiny person. Well, there were his ears of course. And his eyes were maybe a bit big and his nose a bit long and his skin was the palest shade of green imaginable. He stared right back at her, and he didn't look like he was enjoying the view. "I - I don't know what you are. I've never seen anything like you before." The little man raised an eyebrow and sniffed noisily. "Are you a gnome?"

"Am I a WHAT?" he shrieked so loudly Abby started. She felt small hands dig painfully into the skin of her palm and yelped.

"Ow, stop that."

"And let you fling me away like a used tissue?"

Abby gritted her teeth. "I'm not going to fling you anywhere."

"That's what you say. If I hadn't saved myself I'd be smush on the ground and you'd have to clean up the mess. Or maybe you'd just leave my poor broken body for the vultures to pick at. Gnome," he muttered darkly. "Seriously. Do I look like a gnome?"

"I said I was sorry. Please let go. You've got really sharp nails."

He loosened his grip slightly. "You could just put me down."

“But if I put you down, you’ll just run away.”

“I wish.” He took off his hat, blew his nose into it and put it back on his head.

“You caught me. I’m yours now.”

“Mine? My what?” In the distance, Abby could hear whistling. Her father was doing his morning rounds of the fields.

“Your fairy.”

“What?” The whistling was getting closer.

He sighed, a deep, weary huff, and Abby blushed hotly. “Fairy Law states, very clearly, that me, fairy, am in service to you, giant human dolt, until I render you some great service or otherwise discharge my obligation to you, blah blah, don’t bother asking about treasure, there isn’t none.”

“You’re my fairy?” Abby’s brain felt like clay. Her thoughts had to tunnel up to the surface.

“The girl’s not got the brains she was born with,” the little man muttered, wiggling one finger into his ear so energetically Abby heard little sucking squeaks as it rummaged around. “Yes,” he said again, very slowly. “Your faaaaaairy. Are you deaf as well as dense?”

Abby shook her head. There was no such thing as fairies, never mind her crazy older sister Nan and her collection of chiffon wings. “I heard you. I just didn’t believe you.”

He smirked up at her. “Oh yes you did. If you didn’t believe me, you wouldn’t be able to see me, so there. Try pulling the other leg. Now put me down and if you have any soup about your person, I’m a bit hungry after all that explaining.”

“Abby? What are you doing here?”

Abby jumped, and thrust her hand into her pocket, curving her fingers protectively around the little figure. Then she turned around. “Hi Dad,” she said as casually as she could manage.

“You’re up early.” Her father had a huge coffee mug in his hand, blue, with a chipped rim and green letters spelling out I DIG DIRT. “Oh wait. I know. It’s the first day of summer vacation and this is your yearly dawn pilgrimage.”

“Right.” Abby winced as the struggling fairy jabbed her hard in the thigh. Her father gave her a considering look.

“What have you got in your pocket?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh,” said her father. “Is it anything I should be worried about? It’s not another field mouse, is it? Because your mother will have a fit, you know.”

Abby chose to answer the second question. “No, definitely not.”

“You remember what a mess the last one made?”

“I remember.”

“And you know they’re really happier outside.”

“Dad! I know.”

“Mmm.” He took a swig of coffee, eyeing her over the rim. “Well, anyway. I’m going to look at the north field. Want to come?” Any other time Abby would have jumped at the chance. But if whatever it was in her pocket started yelling any louder, her dad would hear it. “Um, no thanks. I’ve – um – I think I hear Mom calling me.”

She turned and ran towards the house as hard as she could while still keeping her

hand cupped around the fairy. She banged through the screen door, ignored her mother's shouted reminder not to slam the door and took the stairs two at a time. Safe in her room, she pulled her hand out of her pocket and put the struggling creature down on her desk.

He immediately fell over in a small heap and started moaning.

"Are you all right?"

He opened one eye. "Where am I?"

"In my room. I'm really sorry about putting you in my pocket." Abby bit her lip.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm not quite dead, if that's what you mean. If you really want to finish me off, try sticking me in a vise and cranking."

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Abby wanted to pick him up again, to gently check his limbs for breaks or his skin for scrapes like she would any small creature that seemed hurt, but she didn't quite dare.

"If I'm not, it's no thanks to you."

"I really am sorry," Abby said. His face softened a tiny bit. "All right, there's no harm done. This time." He got up, put his hands in the small of his back and stretched, groaning dramatically. Then he started pulling at the rumped gold tunic until it looked like someone had wound him in a bed sheet and then rolled him downhill. He had a bag slung across his chest, which he struggled to disentangle from his clothing. It was a long and complicated process and gave Abby plenty of time to think.

So he was a fairy. Okay. Abby had never thought much about fairies or elves or... or whatever else was like fairies or elves. That was Nan's thing.

Abby didn't have time for reading fairy stories. There was always too much to do.

There were her pets and frogs and knitting and running and her strawberry patch out back and baseball and rocketships and the weather station she was building in the tree house in George's yard and a hundred other things.

But she'd always thought you might as well believe in things until they were absolutely proven to be wrong. Like the moon being made of cheese or Australians walking upside down. So. Fairies were real. And now she had one stalking around her desk, poking through her rock collection. He noticed her staring and shot her a sharp look. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"What do you mean, what am I waiting for?"

"I distinctly remember asking for soup. Get on it with it!"

"I don't have any soup," said Abby.

He sighed heavily. "I should have known it was too much to hope for." He kicked a pile of pebbles. "Load of rubbish these." He picked up another rock and rapped it with his knuckles before tossing it over his shoulder.

Below it was a black jellybean she'd avoided eating. "What's this?" He sniffed it carefully, then, eyes bright as headlights, licked it. "Licorice!" He jumped six inches into the air. "Hooray and hooboy and hotdiggity!"

He lunged mouth-first at the smooth black bean. His teeth barely made a dent in the tough sugar shell and the bean skittered away from him. He threw himself after it with a loud cry of "Come back here, you!" and landed on top of it. It slipped out from under him like wet soap and again, the fairy went after it. He chased it around the desk for a few minutes before finally managing to gnaw a hole in the shell. He happily settled down to stuffing his face with gobs of black jellybean innards.

He looked at her appraisingly between mouthfuls. “You’re a very young giant. How old are you?”

“Eleven.” Only just, but she didn’t have to tell him that.

The fairy started. “A baby! What’s a baby like you doing sitting around by yourself?”

“I am not a baby! Anyway, how old are you?”

“Me? Oh I don’t know exactly. About a hundred and forty or so. Give or take.”

Abby squinted at him again. He didn’t look even close to that old. Abby’s grandmother was only sixty-something and she had a cane. “A hundred and forty? Really? Are all fairies as old as you?”

“I’m not old!” He was clearly offended. “I have all my teeth, see?” He bared his tiny teeth at her. They were flecked with bits of black jellybean.

“Well then, how old do fairies get?”

“Werrrl, if nothing untoward happens – like getting caught by a wee baby giant without a brain cell to spare – about seven, eight hundred.”

Abby ignored the insult. What had been happening in Pennsylvania seven hundred years ago? Indians, maybe. She would have liked to see Indians. “Wow. You must get to see a lot.”

The little man smiled smugly. “You’ve no idea.” Then he carried on eating.

Abby put her chin on the desk so they were more or less eye to eye. “Is the jelly bean enough or do you still want soup?” she said.

He barely looked up. “What? No, this will do for now. You may provide soup later,” he added gravely. The little fairy’s face was shiny with sugar and his hair was

sticking up, caked with clumps of half-chewed jellybean goop.

She watched him a moment longer. “What’s your name?”

To her amazement, the little man blushed. It wasn’t a small blush either, not a slight flush but a tomato-red sheen that traveled up from his neck right over his face and burrowed into his hair, which turned almost orange in the reflected glow. He stopped eating and picked at the edge of his robe so intently the hem began to unravel.

“...” he muttered.

“What?” Abby craned her head to hear him better.

“I’m Joy,” he whispered. She shook her head. “Argh!” he shouted and threw down the bit of robe he had been twisting and knotting. It would have looked more dramatic if he were less sticky. Instead, it clung to his hands and he angrily flung his hands this way and that, trying shake off the golden threads he’d been pulling out. He gave up and waved his fists at her like pom-poms. “Joy!” he shouted. “All right? I’m Joy. Got that? Happy golden sparkles and feelings of la la la and all warm glowing ooh so oodly oodly happy all over. That’s me. Joy joy joy. All right? Happy now?”