

DESTINY: THE BLOOD MOON SERIES BOOK 2

By Aimee Oswald Sellars

Preface

My mother always said troubles travel in threes. I was really starting to hate the number three.

First, I find out I've got a knack for magic and summon two hot guys I've been bound to for over two centuries. I could hear my best friend Katy now: "And that's a problem because?" Maybe it had something to do with the fact that one of them, Keegan, is a fae who tried to kill me in a previous lifetime and, under the right circumstances, might try to kill me again. The other one, Tristan, may be my twin flame, you know, the mother-of-all-loves, but I can't be sure if it's the real deal or just the effects of the binding spell. Turns out, there was a teensy problem with the unbinding ritual. The dagger that bound Tristan, Keegan, and me was forged by the Finfolk, a group of dark and powerful sorcerers. Only a dagger forged by their magic can release us. So much for a Ginsu knife from Target.

All of this because I craved more excitement in my life. Between my ill-advised spellcasting, a birthday wish that should've come with its own warning, and breaking the seal on a binding spell against dear old dad, I'd created the perfect storm. So, while all my friends were busy filling out college applications, I was trying to find a way to undo a centuries old spell, not to mention the unrequited love curse that had Keegan in its grip.

But hey, how much worse could things get? I was about to find out. A lot.

Chapter One

Come away....
To the waters and the wild
With a faery hand in hand
For the world's more full of weeping
Than you can understand

William Butler Yeats

Cedarburg, Wisconsin 2017

Feeling deflated and defeated by the failure, not to mention the total fiasco, of the unbinding ceremony, I dropped Tristan and Keegan off at the school parking lot. I replayed Nichnevan's words over and over in my mind on the drive home. According to her, I was the lucky recipient

of not one but two curses. So much for good things coming in pairs. It seemed that Alexandra's runes were right; mysteries and secrets were about to unfold.

Part of that included learning the truth about my own family history. Then, of course, there were the new twists. Like what Nichnevan had said about Tristan: "Musician, there's more to you than meets the eye." And what was I to make of her cryptic fortune cookie about Keegan: "One with eyes of green and blue, freedom's price, your karmic dues." The biggest bomb, though, had to be the mention of a prophecy. Seemed like most prophecies involved travel or a quest of some sort. My rune reading came to mind once more. The last rune I'd drawn, which represented my future, was Raidho, symbolic of journeys or travel. The only travel on my radar was my trip to New York to compete for a scholarship to the Pratt Institute. Right, like I had time for some quest. For now, I clung to Nichnevan's words of promise, that although our fates were cast, our destinies were up to us. Our destinies hinged on the choices we made. As Alexandra warned: "Choices have consequences." Didn't I know it.

I climbed the stairs to my room and looked out the window at the waning gibbous moon. Our window of opportunity to remove the spell was gone for another twenty-eight days. It might as well have been a lifetime. Getting an unbinding dagger from the Finfolk seemed improbable at best. I didn't want to contemplate the worst.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. It felt as if someone were standing behind me. Someone whispered my name. I spun around but there was no one there. As I paced back and forth, I still couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me. Something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I stopped in front of my dresser. My eyes were drawn once again to the strange signature on the painting Jesse had given to me on my birthday back in September. It was still hard to believe my life had taken such a major detour less than two short months ago.

This time something clicked. The signature made sense now. These *were* letters. Letters from the runic alphabet. I grabbed a pen and paper from my desk, replaying my runes reading with Alexandra in my mind. The runic letters danced before my eyes. I scribbled down each corresponding letter of the alphabet. I stopped and stared at the letters—C R E V A N. The paper slipped through my hands. Crevan. The loser who'd left my mother pregnant and alone.

I peered into the painting and stumbled backwards, almost falling to the floor. My father's face stared back at me from the painting.

"I've been waiting for you, my dear."

Chapter Two

The Realm of Fairy is a strange shadow land,
lying just beyond the fields we know.

Author Unknown

My lips trembled as they struggled to form a single word. I fought to catch a breath as my heart thumped erratically in my chest. A strangled sound rose in my throat, giving way to a voice that was half-wail, half-scream.

“Mom, Mom, MOM!”

Footsteps, lightning fast, flew up the stairs and down the hall to my room. My mom and Dolya stood in my bedroom doorway, wild eyed and breathless as they surveyed my room.

“What is it? What’s happened, Renny?”

I searched for words but couldn’t summon any. I closed my eyes and raised my arm, steadying it with my other hand as I pointed a finger at the canvas. The floorboards creaked as Dolya and my mom walked across the floor. Silence, followed by two exasperated sighs.

“For heaven’s sake, Renny, what’s gotten into you? You’ve half scared the life out of your mother and me,” Dolya said as she wrung her apron. I opened my eyes and stared at the canvas in disbelief. There was no evidence of Crevan or the glowing runic letters.

I walked up and jabbed the canvas with my finger. Any fear had dissolved and given way to white-hot anger. “There, right there. It glowed and it was spelled out in the runic alphabet,” I said as I rubbed my eyes.

“And what exactly was *it*?” my mom asked.

I turned and glared at my mom. “A name.”

Her eyebrows formed two matching peaks as she stared at me and shrugged.

I handed my mom the piece of paper I’d used to decipher the letters. The paper that contained one name spelled out in bold, black letters. CREVAN. Mom grabbed hold of Dolya to steady herself. She handed Dolya the paper, shaking her head back and forth. “No, no, no, that’s impossible. It couldn’t be. We made sure of it, didn’t we?” Eyes wet with tears, she looked at Dolya for assurance. Dolya smiled and squeezed her hand. “Yes, years ago, dearie, years ago.”

For a brief moment, I was overcome by a twinge of guilt. I’d undone the binding spell that day in our springhouse, a place I’d been forbidden to go. Overcome by curiosity, I’d opened the door to something more than just an old stone shack. Little did I realize it was really a tiny

tomb where family secrets and lies were buried. It was there I'd stumbled across the aged vellum scroll tied and knotted in black threads. And it was there that I'd broken the ties of the binding spell, and undone the only protection my mother had against Crevan. My cheeks grew hot as my guilt morphed into indignation.

"It's all your fault, Mom. If you'd only trusted me. If you'd told me the truth instead of keeping secrets, none of this would've happened. You had no right to keep all this from me," I yelled. "I had a right to know."

"Renny, calm down. I don't appreciate your tone. I was trying to protect you." She came and wrapped her arms around me like protective armor. "I did what I thought was best at the time. I didn't want you involved in your father's world," she said as she hugged me tighter.

I shrugged her arms off me. "His world? Protect me from *what* exactly? His signature on the canvas is the least of it, Mom. His face appeared on the canvas. Beautiful and terrifying." I crossed my arms. "By the way, Crevan had a message for me too, Mom. He said 'I've been waiting for you, my dear.'"

My mother's face drained of color.

I grabbed the small chest that contained my stash of evidence from beneath a mound of clothes in the closet. I shoved it into her hands. Her eyes grew wide. "That's right, Mom, I've discovered all your secrets, including Julian. My *twin*." The skeletons were about to come spilling out of the closet.

She opened the lid. "Dear God," she gasped as she held up the binding spell, its broken black ties dangling from it. "What have you done?"

Dolya stood stone faced and still as my mother wound the black thread around her finger. Her eyes fixed slowly on mine. "Renny Erin McGuire, you have no idea the danger you've placed us in."

"Well, maybe if you—"

"Enough," Dolya said. She clapped her hands together. "What's done is done. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good. And you," she said, shaking a finger at me, "if it isn't the lamb teaching its mother to bleat."

My mom's back stiffened. "All right then, time for that family meeting, overdue as it is," she said. She made a feeble attempt at a smile.

"Going to be a long night ahead, I dare say. Calls for strong coffee and some of those walnut kringle pastries you both love so much," Dolya said. She stopped in the doorway before turning to leave, her arms folded. "Is it safe to leave you two alone together?"

I looked at my mom and we nodded in unison at Dolya.

“Good enough. I’ll see you both downstairs.”

“All right, then. No going back now,” my mother sighed.

“What? Why are you staring at me like that, Mom?”

“I’m trying to memorize this moment. Preserve it, I guess. After tonight, nothing will ever be the same. Everything I’m about to tell you will challenge everything you’ve ever known or believed,” she said. She leaned toward me, cradling my face in her hands. “You may find it hard to believe, but believe you must, for your own safety and the safety of those you love.”

My mother had never been an alarmist. A bit overprotective, but never an alarmist. The pounding of my heart roared in my ears and made my chest ache. I tried to swallow past the boulder lodged in my throat. All I could do was nod.

“What do you say we set up shop in the library? There’s a chill in the air. Sitting in front of a fire sounds good to me.”

“Agreed,” I said. I grabbed the chest of secrets taken from the springhouse. I headed towards the door and stopped. I looked back at my mom. “C’mon, no going back now, remember?”

Mom smiled and sat down on the edge of my bed. “You go on ahead. I’ll be right down. There’s something I have to do first.”

I shrugged and headed down the stairs.

Dolya was sitting in a wing-back chair humming and knitting as I walked into the library. Somehow, she’d managed to get a roaring fire going, plus put out the coffee and kringles. I cleared my throat to get her attention. “Dolya, do you have like a clone or something?” I asked, pointing at the fire with one hand and pointing at the tray with the other. “I mean, c’mon, what’s *your* secret. Seems like everyone in this family has one.”

Dolya just looked up from her knitting and winked at me. The floorboards creaked as my mother entered the room. She was carrying the canvas, my birthday gift from Jesse, under her arm. She raised her hand toward me. I crossed my arms. “What? I didn’t say anything.”

“I don’t want to hear any protests, crying or complaining. We have to destroy this tonight, understood? The painting has fallen under some enchantment and now it’s the perfect conduit for Crevan since the binding spell’s been undone.” She frowned at me.

There it was, *again*. A *spell*. That damn word, silent and unspoken and the very thing that’d started all this – *Magic*, or *Draoicht* as my grand da would say.

My mom propped the painting up against the fireplace. “Dolya, we’ll need a white candle and—”

“Sea salt, some St. John’s wort, and sage,” Dolya said. She put down her knitting and got up from her chair.

I picked apart a kringle. “Mom, do you think it’s possible Jesse knew about this, or helped Crevan somehow?”

“Jesse? Our Jesse?” my mom said, picking up the poker to stoke the fire. “That’s some conspiracy theory.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess not. No way, right? I mean, he’s my best friend. What was I thinking?” Suddenly my mind flashed back to the Halloween dance. Oh, right, I was probably thinking about seeing Jesse following the terrible trio out into the cornfield. I had to admit I lacked any proof or evidence of wrongdoing. All I had was a hunch that something wasn’t right. Whether it was just a case of overactive hormones or something more sinister I didn’t know.

Dolya carried a silver tray into the library and set it down in front of us. I stared at its contents. My mom placed the white candle on the mantle and lit it. Beside it, she placed a stoneware salt crock, a bundle of sage, and the bright yellow petals and yellow-green leaves of the St. John’s wort.

My mom looked back at me as she picked up the canvas.

“Wait.” I grabbed the canvas from her hands. “Let me.”

She nodded. I threw the canvas on the fire. The flames flashed high and burned bright crimson and blue.

“By the salt of the sea, from this home I banish thee.”

My mom scooped some sea salt from the crock and threw it on the fire. Deafening moans and deep, angry wails rose from the canvas. I covered my ears. The smell from the fire blanketed the library in a sickly smell, both earthy and sweet, like burnt moss and sugar.

“By flower of wort and herb of sage, powers of protection I engage.”

As the sage and St. John’s wort burned, a dark and powerful vortex started to take shape and emerge from the center of the canvas. As it whirled around us, the room grew darker and darker. I reached up to my mouth with trembling hands, trying to cover the screams that threatened to escape. Taunting laughter surrounded us like a shroud. I strained my ears trying to make out the hiss-filled whispers. The words tickled my ears like a feather. *“Come join us, Renny. Come join us now.”*

“Mom,” I screamed. Her voice rose above the din in a confident and commanding tone.

“Candle white, burning bright, Protect this home with your light.

Dark be gone, Light surround us.

Blessed be

*By the power of three times three
So, mote it be."*

Outside, lightning shook the house and thunder roared down from the sky. The vortex dissolved into a hundred orbs of multi-colored light that disappeared up the chimney. I ran to the window. The orbs spun and twirled and twisted in midair before disappearing into the night sky.

I whirled around and stared at my mom and Dolya. "What the hell was that? Guess I can cross the theory about the witness protection program off my list. Is Crevan a warlock in a coven or something?"

My mother collapsed into a chair. "No," she said as she tried to pour herself a cup of coffee. "Their power pales in comparison to your father and his *kind*."

"Let me help you with that," Dolya said. She took the cup from my mom's shaky hands.

"His *kind*?"

My mother opened her eyes and met my gaze, never breaking contact. "Come sit down. Please Renny, have a little patience, dear. No more secrets, I promise."

I placed the box from the springhouse between us. I pulled out Julian's blue and white baby bracelet and the photos of us together and laid them on the table. My mom's chin quivered as she looked at the evidence I had unearthed. I handed my mom the old yellowed newspaper clipping about the Megaconjunction.

"Oh, goodness, I'd almost forgotten about that."

"Does it mean something?"

"I wish I could tell you, honey, but I'm afraid I don't know anything more. Just that you and Julian were born during a rare planetary event. I'd been meaning to give that newspaper clipping to you."

I pried open the second compartment and pulled out the photo of Crevan and my mom. My mother's body stiffened. She turned her face away for a moment, struggling to hold onto whatever composure she had left. I wanted to hug her; she looked so childlike and breakable.

"Mom, it's okay, don't worry. Whatever happens we'll be fine, like always. I can handle it. I promise."

My mom smiled at me, her eyes soft. "You don't know how badly I want to believe that, Renny. I see that same fire in your eyes I had once. Don't ever lose it."

She rubbed her hands together and looked at me. "Well then, where should we start?" she asked.

I glanced down at the photo of my mom and dad. “The beginning would be good.”

My mom picked up the photo and studied it for a minute. Her voice turned wistful. “I’d just turned twenty-one and finished my undergraduate degree. Anything seemed possible; it was an exciting time.

“Your grandmother and grandfather paid for a trip to Ireland as a graduation gift. They thought it’d be good for me to take some time off before starting my graduate studies in January. They loved the idea of sending me back to the old country, to pay homage to our family roots. I was eager for a break from my studies, so off I went at the end of October.”

“Mom, this really sucks,” I said. “I can’t believe you’ve never told me any of this before. And where in Ireland is the old ancestral home anyway?”

“My grandparents were from County Wicklow. Newcastle to be precise. It’s on the east coast of Ireland. I remember driving through the countryside on my way there. It looked like a giant patchwork quilt, assembled with every shade of green imaginable, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

“All the stories your grandfather had filled my head with as a child came flooding back. Suddenly, little men in green with pots of gold, and faeries frolicking in forest glens under the moonlight seemed not only possible but perfectly normal.

“I was tired by the time I got to the hotel, but as I walked through the lobby I spied a stand filled with brochures hawking the local attractions. One in particular grabbed my attention. I was fascinated by the glossy photos. Mysterious caves carved out of ancient rock and woodlands carpeted in pillow-shaped moss. It made even the mundane magical.”

My mom sighed, her eyes fixed and staring ahead.

“Mom, what was the name of the place?”

“Glendalough.”

She continued on, her voice faraway, trancelike. “It’s funny how even the smallest decisions or seemingly random events can alter the course of our lives without us even realizing it at the time.”

Outside, the cloudless sky had taken on a dark silver-grey cast, the kind of somber sky that warns of winter storms ahead. Gusts of wind howled down the chimney and rattled the windows. I shivered at the sound as I glanced outside, half expecting to see the menacing orbs of light again.

Dolya threw another log on the grate and stoked the fire. Bright yellow and orange sparks flew about like tiny fireflies. I grabbed a chunky knitted throw from the loveseat and wrapped it

around myself, tucking my legs beneath me. My mother got up and stood by the fire, warming her hands.

“My original plan was to visit the old family farmstead, but my mind kept wandering back to Glendalough. The next morning, I hopped in my car and headed down the coast, *away* from Newcastle. Whether it was my newfound spontaneity or the thrill of the unknown, I was positively giddy.

“I parked at the trailhead and wandered over to the park’s information center. The park was larger than I expected. The main trail branched off into nine walking trails. I showed one of the rangers my brochure and pointed to the photo of the woodlands.

“‘Are you sure miss, that’s the trail you want, I mean? There be eight trails just as lovely, you know. Go on now, why don’t you pick another?’

“I insisted that was the trail I wanted; that’s why I’d come to Glendalough. I assured him I had no intention of leaving without seeing it.

“He let out a deep sigh and scratched his head. ‘I guess I might as well be whistling jigs to a milestone. There’s a nine-way marked post at the edge of the parking lot. Each trail has a color-coded arrow. Look for the green arrow and follow the Green Road Walk. It’ll take you to the Oakwoods.’ He crossed himself and turned his back to me.

“As I left the office, an older gentleman followed close behind me. He tapped me on the shoulder with his walking stick to say he’d overheard my conversation in the office. He had a thick Irish brogue, but his message was unmistakably clear. I’d stay away from the woods if I knew what was good for me.

“He said ‘I can assure ya dearie, you won’t find any locals venturing into those woods this time of year.’

“I asked him why not? He spoke in a whisper, ‘Ya dunna know? Surely you’ve heard of All Hallows Eve, then? Tis the time of year when all manner of things cross through the veil from the unseen world into ours.’

“I asked him what kind of things. He stared at me with his beady brown eyes and whispered, ‘The blessed dead of our ancestors and the Fair Folk for one, but the most fearsome of all is the Host.’ I searched his face, clueless. For all your grandfather’s stories, he’d never mentioned the Host.

“He leaned over, cupping his hand over my ear as he confided, ‘Faeries, my dear lass, faeries. The most feared and dreaded kind. I pray ye never encounter the likes of the Faery Host. They come from the west after sundown, in great shrieking, swirling swarms in search of prey. Human prey. Like giant blackbirds, they be. They’ll snatch yer very soul. Best heed what I tell ya, young lassie. Stay on the path, talk to no one, and get back home before eventide.’

“I thanked him for his concern and assured him I’d be careful. I laughed and said, ‘Lucky for me I don’t believe in all those old yarns.’

“He wasn’t amused by my lighthearted attitude. I’ll never forget his parting words to me. ‘My da used to say, ‘Don’t give cherries to pigs or advice to fools. Good luck then, miss.’ He tipped his cap and walked away.”

My stomach growled. I looked down. I still held the piece of apple walnut kringle that Dolya had shoved into my hand when we sat down. I gulped it down and took a sip of my coffee. I glanced at my mom and Dolya. They eyed me, waiting for a reaction.

I rolled my eyes. “What? It’s gonna take a lot more than some superstitious old guy to freak me out.”

Dolya pursed her lips and sighed as she exchanged uneasy glances with my mom. The telltale ‘elevens’ of doom and gloom formed between my mom’s eyebrows. She put down her cup of coffee.

“Where were we? Oh right, I was headed for the trail. Nothing could dampen my enthusiasm that morning. If anything, the encounter with the old gent ratcheted up the excitement a notch.

“As the trail gave way to the woodland floor, it was like stepping into another world. There was something so profound about walking among such ancient woodlands. The massive oaks had been standing guard for over seven thousand years. It looked just like the photo. Peat bog, ferns and mushroom-shaped mosses covered the woodland floor. Lichens and ivy clung to the towering oak trees. With every step, the canopy of trees grew thicker. Butterflies with pale, silver-blue wings floated overhead. Finches and warblers filled the air with their song. Every sight, every sound and smell was amplified. It was as if my senses had been filtered through gauze before now.

“A pungent smell, sweet and fruity, rose from the ground. I couldn’t imagine what could be in bloom that time of year. As I followed the scent, a deer ran across my path, startled and wide-eyed. It made a funny, barking sort of sound. Several other deer gathered and called out in the same fashion before bolting across my path and through the woods, away from me.

“Every sight, sound and smell is burned into my memory as if it happened just yesterday, not years ago. It will haunt me forever. My constant companion, a relentless reminder of both the sweetest and most unbearable of memories.

“The further I wandered into the woods, the more intense the scent became. I stopped and noticed how quiet the woods had become. There was no birdsong; not a creature stirred. At that moment, I spied the source of the intense fragrance: dense thickets of honeysuckle covered in dainty white flowers. I walked over and picked a flower, snapping the end off to suck out the nectar.

“Tsk, tsk. Be careful. You don’t want to anger the woodland spirits, do you?”

“I jerked my head in the direction of the voice, a voice like butterscotch, honey and rose petals. The face rivaled the beauty of the voice. He was standing under an oak tree, wearing an irresistible, impish grin. Piercing eyes of the palest blue-grey peered out from a perfect porcelain face. His wavy black hair stirred in the breeze. I froze on the spot. He threw his head back and laughed.”

I knew by the look in my mother’s eyes, she was no longer sitting in the library of her home in Cedarburg, but back on a trail in Glendalough, many years ago.

“Sorry, miss I didn’t mean to give you a fright. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s an enchanting, young creature like you doing alone in these woods?” He rubbed his eyes and blinked. ‘For a moment, I thought my eyes might be playing tricks on me. I thought you might be some sort of beautiful mirage, a forest goddess.’

“I tried to sound nonchalant, even though I felt like I was standing in quicksand. ‘Ah, so this is the legendary Irish charm I’ve been warned about. I’ve heard it’s irresistible.’

“So I’ve been told.’ He smiled.

“Don’t tell me you believe all this superstition about All Hallows Eve too? Sounds like a lot of *malarkey*, if you ask me. Give the gullible tourists a thrill,’ I said.

“Oh, I expect you’re referring to our spirits and faeries and such?”

“I nodded.

“How can you be certain you’re not talking to one right now?” he teased.

“You look real enough to me, not to mention very alive.’

“Maybe you ought to come over here and have a better look.’

“I didn’t remember walking towards him, but a second later I found myself standing in front of him. He held out his hand.

“I’m Crevan. And you are?”

“His breath was as sweet as the honeysuckle nectar, as it brushed my face. His skin was soft and his touch infused my entire being with his perfume. I half expected to wake up any minute, back in my bed at the hotel. I was completely flustered.

“I am, uh, I’m Abby McGuire.’

“His lips brushed my hand and I could taste the sweetness of his kiss through my skin. He pulled me closer and whispered in my ear ‘And if you dare to kiss my lips, sure of your body I will be.’

“Ah, Thomas the Rhymer, by Sir Walter Scott. I don't know whether to be impressed or give you a good hard slap across the face. Tell me, does that line usually work on unsuspecting girls?”

“I don't know, never used it before, been saving it for someone special. So you tell me, are you impressed or should I be runnin' for the hills?”

“I smiled at him. ‘Don't go running for the hills just yet.’

“His voice warmed and relaxed like an opiate, my body overdosing on endorphins. I never wanted the feeling to end.

“We spent our days exploring the countryside. At night, we returned to the little cottage we had rented. It was within walking distance of Glendalough. I called it our enchanted cottage. I was deliriously happy. We talked for hours on end. To my surprise and delight, I learned we shared a lot in common. It was uncanny. I thought I'd found the man of my dreams. He was everything I'd longed and hoped for, as if he was tailor-made to my specifications.

“November came and went and I found myself staying on, first to celebrate winter solstice and then Yule. I kept postponing my trip home, much to the dismay of your grandparents. Crevan had filled my head with promises of marriage. It was easy to envision a life there with him.

“Then, in early January, I started feeling ‘off.’ I tired more easily and nothing seemed to agree with my stomach. I figured it was a touch of the flu, but decided to make an appointment with the village doctor to be on the safe side. Several tests and a couple of days later, he called and asked me to come back in. I was worried; I figured it must be something serious.

“I asked the doctor what he thought I had. He looked at me over his bifocals and said ‘I'm afraid it's a case of nausea gravidarum.’ I asked him if it was serious.

“He laughed and said, ‘Don't worry, it's not contagious, but it does have a nine month incubation period.’

“I looked at him like he was crazy.

“He slapped his knee and said, ‘Touch of the old morning sickness, dearie. Who's the lucky chap then?’

“I told him it was Crevan O'Leannon.

“He scratched his head and said, ‘No, never heard of him. Strange, I've lived here all my life, know the locals well, but that's a name I've never heard.’

“I made another appointment and left his office with handfuls of pamphlets and vitamins.”

My mother’s voice was soft and her eyes glowed with pure, unfiltered love.

“I was ecstatic. A baby; *our* baby. Of course, I didn’t know then I’d be *doubly* blessed. I couldn’t wait to tell Crevan. We’d marry as he promised and start our new life together.”

My mom’s eyes clouded over and her hands trembled as she took a sip of coffee.

“I rushed back to the cottage. Crevan was standing warming his hands in front of the fire. He turned and smiled when he heard me burst through the door. Breathless, I blurted out the great news. He stood motionless by the fireplace.

“There was no warmth in the exaggerated grin that stretched across his face. His eyes looked right through me, cold and calculating. In that instant, I didn’t recognize him. His whole demeanor was alien, detached. I told myself it was just the shock, the surprise of the unexpected news.

“The hard set to his face disappeared. His features softened as he walked across the room toward me. He lifted me into the air, and swung me around. Of course, we’d be married, in fact he couldn’t wait. It was Thursday and he insisted we marry on Saturday. I spent Friday finding a dress and flowers. Crevan said he’d take care of finding a chapel and priest.

“A gentle snow started falling as I walked home from the village Friday evening. Everything was covered in a mantle of soft, white powder. The lights from the village created a dreamy amber glow. I gazed up at the sky, the silver-white moon smiling down at me, and for a moment, my world was perfect.

“I looked forward to warming myself in front of the fire when I got home. I wanted nothing more than to stay up all night with Crevan, talking about our future. The cottage was dark when I returned. I figured Crevan had been held up. He’d probably run into trouble finding a chapel or priest on such short notice.

“Standing outside the door, I was overcome with a sense of dread. I steadied my hand as I tried to fit the key into the lock. I knew he was gone before I even opened the door. I was just as certain I’d never see him again. My eyes made a quick survey of the cottage. All traces of him were gone. His pipe and pouch of tobacco were missing from the kitchen table. His walking cane no longer stood in its usual spot by the fireplace. I ran to the bedroom. There was a gaping hole in the closet where his clothes had hung. His sweet scent which permeated the air in the cottage had vanished, replaced by the scent of burnt wood and ash.”

“God, Mom, I’m so sorry about undoing your binding spell,” I said as I raked my hands through my hair. My voice caught. If only I’d known, none of this would’ve happened. “It’s just that I was curious and angry at you for keeping secrets from me. I never meant to cause you

more pain. Good to know I was wrong about my *dad* all along. Turns out he's so much more than just a dirt bag. He's a full-on dumpster fire!"

"Renny, don't. Stop, right now."

"I can't help it, Mom. How do you expect me to feel? I mean, it's not like he was ever gonna get nominated for father of the year, but this, I mean it's just so...so *cruel*," I said as I threw my hands in the air. "He couldn't even leave you a note. Pathetic. No wonder you've sworn off men."

Dolya kept knitting as we talked. Even with her head bent I could see the disapproving arch of her brow. "Ya sound as bitter as thick milk, Renny. Remember my girl, he who angers you, conquers you," she said as she wound more yarn around her finger.

I sighed. "Sure, whatever." I turned my attention back to my mom. "So, you came back home after that?"

"If only it'd been that simple. I'm afraid the story doesn't end there."

"You said doubly blessed. You were talking about Julian."

My mom looked down at her lap and nodded.

"What happened to him? I've lived all these years, feeling something inside me was missing, incomplete. I guess my heart knew, even if my mind didn't."

"I'll tell you about Julian, but first you need to know the whole truth about your father."

"I already know the truth."

"No, you think you do, but you don't, not by a long shot, sweetie."

My mom gazed out the window. "I cried myself to sleep and woke early. I was determined to go into the village and try to put the pieces together, find out the truth. I needed some closure before going home. I hoped someone in the village knew Crevan's family. Sick with grief and longing, I had to find him. Grabbing the one photo I had, I headed out to the village. The photo solicited looks of concern, pity and outright fear. People shook their heads, refusing to meet my gaze, blessing themselves as they hurried away.

"I collapsed exhausted on a bench outside a bookstore. The shop owner saw me and helped me inside. She offered me hot tea and biscuits and a sympathetic ear. I broke down and told her my whole tale of woe.

"Well, if that isn't a fine bit of stuff. So the fella's gone and left ya, knowing you're set to have his baby and all, after promising he'd marry ya. That's one right bad bastard, if you'll pardon me saying so, miss. What's his name?"

"I told her, 'Crevan O'Leannan.'

“No, that’s not a family I’m familiar with.’

“I told her I had a photo and retrieved it from my purse. I handed it to her. She took one look at it and turned as white as snow. She dropped the photo as if it’d burnt her hands, and blessed herself.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, this fella is more than just a bad bastard, my dear. He’s worse than that, much worse.’

“What, what do you mean? Did he kill someone?’

“Oh, he and his kind have plenty of innocent blood on their hands. Ya dunno what he is child, do ya? How could ya, not being from these parts and all. No one is immune, not even the locals.’

“Immune from what exactly?’

“The charms of the gancanagh. You’ve come under the spell of a love- talker. I should’ve known by the look in your eyes.’

“Sounds like some sort of playboy serial killer.’

“Ya might say somethin’ like that. Tis nothing to be joking about though, me dear. Follow me; I have something that’ll help ya understand.’

“She pulled a huge book from one of the shelves. It was a historical anthology of sorts about Ireland. She paged through it, stopping to look at a page. She sat down and patted the settee with her hand. ‘Yes, this is it. Sit down, over here by my side.’

“I was filled with a growing terror as my eyes raced across the page. I read the words over and over trying to make sense of it all.”

My mom closed her eyes, her voice hollow and mechanical as she recited the words, words like ghosts that haunted her memory.

“The gancanagh, also known as the love-talker, belongs to a small yet notorious troupe of faeries. Known to frequent woods and valleys, he preys on young maidens. The male fae inspires an ardor so fierce that his victims are rendered helpless against it. His skin secretes a sweet, intoxicating scent and his deep, melodic voice and smooth-talking ways prove irresistible. He casts no shadow and animals fall silent in his presence. The luckiest of his victims live out their days pining for his love, forever addicted to his voice and touch. No mortal man can compete with the charms of a gancanagh. For many however, an encounter with the love-talker proves lethal. They die brokenhearted, of the thirst that cannot be quenched.”

My mother shook her head. “I’m afraid if it hadn’t been for Dolya I would’ve been among the unlucky ones.”

I jumped up from the sofa, my nails digging into my palms as I paced in front of the fireplace. “Is this some sort of joke? I mean, I knew you didn’t want to talk about this, but really?” I could feel a serious rant coming on. “Now you’re telling me that Crevan is not just your common variety deadbeat dad but some sort of supernatural creature. Why not a werewolf or a vampire? I can’t believe you lied to me all these years. Grand da would’ve wanted me to know.”

My mother twisted the peridot ring on her finger back and forth. “It never seemed like the right time. What was I going to say? ‘Oh, by the way, honey, did I mention your father isn’t human, he’s a faery?’

My temples were throbbing. Keegan’s words echoed in my ears. ‘You know what I am now, but the question is, do you know what you are?’

“So, if he’s a faery, what exactly does that make me?”

Dolya dropped her knitting in her lap and stared at me with a mixture of pity and anger. “A halfling, that’s what it makes you, Renny. Half human, half fae.”

A halfling, just like Caitlin. I smiled. Maybe I was more like Caitlin than I knew.

I threw Dolya a sideways glance. “What makes you such an expert?”

She sat in her chair, hands folded in her lap, a strange half smile on her face. The clickety-clack of her needles filled the silence as her needles continued to stitch and purl without Dolya’s assistance.

I backed up, almost knocking over a table and lamp in the process. “No way,” I whispered. “You’re saying you’re one too? A, a …” I stuttered.

“That’s right, a faery. You can go ahead and say it. Not just any faery though, I’m a house faery, although there are some that prefer the term domestic faerie. We become attached to a mortal family and adopt them, so to speak. We take great pride and joy in our duty to serve and protect the house and the loved ones within.”

I turned to my mom. “Now I get it. That explains why you’d go ballistic whenever I asked about stocking anything to do with faeries for the bookstore. And that’s why you didn’t want me to hear gran da’s stories about the in-between. *You* called it a bunch of malarkey.”

My mother stared out the window, silent, her lips drawn into a thin, tight line.

My head was spinning. My stomach dropped. It was like being at the top of a roller coaster just before it plunges down the rails. Time was suspended for a brief moment as my emotions seesawed from excitement one moment to being terrified the next. I couldn’t decide if I should celebrate, faint, or throw up. Keegan knew what I was before I did. But how?

Dolya picked up her knitting needles again. Without looking up from her knitting, she calmly asked if I wanted to hear how she and my mother met. I'd just been told my father was a faery and I was some sort of mixed-breed halfling thing and she acted like we were talking about the weather.

I gazed into the flames, shaking my head. The fire flared up, the sparks transforming into a hundred tiny fireflies. They flew out of the fireplace and fused together to form a dancing crown of light. I spun around, mouth open, and stared at Dolya. Hovering above her head was the crown of blinking golden light. She looked at me, eyebrows raised. Her lips twitched as she tried not to smile. I turned back around. The fireflies flew past me and into the fireplace, where they transformed back into glowing red embers once again.

Dolya spoke in a quiet, almost reverent tone. "I'd been in the woods gathering oak nuts for my tea and moss for the fire. Out of nowhere, the stillness was pierced with the most anguished wailing to ever greet these old ears. I picked up my basket and hurried in the direction of the cries. Peering over a thicket of honeysuckle, I spied your mother. Even the dark circles that ringed her eyes and a face ashen with grief could not destroy her beauty.

"She cried out your father's name time and time again, until she collapsed, exhausted. I knew that kind of melancholia could only be caused by one thing, a bloody ganch. They'll sweet talk you right into your grave. Bitter is the payment for the ecstasy of his touch. Your mother had grown weak from withdrawal. I was the only chance your mother had of surviving his poisonous caress.

My knuckles tightened around my coffee mug in a death grip. "I hope Crevan burns in hell, or *wherever* it is bad faeries go."

Dolya tried to conceal a smile, and continued.

"I ran to her side and wrapped my arm around her waist to help her up. I gasped as my hand slipped to her stomach. I patted it. She was carrying the ganch's cuddy and cub from the feel of it. Twins, I'd guessed, a boy and girl. I knew right then I'd met not just *my* family, but my destiny as well. This was no ordinary family. A halfling child needs the guidance of a faerie.

"I took your mother back to my cottage and drew a bath for her. I needed to work fast. This was going to require a potent brew to work against the toxins of the ganchanagh. I pulled out my mortar and pestle. I crushed rowan berries and white clover, rosemary, and St. John's wort. But the most important ingredient in the purifying process was the flowers from the common gorse. I sprinkled half the mix in the bath water and made a strong tea with the rest."

Dolya looked at my mother and laughed. "Your mother was having none of it; turned her nose right up at the tea. I told her, horse it into you now; you've got to take the bitter in to get the bitter out. I knew the brew had done its job when I saw the flush of life come back to your mother's cheeks. All she wanted to do for the next week was eat and sleep."

“You cured her.”

“No, not cured, Renny. I was able to heal her body physically, remove his toxins from her skin, but I couldn’t heal her heart. Emotionally, she’s still under the spell of your father and now with the binding spell broken...I’m afraid it’s an addiction with only one cure, or so the legends say.”

I stared at Dolya, wide eyed and trembling. “Well, we have to at least try.”

Dolya’s face turned somber. Her mouth twisted into a grimace.

“What’s wrong? What is it?” I asked.

“There’s only one antidote to the gancanagh’s powers. Only one thing can release your mother completely. Your father’s death. Upon the drawing of his last breath, the gancanagh’s victims will be free at last.

Chapter Three

And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets.

Joseph Conrad – Heart of Darkness

“So, you’re telling me my mom’s screwed unless Crevan meets an untimely death?”

Dolya looked up from her knitting long enough to frown at me. “Well, those wouldn’t be my choice of words, Renny, but yes, that’s the gist of it.”

“Maybe if we’re lucky, he’ll get sick and die.”

My mom gasped, her mouth falling open in disbelief. “Renny!”

Thankfully my cell phone rang at that moment, sparing me from a full on I-know-I-raised-you-better-than-that-young-lady lecture. My heart racing in hopes it was Tristan, I checked my phone. It wasn’t Tristan. It was Katy. She was breathing hard and her voice was shaky.

“Renny, I really need to talk to you. It’s about Jesse. We’re talking *huge*, monumental, as in beyond belief. I’m not kidding, it’s totally messed up. You’re not gonna believe it. Not in a million years. Remember that night at the Harvest Dance—”

“Katy, I’m really sorry, we’re gonna have to do this later. I’m in the middle of some pretty big stuff myself right now. Family stuff. Kinda freaking out right now. I’ll call back soon, I promise.” Even though Katy was the queen of hyperbole, there was something unsettling about the call that I couldn’t put my finger on. How many nights had I lent a sympathetic and supportive ear when Peter had been a complete tool? But this time Katy sounded *different*. Besides, she and Jesse seemed so happy together. Right now, though, I couldn’t allow myself to become distracted. My curiosity, along with Katy’s story, would have to wait. I channeled my inner Scarlett and headed back into the library.

Dolya looked up as I walked in the room. “Everything all right?” I nodded. She went back to her knitting, continuing the conversation in her matter-of-fact sort of way. “Wouldn’t hold my breath, dearie, waiting for Crevan to get sick and die. Faeries are imbued with a strong constitution. They aren’t immortal, but they can live a couple of hundred years, give or take. They’re immune to just about everything. Everything except cold iron. Cold iron’s like a poison, toxic to the touch.” Dolya stopped knitting and shook her head. “Wasn’t always the case, though.”

“Wait, I’m confused. You keep talking about faeries in the third person, Dolya, even though you said you’re a house faery. Aren’t you considered a *real* fae?”

Dolya looked up, a wry grin on her serene face. “Sorry, child, guess it’s an occupational hazard from living in the mundane world, being part of a human family for so long now.”

I nodded. “Makes sense. Sort of like living in a foreign country so long that you start to identify with that culture. But, back to the whole iron thing. So you’re saying it wasn’t always toxic to faeries?”

Dolya cocked her head, tapping her finger against her upper lip. “Well, let’s see. First off, you need to understand a little bit about our history. Faeries descended from a great and powerful ancient tribe known as the Tuatha de Danaan or children of Danu.

“The Tuatha de Danaan ruled over Ireland for two hundred years. They were revered far and wide for their bronze metal-working skills. They were also proficient in magick. Some say they were banished from Heaven for acquiring knowledge of the enchanted arts.

“Life was peaceful and prosperous under the Tuatha de Danaan for many years. That all changed overnight.”

“What happened?” I asked, as I stuffed another piece of kringle in my mouth.

Dolya sighed. “The Milesians, a seafaring tribe, decided to set sail for the Promised Isle. They’d heard stories about a beautiful land, green, fertile and full of promise. They weren’t just curious, though. They were intent on overthrowing the Tuatha de Danaan and claiming the land as their own. The Milesians were powerful and skillful in their own right, but they didn’t possess the gift of magick like the Tuatha de Danaan.

“Okay, so what was the problem? What could be more powerful than magic?”

“The problem was a skill the Milesians possessed. It proved to be the undoing of the Tuatha de Danaan. Not even their powerful magick could save them from the cold iron forged by the Milesians.”

I shrugged. “I’ve never even heard of *cold* iron.”

Dolya shook her head back and forth. “It’s hard to come by these days and harder still to find those trained in the ways of working it. There’s only one group left that I know of, an ancient order of sorcerers, the Finfolk of Eynhallow, with the knowledge and skill to work cold iron.”

My heart pounded in my chest as I recalled Nichnevan’s stern words spoken in the basement of the Black Bird. ‘Your binding spell, it wasn’t Black Raven Magic. Make no mistake, this is the magic of the Finfolk.’ She had rubbed her upper arm revealing the half-man, half-seal emblazoned on it. A warning from the Finfolk about meddling in their magic, she had said. I swallowed hard, my throat bone dry.

Dolya threw her knitting down in her lap. “Well, that’s a whole other kettle of fish better saved for another day. The thing of it is, cold iron’s stronger and harder than iron forged by fire. The metal’s worked and shaped without heat. The bronze weapons of the Tuatha de Danaan were no match against the powerful iron weapons yielded by the Milesians. The cold iron had a toxic effect on the Tuatha de Danaan for which there was no antidote. Not even their magick could overcome it. It was like poison to their blood.

“In the beginning, the cold iron had to penetrate the skin and taint the blood in order to inflict a fatal wound. But then something mysterious happened ‘round eighteen hundred, if memory serves. Suddenly, the fae started falling ill from the mere touch of the stuff. The cold iron no longer had to penetrate their skin or mix with their blood to prove toxic. Seemed like it happened overnight. And now of course, the fae are susceptible to anything fashioned from iron, not just cold iron.”

“What kind of illness does the iron cause?” I asked.

“Best case, the immune system is weakened, followed by a fever and lethargy that passes in time. Worst case, let’s just say—”

“Mere exposure to iron can kill faeries?”

Dolya's lips were drawn in a thin, tight line. She nodded. "Yes, dearie, it's our one true vulnerability, our Achilles heel. At the onset of the illness, rust-colored flecks appear in the irises. If the exposure wasn't severe, then the iris may not change completely, a good sign there's a chance for a full recovery. Once the entire iris changes color, though, it's only a matter of time. The skin turns a russet hue and the blood in the veins dries to a burnt umber powder."

"Wow. Like rusting from the inside out."

"Precisely."

I looked over at my mom. She looked pale as she bit at her lower lip. Her fingers played with the latch on the chest and lingered there a minute. She stood up and walked over to me.

"Renny, how did you open the chest? You didn't touch the latch did you?"

I looked at my mom and laughed. "How else would I open it? "

My hand flew to my mouth. "Oh."

In that split second, the gravity of the question and its dire implication hit me. Of course, my mom had put an iron latch on the chest.

My mom's hands trembled as she held my face in her hands. She stared into my eyes. Her hands dropped to her sides. Her voice took on a hysterical edge.

"What's happened to your eyes?"

"Why? What do you mean? What's wrong with them?" I asked as I ran to the mirror. I breathed a sigh of relief as I stared at my reflection.

"Renny, your irises used to have bright gold flecks. Now they're silver-grey. Don't tell me you didn't notice? Did it happen after you handled the latch? Did your hands feel hot, or sting? Try to remember. It's important."

"Mom, stop it, you're really starting to freak me out," I said. I turned around to face her. "At least they're not rust colored. *No*, I didn't feel anything weird when I touched the latch on the chest. I feel fine, *really*."

My mother's voice was shrill and full of panic. "Dolya, come over here and take a look at this. What does this mean? Is it some sort of halfling quirk?"

Dolya pulled me over to the lamp to inspect my eyes and then shrugged. "Can't say for sure, Abby, but I've never heard of a case of iron poisoning causing this reaction. Besides, she'd have other symptoms by now."

Dolya's eyes narrowed. "Odd thing it is, though. Couldn't hurt to mix up a tincture of milk thistle, dandelion, and red clover." Dolya patted my mom on the back. "If it hasn't caused a problem so far I wouldn't worry about it too much, Abby."

I laughed out loud. “Hellooo, have you two met? Get real, Dolya.”

Too bad I didn’t feel as cavalier about the whole thing as I tried to sound, but I knew my mom didn’t need something else to obsess over. Between stressing about me or the bookstore, my mother pretty much subsisted on a steady diet of worry.

I checked my phone. “Shoot. I promised Katy I’d call her back. Can we finish this tonight? We still have to talk about Julian, you know.”

My mom was slumped in her chair as if she’d been drained of all energy. “Yes, of course, I gave my word to you. Let’s plan on talking again after dinner tonight.”

Fear was written across my mom’s face. She looked at me like I was a time bomb ready to detonate any minute. For all I knew, she might be right. I sighed. This was going to be a very long week.

I ran upstairs and phoned Katy. I ticked off a list of possible reasons for her urgent call as I waited for her to answer. She was right, though. Nothing could have prepared me for what she had to tell me. Not in a million years.

“Hey, Ren, I was just about to text you. I thought maybe you’d forgotten.”

“Nope. So, what’s the huge news? If you and Jesse are fighting, I already told you two that—”

“It’s nothing like that. No, we’re talking *strange*. I’m telling you, this is weirder than the time I saw my mom trying to rock a leopard print mini and platform pumps. Just strike me blind already. OMG, so gross. Where was I? Oh yeah, out of the blue, Peter calls me—”

“Whoa, Katy, why is Peter calling you? I don’t like the sounds of this already.”

“Hang on a minute. Just listen. He wanted to know when Jesse went all sword and sorcery. I told him Jesse’d never been into the whole role-playing game thing. Then he tells me that he and Peyton were in the corn maze making out when they heard voices. He didn’t recognize the girls’ voices but he recognized Jesse’s right away.”

My stomach sank as I flashed back to All Hallows Eve, watching in disbelief as Jesse followed the beautiful and terrifying winged trio into the corn maze. I knew Peter wasn’t lying to Katy. Keegan’s words echoed in my head. ‘On Samhain, the veil between the human and supernatural world falls away and anything’s possible.’ I guess anything included your best friend hanging out with a bunch of fae in the middle of a cornfield.

Katy took a deep breath. “Okay, here comes the weird part. Peter overhears Jesse talking about some prophecy thing with these girls. He said it had to do with halflings. Please, like right out of Lord of the Rings, right? Anyhoo, one of the girls asks if he’s been able to locate some Book of Records. Get this, he said he hadn’t, but to tell the *Dark Court* not to worry because it

was only a matter of time. Peter said the girl sounded really miffed and told Jesse that the *Lord of the Dark Court* wanted the list of *swans*, and if he messed up he'd be banished to the *Mire*. Are you ready for this? His name's not Jesse; it's *Braeden*."

My stomach lurched, the kringles threatening to make an unholy appearance. I steadied my voice. "Yeah, pretty wild story alright. Sounds like some Celtic or medieval game. He was probably embarrassed to tell you he's an RPG geek," I lied.

"Yeah, well he'd better have a good explanation. I mean, where did he meet these girls? Why didn't he ask me if I wanted to play? What was he thinking? I mean, it's not like he doesn't know about my trust issues." Katy sniffed.

My voice cracked. "Have you told Jesse yet?"

"No, not yet. I wanted to talk to you first. If anyone knows Jesse, it's you. I'm sure you're right, he's probably too embarrassed to admit he's into the whole RPG thing, but I'm still royally torqued that he's hiding stuff from me."

"Okay, good," I said as I breathed a silent sigh of relief. "I mean, good, you shouldn't talk to him while you're still so upset about it. I could talk to him if you want. Might be better that way; he'll be less defensive. It's too late to do anything tonight, though. Think about it and we'll make a plan first thing in the morning. Promise me you won't call him."

"Sure, I promise. First thing in the morning, right? "

"You've got my word, Katy. I'm sure we'll laugh about this later. Now go to sleep."

The room started spinning as I contemplated what I'd just heard. Jesse, *my* Jesse, was working with the Dark Court. I'd known Jesse since the fifth grade. He'd transferred into school from out of state the same year I started school. The words sunk in. *He transferred into school the same year I started. From out of state. Yeah, more like from another world.* Jesse's mad track and field skills suddenly made sense. I thought of all the times Katy and I'd watched Jesse at his track and field events. It was all so effortless. He'd sailed over hurdles and flown across the high jump bar like it was no big deal. Guess if you're a fae, it's not.

I crept downstairs, trying to avoid setting off the floorboard alarms. As exhausted as I was, I knew I'd never sleep without the help of Dolya's valerian and balm tea. I rarely drank it, but chamomile wasn't going to cut it tonight. I needed something more potent. Something to knock me out. My mom had laughed at the idea that Jesse had something to do with Crevan and the painting. Now it appeared that my best friend wasn't *what* or even *who* he'd pretended to be all these years. I had to deal with that fact, along with everything else I'd learned about my own family.

I welcomed the dark quiet of the kitchen. The soft glow of a nightlight provided the only illumination. I put some water on to boil, and pulled the tin of tea from the shelf. I waved the

opened tin back and forth under my nose, inhaling deeply, as I stared out the garden window. Most of the leaves were off the trees now. The diamond brilliance of the stars was showcased by the black, new moon sky. My focus shifted to the tree line. I unplugged the nightlight and squinted in the direction of the evergreens. *It's just your nerves. There's nothing out there.* As I focused my gaze, I saw a back and forth movement around the lower branches of the evergreens. As I continued to stare, small glowing lights appeared here and there between the branches. Eight fixed orbs, shimmering through the branches of the evergreens, like stars fallen from the sky and trapped. No, not stars, more like *eyes*. Eyes watching and waiting. I dropped the tin in the sink. Instead of terror, a sense of peace and calm washed over me. The longer I gazed at the strange lights, the more relaxed I became. Yawning, I cleaned up the tea from the sink, turned off the stove, and dragged myself to bed. I couldn't remember why I'd wanted the tea in the first place.

I rolled out of bed feeling woozy, my head foggy. Had I dreamed the whole kitchen incident up? I needed to be clear headed today. I looked at the clock and panicked. I must have overslept. I checked my cell phone. There were several messages from Katy. I held my breath as I listened to the last message.

“Hey, it's me again. Listen, I couldn't wait any longer. Don't worry, I talked to Jesse. After I finished reading him the riot act about his little rendezvous in the cornfield, we had a good laugh about it. He wants me to meet him at school after track practice so he can take me to lunch and explain everything. He was really sweet about the whole thing, except he wasn't too happy when he found out I told you about it. Guess you're right; he's embarrassed. Gotta run. Talk to you later.”

No, Katy. No, no.

My eyes welled with tears as I raced through my shower. Why was Jesse working with the Dark Court and Crevan? What was so important about a Book of Records that Jesse risked banishment to the Mire if he failed to get it? Whatever the *Mire* was, it didn't sound good. The Mire would be nothing compared to what I'd do to him though, if he harmed one hair on Katy's head. I threw on my jeans, a sweater and some boots before tying my damp hair back in a ponytail. I texted Katy that I was on my way to meet her before heading downstairs.

I spied the tea kettle and tin of tea as I entered the kitchen. My mom and Dolya looked up from their breakfast. My mom frowned, the elevens on her forehead deepened. “Did you sleep okay last night?”

“Yeah, great actually.”

Dolya winked at me. “No doubt. Valerian and lemon balm tea, potent stuff. Aye, it'll do the trick.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s a real lifesaver,” I lied. “Gotta run. I promised Katy I’d meet her for lunch.” I grabbed my jacket and car keys before running out of the house. If I hurried, I might still be able to intercept Katy in the school parking lot. The cold air nipped at my hands and face.

I hopped in the car and turned the radio on. I tried to drown out thoughts of my father, Julian, and Jesse. Finding out I was a halfling might’ve been cool if it hadn’t turned out my mom’s baby-daddy was some sleazy ganch. My luck, I had to be descended from some black sheep of the faerie world. Sooo uncool. Did other halflings exist, and if so, where and how many? Was being a halfling part of the curse Nichnevan had seen in her vision that night at the Blackbird Bar? Her cryptic words struck a nerve. The hair on my arms bristled and a chill ran through me as I silently repeated them.

*“Three as one, your troubles are far from done.
Three as one, your journey’s just begun.
You are cursed little one, twofold
A prophecy and secret to unfold.
A family tree
Holds the key
To what you are.
One with eyes of green and blue
Freedom’s price, your karmic dues
Musician, there’s more to you than meets the eye
The truth it will be told, by and by.”*

One curse down. One to go. After hearing Katy’s story, I was convinced the secret and prophecy had to do with Jesse. But what about the swans and the black panel van and my strange Contessa? Then there was the mysterious reference to Keegan and Tristan, ending with the oh-so-comforting assurance that ‘the truth will be told, by and by.’

As if all this wasn’t bad enough, I still hadn’t heard from Tristan. There had to be a good reason why he hadn’t returned my call. My stomach, tying and untying itself in knots, was more skeptical. Had Tristan forgotten we needed to get an unbinding dagger? Would he still want to, once he found out I was a *halfling*, or would he run as far as he could from his half-human muse? Then again, would he even believe me? Keegan already knew the truth. But how *had* he known about me and which part of the Faerie realm did he come from? It was all too confusing. I was left with even more unanswered questions.

The only thing I *was* certain of was the fact that we only had twenty-six days till the next waning gibbous moon and another shot at the unbinding ceremony. Maybe Nichnevan or Keegan had some contacts that could help us. There had to be a way. I really needed to hear Tristan’s voice right now. I needed someone to talk to, and there was something about the soothing, deep velvety tone of his voice that could make me believe everything would be okay.

I jumped at the sound of my ring tone. It was Katy. Her voice quivered.

“Renny, where are you? Jesse’s not here. No one’s here. Something’s not right. Gotta go.”

What? This wasn’t like Katy. The girl was vaccinated with a phonograph needle at birth. I mean she *really* loved to talk.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel waiting for the light to turn. Murphy’s Law was in full swing. I hit every red light on the way to school. The parking lot looked desolate as I pulled in. I spotted Katy’s car in the far corner, close to the gymnasium. It was the only car in the lot. Walking towards the gym, I prepared to be read the riot act by Katy.

I called out to her as I approached her car. “Hey, Katy, sorry I’m late. Don’t kill me; I’ve got a good excuse.” I waited for Katy’s teasing, scolding reply, but there was only an eerie silence. She wasn’t in her car.

I stood in front of the gym and looked around. I made a feeble attempt to open the door to the gym, even though I expected to find it locked. My heart raced as I called Katy’s name over and over. I pulled out my cell to dial Katy’s number. The number one glared out from the little envelope icon. A new message. The hair on my arms stood up as I listened to it. This time Katy’s voice was a tense whisper. “Ren, it’s not safe. Don’t come. It’s a trap.” I could hear the panic in Katy’s voice along with the insistent pounding rhythm I’d come to recognize all too well.

I froze at the sickening, clattering sound of Katy’s cell phone as it hit the pavement. Katy’s words were muffled. “Jessie, let me go. You’re hurting my wrist! What’s going on? Is this some sort of sick joke, ‘cause you’re really starting to scare me. Omigod, no, please, don’t.” She screamed and pleaded, “Please, please, let me go. I just wanna go home.”

Then, the line went dead.

I bent over clutching my stomach, wave after wave of nausea washing over me. Then I heard *it*. I stopped, frozen by the familiar sound. The bass boom, boom, boom, vibrated in the air. The blood pulsed in my ears in a macabre duet, *swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, boom, boom, boom*. I squeezed my eyes shut. As if on cue, the black van appeared in the south parking lot. It drove towards me like an angry bull taking the bait of a red cape. I stood my ground, adrenaline surging through my body. I strained my eyes, struggling to peer inside the van.

It stopped and swerved. The tires squealed in protest. And then, it disappeared as quickly as it’d appeared. My nostrils burned with the acrid smell of burning rubber.

Wait. *What just happened?* I looked around. The parking lot was empty except for Katy’s car and mine. Then I saw the dog. He sat in the middle of the parking lot, eyes fixed, still as stone, muscles tensed. He was imposing on all counts, with a glossy white coat that covered a wide deep-set chest and sinewy frame. Ears, set high atop a massive head, were erect, focused.

He walked right past me and stood by some bushes near the gym. I watched him raise his head and howl, low and mournful. He pawed the ground and picked something up in his large strong jaws. I inched my way over to the dog. I stared into his face. Two silver-blue eyes, ringed in deep indigo, stared back. Any fear dissolved as I stared into the depths of those gentle eyes. The adrenaline drained from my body. I knelt down.

“C’mon, be a good boy and come here. What’s that you’ve got in your mouth?”

He came to me, head bowed, and dropped the treasure in my palm. I recognized it instantly. My eyes watered as I ran my fingers over the silver and green beaded bracelet. A Celtic friendship knot dangled from it. It was identical to the one hanging from my wrist. I’d picked the bracelets out in sixth grade, one for Katy and one for me.

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