

FINDING FAIRYLAND 2: LAURA'S TURN

Ch. 1 Oak Leaves & Green Beans

Laura poked at a clump of leaves with the stick she held in her mittened hand. When she found nothing, she grunted "Figures" and continued on. She looked down as she walked, ignoring the leafless trees, the chattering birds, and all the other sights along the path.

When she had first come outside into the December afternoon, Laura had taken off the knit hat her mother made her wear and stuffed it into her coat pocket. Her brown hair, thick and curly, was pulled back in a ponytail, though a few strands had come loose during her walk. It was late in the afternoon and she'd been searching around in the woods for more than an hour. She was cold without the hat but she didn't want to always do what her mother said. She had her jacket zipped up as high as it would go to keep out the chill.

The fourteen-year-old walked along the trail and prodded leaves on the ground and at small shrubs. Now and then she kicked a fallen branch or rock with the toe of her boot and turned it over. Every time she saw a bush, though most of them were bare of leaves, she probed under the branches and looked beneath them, searching.

"How long are you going to keep this up?" the girl walking just behind her asked. She too was bundled against the cold, a knit hat on her head and her hands stuck in her pockets.

"Until I find something," Laura answered, not looking back at her friend.

"What do you think you'll find out here?" the other girl asked. "You've looked along these trails over and over again. We've wandered all through your family's woods every time I've been over for the past three months. You even made me sit on that hill for hours. But you never gave me a good reason. It's a weird way to get away from your family. What are you looking for?"

"A way to fairyland," answered Laura who was now examining a hole in the trunk of a large tree.

"You're kidding," the other girl said and stopped. "I thought you were joking when you said that. Are you as goofy as your sister?"

"Look, Hannah," Laura said spinning around and facing her friend. "If Julia went to fairyland, I should be able to go too. Do you want to help me or not? If you do, you'll be able to go with me."

"You believe in fairies?" Hannah asked, lifting her chin above the collar of her coat. She pulled her left hand out of her pocket and rubbed at her red-rimmed nose. "That there are little people who run around in the woods?" Hannah smiled. "Dancing and singing and flying on little wings?"

Laura nodded her head at her friend, angry at first, but then she grinned. "Yes, I do believe. Maybe not as much as Julia did before she went. But I know they exist. And that fairyland is real, too."

Hannah walked up to her friend and looked her directly in the eyes. "You believe she really went there?"

"Yeah," answered Laura returning Hannah's gaze. "Yes, I do." She turned and continued along the path. The trail started to climb up a hill and she used the stick to help herself along. She looked ahead at the pine trees that covered the top of the rise, dark and green even in the bare winter woods. When she didn't hear her friend following her, Laura stopped and looked back.

Hannah stood in the middle of the trail, her hands in her pockets and her shoulders scrunched up to her ears. Little puffs of white floated away from her each time she breathed out.

"What?" Laura called back.

"You don't think it's just a story the two of them made up to get attention?" Hannah called up

to Laura.

"No, I don't" Laura answered. "She wouldn't lie about it."

"Why not?" Hannah asked, still standing there.

Laura knew her friend was thinking about going back to the house and not following her out to the woods. When Laura didn't respond, Hannah continued.

"If she doesn't want to look stupid to other people. The way she was always poking around at rocks and trees. Looking in holes for fairy nests. She'd make up a story and get McKenna to go along with it."

"She didn't" Laura answered and shook her head at the thought. Julia was too caught up in fairies, too wild about them to lie about her trip to fairyland. It had to be real.

"What are fairy nests anyway?" Hannah asked.

Laura ignored the question and instead asked loudly "What about the leaf? You saw it."

Hannah started to walk toward Laura, shaking her head. "In a frame. Behind the glass," she huffed as she strode up the hill. "She could have painted it."

"That isn't paint," Laura answered matter-of-factly. "My mom said so. She looked at it under a microscope at her office." Laura watched her friend approach, her head down looking at the path.

Hannah stopped as she caught up to Laura. She stood just below her on the hill. Hannah tilted her head and squinted her eyes as if examining something closely. "Your mom believes in fairies? She believes Julia?"

"Yes, why not?" Laura answered. "They exist. They're around us. Somewhere in the woods. Though I can't seem to find them." She looked around to the left and right, then back at Hannah. "But they are there."

"Do you have proof?" Hannah asked. Laura opened her mouth to speak but Hannah said quickly "Besides the leaf and Julia's story."

Laura closed her mouth and turned to continue up the hill. As she did, she remembered something her mother had said and paused. She looked over her shoulder. Hannah was still standing there.

"You don't have to believe in something for it to be real," she said. "It just is."

Hannah shook her head. She hunched her shoulders again and walked up to the other girl. "Now you sound like your mother," she said and grinned. "I'll help you look for a half hour more, then I want to go inside. I'm freezing." Hannah strode toward the top of the hill.

Laura grinned and followed her.

Once into the stand of pines, Laura left the trail and wandered along on the rust-red needle covered ground. Hannah followed the path to where a tree was down and, her hands still in her pockets, bent and looked under the brown and orange trunk and around the dirt-caked roots. She worked her way to the branches and out from under the cover of the other pines.

Laura found two old, dried mushrooms near one tree. She searched the ground for a ring of the fungus, a fairy ring like Julia had found. Except for twigs and a few leaves, there was nothing else in the needles, no mushrooms or fairy ring.

Laura circled beneath the group of trees until she was near the roots of the fallen pine Hannah had examined. She was going to say something to her friend when she heard snapping branches behind her. She looked around, thinking maybe Julia or her mother had come out looking for them, but no one was there.

Then Laura felt a smack at the back of her head and a bunch of green oak leaves fell over her shoulders. She spun around and saw Hannah standing looking at her, her eyes wide.

"What'd you do that for?" Laura asked.

Hannah didn't say anything, she just shook her head.

Laura glanced down at the ground. The pointy-edged green leaves stood out against the or-

ange of the needle carpet. She bent and picked up a handful. She looked back at Hannah and wondered where she had found green oak leaves in December.

"Where'd you get these?" she asked, moving toward her friend.

"I didn't," Hannah answered. "I didn't do it. They just came at you from between those two trees. Like they fell or the wind blew them or something."

Laura looked at the trees Hannah had indicated. "You didn't throw these?" she said holding the leaves in her left hand toward her friend. The other girl shook her head. Laura stuck her free hand under her armpit and pulled off her mitten. She touched the leaves. They were warm, like they had been in the sun all day. Not like they had been out in the cold, wintery air.

"Between," she said. She was remembering things that Julia and McKenna had told her. She smiled. "Between."

"What?" Hannah asked.

"Between," repeated Laura and bobbed her head up and down. "It figures."

"What?" Hannah asked again, looking back and forth from the trees to Laura standing there smiling.

Laura didn't answer. She walked toward the two pines that Hannah had pointed out. She stopped in front of them and looked left and right like she was waiting to cross a street. Taking a long step forward, Laura walked between the evergreen trunks, closing her eyes as she did.

When she opened them, she was on the other side of the two trees, still in the pine woods. Slowly, she turned around to see if maybe it was in a different forest.

There was Hannah, standing near the edge of the little woods, looking at Laura with her mouth open and a questioning look on her face.

"Are you crazy or something?" Hannah asked. "What are you doing?"

Laura sighed and shook her head. She looked at the leaves that she still clenched. She was about to throw them away when she decided to keep them and stuffed them into her coat pocket.

"What's going on?" Hannah asked as she strode over to Laura. "What is this about 'between'?"

"A lot of ways to fairyland have to do with betweens," Laura explained. "Like between night and day or between seasons. Between things too. Like between the trees and the field or on a little hill between the earth and sky."

Hannah looked at her. Laura lifted her hands up to indicate the trees. "Or between trees. At least that's what I thought."

"You thought you were going to fairyland?" Hannah asked and then laughed.

"Yes," Laura answered, grumpily. "Since the leaves came from between the trees I thought it might be a way there. Like we were getting invited in."

Hannah walked away, still laughing. "Come on, Laura. You can't mean you thought we were about to go to fairyland. Did you see a fairy? I didn't see anyone flitting by."

"No, but I'm sure I know who it was," Laura said to her friend's back. Then she said louder "I think it was a friend of Julia's. Playing a joke on me."

Hannah stopped and then sat down on the trunk of the fallen pine. "Who are you talking to?" she asked.

"Jennall. I think she threw them," answered Laura. "The bookman's daughter. She's a wood sprite."

"Where is she?" Hannah looked around warily, like she expected someone to jump out from behind one of the trees.

"She's not going to let me see her," Laura answered in a loud voice. "She never lets me see her."

Hannah snorted. "Are you talking about the fairy Julia made up?"

"She isn't made up," Laura said in a normal voice, but exasperated with Hannah for not understanding. "She's the one who took them to fairyland."

When her friend just stared at her, Laura went on. "She's been doing stuff like this for months. She leaves things for Julia on our porch, funny leaves and rocks and stuff. Once she filled my mother's flower beds full of dandelions. Another time she left a trail of sticks that Julia and I followed. But they just led to a patch of poison ivy. She plays pranks on us to let us know she's around."

"And she's a fairy and the daughter of the guy who runs the bookstore?" Hannah asked, raising her eyebrows at the thought.

"Yes," said Laura. She walked over and sat next to Hannah.

"Is he a fairy?" her friend continued.

"No. We don't know for sure," answered Laura. "Maybe. My mom says there's more to it than what we might understand. She says you never can be sure about anything that has to do with the fairy folk."

"She says that, huh?" Hannah said and bumped her shoulder against Laura's, knocking her slightly off balance. Laura laughed and pushed back. "It sounds like something she got out of one of Julia's fairy books," Hannah added and stood up, pushing Laura again and then taking a few quick steps to get away.

She turned back to face her friend and said, grinning, "It sounds like you are all reading too many fairy stories."

Before Laura could say anything, another bunch of leaves flew out from between a different set of trees and hit Hannah in the back of the head, knocking her forward. The leaves exploded in the air around the girl and then fell fluttering to the ground like snowflakes.

Hannah gaped up at Laura who held out her empty hands, shook her head and grinned. "It wasn't me. Now you're getting the fairies mad."

Hannah half-spun as she tried to look in every direction at once, trying to see who it was that had thrown the leaves.

"You're not kidding," she said and ran over to Laura. She grabbed her friend's shoulder and looked around. "They're really here?" she whispered.

Laura grinned and said "Now do you believe me?"

"Let's get out of here," Hannah said. "If I say I believe you, will you go?"

Laura laughed and grabbed the other girl by the elbow. "You have to tell Julia you believe her, too," she said. Hannah nodded, and Laura stood up and pulled her friend back across the hilltop in the direction they had come.

"Good job, Jennall," Laura called out just before they stepped out of the trees. "You convinced Hannah. But why won't you let me visit?" Laura looked around the pine wood.

The trees were silent.

She turned with Hannah and the two ran back to the house.

"It's not fair," Laura pouted. She was leaning her head on her left hand, elbow on the counter, and pushing green beans around on her plate with her fork.

Hannah had left earlier and now it was just the three of them -- Laura, her mother and Julia -- eating dinner. Laura's mother and sister had been talking about an astronomy project they had been working on before dinner.

"What isn't?" her mother asked, looking up from her own nearly empty plate. "Don't you like the green beans?"

"It's not fair," Laura said and sat up. "Why Julia got to go to fairyland and I've been trying for months and nothing. And Jennall is teasing me, now. Her or some other fairies."

Laura had told her mother what happened out in the woods and showed her the oak leaves. They sat in a bowl on the counter between them.

Her mother pursed her lips like she was thinking. She reached out and took one of the sharp-

edged leaves and held it in front of her, twisting it around by the stem.

Julia giggled.

"And her laughing is driving me crazy," Laura complained. She and her mother looked at Julia who smiled.

"What?" the younger girl asked. "I didn't do anything." And she giggled again.

"Don't be angry with your sister," her mother said. "She went the one time and that was special."

Julia coughed and her mother stopped and glanced at her.

"Swallowed wrong," Julia choked out and giggled.

"Chew more carefully," her mother said, then looked back over at Laura.

She set the leaf down and leaned toward her oldest daughter. She paused. "It's not. You're not," she said haltingly. "It's a special thing to get to go to fairyland. That's true. But I know you're going to get to go sometime. I'm sure of it."

Julia giggled again and when Laura looked at her, the younger sister nodded, agreeing with their mother.

"What do you know?" Laura said.

"Now don't blame her," their mother said. "She wants you to go to, I'm sure." She reached her hand over to Julia and patted her on the head. Julia giggled.

"See what I mean? She giggles all the time," Laura said and dropped her fork onto her plate. "All the time. And when she and McKenna get together it's even worse."

"They're just happy," her mother said. "They enjoy things, they have fun. Talking. Drawing pictures of fairies. Playing. Life. I want you both to be happy. I like it when you laugh, too."

"It's because they've been to fairyland," Laura said. She looked down at her plate, picked up her fork, and then tossed it down again.

Her mother sighed. "They laughed before that."

"But more now," Laura said.

Julia started to giggle again but her mother cut her off, saying, "Why don't you run upstairs and get the paper we need?"

Julia stood and looked at Laura as if she were going to say something but then only smiled and ran off and up the stairs.

"Look," their mother said when Julia was gone. "Don't get upset about it. Remember to have a good attitude. It always helps and I'm sure it helps more with the fairies. They can tell if you're impatient with them or angry."

Laura leaned forward and put her elbows on the counter and rested her head on her fists.

"I know," Laura said. "You say it all the time. But she's not supposed to. I'm." She stopped.

Her mother smiled. She stood up and walked around the counter to Laura and put her arms on her daughter's shoulders. "She's the little sister," she said and pulled Laura toward her. Laura resisted but her mother pulled a little harder. Laura gave in and leaned into her mother's hug.

"But do you want to do everything your sister does?" she asked. "I know it sounds strange, usually it's the other way around. She wants to follow you everywhere, do what you do. And you complain about her tagging along."

Her mother laughed a little, then kissed Laura on the top of her head. "You wouldn't be a normal older sister if you didn't."

She let her daughter go, then reached down and took her face in her hands, turning Laura so that they could look each other in the eyes.

"You each have your own lives to lead, your own paths to follow," she said, smiling at Laura. "You'll find yours as you grow. That's all I wish for you. For both of you. To find your path in life and be happy. If that path leads you sometime to fairyland too, then fantastic."

She paused and Laura started to say something but she cut her off. "I know you will go, though. I'm sure someone will invite you and you will have your own adventure."

Smiling, she pulled Laura toward her and kissed her forehead. Laura closed her eyes briefly as she did. When she opened them, she smiled up at her mother.

Her mother went back around to her seat and sat down, picking up her fork.

"When?" asked Laura.

"I don't know. It could be any time," her mother answered. She reached over and jabbed at the vegetables on her daughter's plate. She sat back and waved the forkful of beans at Laura like a wand.

"I know, why don't you talk to the bookman?" she suggested, then put the beans in her mouth.

"When?" Laura asked, then grinned. "I can never go there without Julia following me."