

BOOK ONE OF THE CROWN OF THE FAE KING

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L.L. MUIR

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GREEN TOED FAIRY

To the old me...

*Who should have never
walked away from fantasy.*

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REVENGE IS BEST SERVED...LATE

*H*ours before dawn, Wickham Muir stepped out of Place, willing himself to the Black Isle, to Muirsglen, where his enemy lay in wait.

The windows of the Grandfather's dark Tudor house came to life the moment Wickham's feet touched the gravel of the driveway. The large front door slowly creaked open and the two weirding sisters stepped outside and closed it behind them, their faces hidden in the moon's shadows beneath their draping gray hair.

One stepped forward while her sister blocked the entrance. "Come back later," she said, reaching out her pale hand in entreaty. "Far too early for a visit." When Wickham said nothing, she pulled back and lay her fingers across her lips as she tried with her weak talents to read his mind.

"Ye should never have toyed with my sisters." He didn't bother lifting his arm, but swiped his hand in a circle as if wiping at a stain hanging in the air. And just like that, it was done.

The sisters clutched at their bodies as if suddenly nude, searching for dresses no longer there. But it wasn't clothes they were missing. They bleated and whined, then turned to each other and screeched in outrage.

He motioned once more and the woman before the door moved aside, still groping herself, splitting her attention between her body and her sister. She stumbled out of the way, now blind to his presence and his manipulation.

The door swung open under its own power, and he stepped inside the house. In the black of night, two lit candles illuminated the large room well enough. He located the Grandfather immediately, an old man reclining on his wide bed near the cold hearth, his head raised on a mound of pillows like some aged Arabian prince.

Unlike the weak and gasping patient on death's doorstep, as he'd presented himself to Wickham's sisters five years ago, the Grandfather was hale and hearty beneath his skin of aged, tanned leather. His eyes flared ever so briefly—the surprise of a man rarely surprised. His tongue snaked out to wet his lips, then was caught between his teeth as he watched Wickham move slow and surely toward the bed. “Ye took their power. Why?”

“They toyed with my sisters.”

The man scoffed. “I wanted the message to reach ye.”

“It reached me, though likely not the message ye intended.”

“Aye, and five long, mean years ye've punished me for it.”

“Aye. Five years...and no end in sight...”

The man blinked rapidly, as if standing in a sudden rainstorm. Hope drained from his face—the very reaction Wickham had wished for, dreamed of. It had been five long years for him as well.

The Grandfather of the Muir Witch Clan dismissed the topic with a roll of his eyes and waved it away altogether. “Ye

found the woman? The Uncast?"

"I did." Wickham continued around the foot of the bed and stopped when only a meter separated him from his tormentor's face. "Any new revelations ye intend to share?"

"*Intend?* Ye think I'd withhold things from ye *now?*" The bastard sneered and struggled to sit up, punching his pillows behind him. "I ken nothing more. But still ye hope, aye? Desperate for any reason *not* to end me and accept my mantle!" His voice rose, its volume unseemly for the early hour. "Coward—"

The word hung unfinished in candlelight, cut off—along with the Grandfather's head—by a basket-hilt claymore that had been gifted to Wickham by its original owner, a resurrected Highlander who had wielded the weapon at the Battle of Culloden.

The ancient body fell back, and Wickham used the robes to clean his blade before returning it to the sheath at his hip. He entertained no emotion as he watched the blood of the man he hated spurt and splash onto the pillows. He wouldn't have lingered over the sight...had he not been waiting.

He glanced down at the head that had rolled past him only to be stopped by the hearthstones. The eyes were still open, the face frozen in mid-sneer. "No one toys with my family."

The heart took a surprisingly long time to stop its beating, but Wickham felt that moment instantly, as if the ground shook to mark the occasion. A white mist unfurled from the body like a flag, exalting in its freedom for a breath or two, before rolling like a slow wave of sea water toward Wickham.

He took one step back, then another. He thought he was ready. He was not. But the time was at hand. He recalled

another time, after his brother's death, when the power of another was transferred to him whether he wanted it or not. Would it feel the same?

Instead of rising up and pouring down onto his head, as that green light had done years ago, this white mist took its time, regarded Wickham while it built into something opaque—something resembling a human with robes and thin strands billowing around it, moved by wind, floating through water. Headed one second, headless the next.

Without thinking, Wickham wished he had the protection of his ancestors with him. It was a protection he'd once summoned for his niece. And just as it had years ago, that green ring of security appeared just above the ground and began circling his knees. The spirits of his ancestors were with him.

The figure noticed. With its attention now drawn to the floor, it also noted the Grandfather's head as well. When that nebulous face lifted, it considered Wickham. Time froze while they stared at each other. Weighing. Measuring. In a blink, the entity stood before him, proving the circle of ancestors was no barrier at all.

Because it, too, was an ancestor?

Wickham narrowed his eyes, tried to slip into its thoughts, its memories, but there was nothing but...mist.

The figure slowly sank toward the floor, loosely holding its form. The swirling green mist mingled with it, streamed into it like fast-moving clouds, sucked in by a hundred straws, and was gone. A moment later, White One was white again. No trace of green.

Wickham was on his own again. Would it attack him? Possess him? Turn him into someone else completely? It was impossible to prepare when literally anything could happen. After what occurred at his niece's wedding, he'd learned the supernatural world was not what he thought it was. A weighty realization for a powerful witch like himself.

The White One's head...bowed.

Wickham's body turned to stone and helplessly, he watched the cloud enter at his feet. He felt it move in and through his veins, spreading, saturating his cells with a kind of oxygen not of this world. He wanted to move, shake his leg, discern what was different, but mobility was impossible.

It entered his groin, his buttocks, and before he could contemplate its affect there, it rose into his guts, his stomach. It churned like a writhing snake, getting to know its environs. He was going to boke!

Next, it sought his heart, filled it, encompassed it—*soothed* it. The frantic pounding settled to a steady slow rhythm, back and forth, back and forth, like a rocking chair finding its tempo.

It expanded across his chest, into his oxters, down his arms. The sensation of cool mist spread out to his fingers, built in the knuckles, then punched through to the fingertips. Wickham held his breath as it rose in his throat, choking him. Over and over, he swallowed, trying to force it back down. He clutched at his neck, decided to dig it out, clawed at the tendons and broke the skin only once...before the lack of air took its toll and darkness swallowed him.

He never heard the hiss of mist as it made its triumphant entrance into his mind.

“We are Seanathair!”

WINTER'S BONES

*H*azelton, Idaho was a back-in-the-day town; back in the day, it used to be a town.

Halfway through our big move from Wyoming to the Oregon Coast, my car had broken down there nearly a year ago. My boyfriend and I had decided to stay, to see if Fate had dropped us there for a reason.

It hadn't.

Three short months later, he hadn't needed much of a reason to move on and leave me and the bills behind.

March decided to be mean this year. After a little bit of green peeked out of the snow, the temperature plummeted again and barreled through the valley like a winter witch on steroids and a turbo-charged broom. It turned everything to ice and promised nothing could recover when it thawed. Magic Valley was being punished for something. I just didn't know what.

On the way from my car to the back entrance of Twila's Cafe, I ignored the cold biting at my bare legs because I'd rather freeze than make my boss happy by wearing nylons. I hurried, but carefully, over deep tire treads frozen in the mud, and I wished for the thousandth time I didn't work for a man too cheap to gravel his parking lot.

I used my sleeve to grab the doorknob, knowing it would burn bare fingers like dry ice. Then I shouldered the old wood door open, sending a new shower of paint chips to the ground. Once upon a time, there had been a screen door too, but when it became more trouble than it was worth, it was gone. I'd volunteered to refinish the old wood once, if the owner, Pete, would spring for a mere quart of stain, but he didn't see the need.

"No one cares," he said, and that was that.

No one cares should be painted on the city sign.

As for Twila's, the fate of the screen door was pretty much Standard Operating Procedure. If it caused trouble, it was outta there. And everyone who worked for Pete knew they were just as expendable. Ambition wasn't rewarded, and squeaky wheels did *not* get greased. They got thrown on the fire and burned.

Unlike the rest of the country, Hazelton didn't have a labor shortage. If Pete canned someone during the breakfast shift, there'd be half a dozen women racing through the door before lunch, eager to please until their self-esteem couldn't take any more.

I guess my stunted self-esteem had more stamina than most since I'd been on the payroll nearly a year, second-in-seniority ever.

The smell of warm syrup and coffee hit me in the face and reminded me why I kept coming back—the slim chance of free food. Jericho, our breakfast cook, made living in Magic Valley almost worth the torment. He could make all the trouble he wanted, and Pete wouldn't so much as sneer. Jericho was his bread and butter.

The heavy taste of bacon grease hung in the air and woke my stomach. It rolled over and stretched like some silly, hopeful dog that thought this morning might be different from every other morning. This morning might mean food.

I swallowed my spit and told it to shut up.

I hung up my coat, crammed my bag into my locker, and spun the lock. It wasn't that the employees didn't trust each other—it's that we didn't trust Pete. And we kidded ourselves, pretending a man like that wouldn't have a master key, that he wasn't an arbitrary principal who would go through our things without asking permission.

Another nine months, and I could fight back. Another eight, if I walked to work more often...

Rena stood in the kitchen doorway wearing an ugly '50's orange dress and white apron that matched my own. She was chewing gum—which was forbidden. And grinning—which was even more rare. She held something behind her back and leaned in the doorway like she didn't care if she lost her job for it.

I was both excited and terrified. I didn't want to lose her. Sometimes her sarcasm was the only thing that got me through my shift.

“Good news and...good news,” she said, then popped her gum.

“Pete's not here!”

She nodded. “Doctor's appointment. I would have thought for sure he'd be better off with a big animal vet.”

My stomach started barking and wagging its tail. Breakfast, it seemed, was back in the realm of possibilities.

“And the good news?” I didn’t even care what it was. All I needed was a very clean costumer to leave something untouched. After working together for a few months, the rest of the staff knew my cupboards were bare, and they were kind enough to turn their backs when I squirreled away a little something inside a napkin. But with Pete always watching, I couldn’t save much. And if he caught me, he’d charge me full price for every little scrap.

Rena’s brows bounced. “Those weird sisters from Jerome were just here. Ordered two cups of coffee and a big breakfast, then said it was for you and left. They said to call it a birthday present. So...” She pulled her arm out from behind her and held out a plate piled high with pancakes, hashbrowns and a couple of fried eggs, all topped with a thick pile of bacon.

The rule was that any protein left on a plate was set aside for Bar Killer, Pete’s dumb-as-hammers rottweiler. It was a massive stuffed animal brought to life. No personality at all. Eat, slobber, sleep. It was a wonder he hadn’t gone the way of the screen door.

It was too good to be true, and I said as much.

Rena shook her head. “It’s all yours.” Then she lowered her voice. “And Jericho was cleaning the camera lens when I brought it back, so *someone* won’t even know.”

The woman really was risking her job to make sure I got a meal. Pete probably had a dozen cameras in the place, and he’d sure as hell review the footage when he got back from his appointment. But I couldn’t let her good intentions account for nothing, so I reached for the plate.

She held it back for a second. “You’re going to sit down and eat, right now, before you go out there. And if you want to save some for later, go ahead. But you’re *not* to give it away.”

My hands froze.

Rena rolled her eyes. “How often do we leave at the same time, Lennon? You think I don’t know where you go?”

“You *follow* me?”

She sighed. “I have. A couple of times. Just to make sure you were all right. But I don’t anymore. It’s none of my business, is it? But those old broads meant this for you.” She slapped her modest gut and jiggled it. “They sure as hell don’t think any of the rest of us are starving.”

Rena pushed the oversized plate into my hand and headed back to work. The place was always hopping for breakfast, so it was only fair...that I eat fast.

Despite what she said, I went straight for the packing station and pulled out two foil doggy bags. I slid half the bacon into one, along with a handful of hashbrowns. I rolled up two of the pancakes and slid them into the other. There wasn’t room in my stomach for more than one of Jericho’s pancakes, no matter how delicious. And though it was selfish, I kept both the eggs for myself. If I didn’t take care of me, I wouldn’t be around to help anyone else.

I hurried back to my coat, found the inside panel I’d made for just such an occasion, and slipped the foil packets inside. It was waist high, so if Pete did a quick search of my pockets, he wouldn’t notice them.

Breakfast was so good I cried while I ate and thanked God for those old hippie sisters from Jerome. It had to be luck alone that my birthday was in a few days. They couldn’t have known.

I crammed the last bite of pancake between my teeth, washed it down with quickly cooling coffee, and headed out to

rescue Rena from the hungry masses. I had the hiccups for half an hour.

Pete didn't show up until nearly eleven, when the worst of the morning crush had ended. We all worked silently, waiting to see how badly we would have to pay for that blissful, Pete-free morning. I was just starting to relax when he bellowed for Rena from behind the closed door of his office.

She forced a smile and pointed to table six. "They need coffee and their check." She handed off her order pad and gave me that too-frequent look that said, "In case I don't come back."

I was far too busy to eavesdrop, but I did pass the office slowly when I had the chance. Jericho scowled while he babysat pancakes, but forced a smile when he caught me looking. An untrained eye might not recognize that look, but I did. After a year of employee turnovers, it was obvious Jericho was ready to walk.

I felt sick, worried the tightrope that was our work lives was about to snap, and it would be my fault.

Pete was loud. Always. Now, his low murmur made me sweat. Rena was mouthy, but smart enough to choose her words carefully, except on days she wanted to tempt fate. I couldn't hear her at all.

Finally, I had a lull and joined Jericho in the kitchen. Together, we leaned against the counter and stared at the floor, waiting, dreading.

Rena's voice escaped through the cheap wood of the door and echoed in the nearly empty building. "*Are you shitting me?*"

Jericho and I looked up, wide-eyed, and laughed as quietly as we could. Nothing ever felt as good as someone telling off Pete Salinas.

“She runs this place, does the work of three,” I whispered. “He won’t let her go.”

The big cook nodded, but he didn’t believe that any more than I did.

Rena nearly ripped the door off its hinges and came out red-faced. She glanced at us and opened her mouth to speak but shut it again and headed for the dining room. At least she hadn’t grabbed her coat and stormed out the back.

“Lennon!”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, but I didn’t get two steps before Jericho’s hand grabbed my arm. He wasn’t much of a talker, so he just shook his head, pulled me back, and headed into the office in my place. The door slammed on Pete’s protest.

I joined Rena out front. “Three just got their food.” I set both our order pads on the counter and gave Rena the same look she’d given me. *In case I don’t make it back.*

“He found out about the breakfast, didn’t he?”

Rena nodded. “I told him it was bought especially for you, but he called me a liar. I suggested he drive to Jerome and find those sisters, to ask them himself. I suggested a couple of other things too, but I doubt he’s got the flexibility. And I’m pretty sure he’ll can me after the lunch rush. I’d walk out now, but I won’t leave you juggling it all. Janice will be here in a minute, but she’s more trouble than she’s worth.”

The front bell rang and eventually, I turned to greet the new customer. Unfortunately, it was Lynette Weaver, a sixty-

something woman who still spent her spare time arguing with her little brother, Andy. She just pretended to like the food at Twila's and only came to keep Andy away from his favorite restaurant.

They'd both filed restraining orders and couldn't come within 500 feet of each other, and in a town the size of Hazelton, population 813, that required a constant dance. Two gas stations, one grocery store, one café, two bars.

The inhabitants of our little town only welcomed the sight of Lynette because it meant her bully-brother had to stay away. And the only two things I could think of that might rank less popular than Andy Weaver, were Voldemort and Velociraptors.

Maybe.

"I'll take care of her," Rena said, then headed for Lynette.

The office door opened, a reminder that my life was about to take a serious turn for the worse. Jericho stepped out, gave me a wink, then went back to his kitchen. Pete filled the doorway, looking pissed, but politely asked, "Will you come in here, please?"

It was almost mean—that little grain of hope.

The morning's eggs and bacon still felt heavy in my stomach, but I wasn't about to puke them up. Those calories and carbs were staying right where they were.

Already, I was wondering if I had enough change in my purse to buy a newspaper. Maybe I could sneak the wanted section out of Twila's copy. If I had to drive to another town for a job, the gas alone would cost me another year. Another year of Hazelton. Another year of watching Lynette and Andy Weaver square off in the street over an inheritance of one lonely house that had produced two hateful people...

It wasn't worth it. I had to suck up to Pete. I couldn't take an extra year added onto my sentence.

The bell rang again, and I paused at the office door to see who had come in. My heart stopped when I recognized Mr. Tall, Dark and Brutally Handsome. He'd been in for lunch a week ago and disappeared as soon as he'd walked outside. Rena had literally run out the door to follow, but he was already gone. No tail lights. Nothing.

And now he was back.

Well, good for Rena. I was sure that this time, she'd have all her questions answered by the time his food was ready.



“I’M DISAPPOINTED,” PETE BEGAN. “I THOUGHT YOU understood the way things work around here.”

Was he kidding? Of course I knew! He'd wanted a doormat, so I'd been a doormat. I'd simpered and bit my tongue, tip-toed around his moods on freaking toe-shoes, and he thought I didn't know the job?

The Weavers be damned, I just couldn't summon a pucker.

I looked at the empty chair against the wall, but he didn't invite me to sit. I pulled it into the tiny space in front of his messy desk. “I work on my feet,” I reminded him. “In fact, I work pretty damned hard. You're lucky to have me.” My heart was beating a hundred miles an hour, but I frowned and tapped my lips. “You know, you might be able to keep a steady staff here if you offered, say, a free meal for every full shift.”

His eyes bulged a little—not so much at my suggestion, but from surprise. He never expected me to talk back. He

knew as well as the others how bare my cupboards were. It had given him the upper hand from the beginning. But Rena and Jericho had inspired me. As had the gift of breakfast.

Everyone stuck up for me because I was too spineless to stick up for myself. It was time to relieve them of that burden.

Pete was still gaping, so I went on, my future snowballing downhill.

“I guess you heard those gals from Jerome bought me breakfast for my birthday. But don’t worry. I didn’t punch in until after I’d eaten.”

Pete’s gaze fell to his desktop where two foil packets sat on a stack of papers. One had been ripped open. I finally noticed the greasy smear on his lips, the shine on his fingers.

“You ate my bacon? And the hashbrowns?” I forced another deep breath and summoned a smile. “You owe me the price of a full breakfast. Obviously, I’ll take it now. Cash. Like we have to pay you when you accuse us of stealing food.”

He wiped his arm across his guilty mouth. “You know the rules—”

“The one about saving leftover protein for your dog? Looks like even you failed there. But it doesn’t matter. That food wasn’t leftover. I’m sure if you’ll consult your dozen cameras—”

“I don’t have a dozen cameras,” he growled, but the flush of his bald head said he was lying.

I decided to test him. “As long as you don’t have one in the bathroom...”

His head nearly exploded. “That’s disgusting!” Then he glanced at the door, worried, like he thought his raised voice

might bring Jericho back.

Just what had the cook threatened?

“Come on.” I held out my hand and wiggled my fingers.
“Twenty-two bucks.”

“Twenty-two?”

“Yeah. Tax.”

He actually stood to dig his wallet out of his back pocket, and I struggled to keep the shock off my face. I really should bluff more often.

He pulled out a twenty and a five. “I need change.”

I lunged across the desk to pluck the bills from his fingers.
“That’s all right. I remember you rounding up a few times.” I stuffed it into my bra. “Now apologize.”

“What?”

I decided to cut my losses and pointed at the second foil packet. “You gonna eat the pancakes?”

He snorted. “No.”

“Good.” I snatched up the packet and held it behind my back. “Anything else?”

The door burst open. I thought Pete might wet himself, but he relaxed when he saw Rena.

“You can’t fire her,” she hissed. “Andy Weaver’s here.”

“So?”

I smiled and turned back to my nervous boss. “So...so is Lynette.” And when it came to getting one of them to leave, I was usually the best man for the job. I might not be good with animals, but I could get through to Andy, even when he was

losing his shit—which was inevitable if Lynette had beaten him there.

Instead of walking out from behind his desk to confront the problem in his own dining room, Pete pulled his chair under his butt and sat, then started shifting papers. He couldn't read a thing without his glasses. "Go on, then," he said, then glanced up at me. "You know what to do."

I played dumb. "And what's that?"

"Come on," Rena said, and grabbed my arm. "Andy's looking for a fight, and his only options are Lynette and my pretty Scotsman. If he damages that face, I'll kill him myself."

IT TOLLS FOR THEE

I grabbed the doorjamb to stop Rena from pulling me out of the office. “Just a minute. I don’t have to deal with Andy if I don’t have a job.” I looked back at Pete and waited.

He rolled his eyes and nodded, but I didn’t budge. He rolled his eyes again. “Fine. You still have a job.”

I let go of the door and hurried out of the short hall and handed my foil packet off to Rena. “Hold this.” I dusted my hands together, then found all the players.

Andy and the Scotsman stood nose to nose with the former up against the wall near the door. Lynette sat in her booth watching with bug eyes and a toohy grin, as if she expected to eat the loser for lunch.

Table three went on chatting and stuffing their faces, oblivious to the danger, though no one was oblivious to Rena’s Scotsman. Everyone in the dining room snuck glances in his direction. He didn’t have a kilt or bagpipes but might as well have.

That’s how detached Hazelton was from the rest of the world. Any stranger, anyone who even looked like they might have an accent, stood out like a sore and bloody thumb. I really had to get out of there.

For the time being, it appeared I didn't need to handle Andy, so I stood beside the register with Rena and watched. The two men were having some sort of staring contest. Andy, who was half a head taller, was mad someone stood between him and his sister. His fists flexed over and over, looking for the moment to strike. He glanced up at the big camera in the corner of the ceiling, and though his hands relaxed again, his face did not.

“Move along, man,” Andy growled. “Stay out of this or I’ll ___”

“Smear me like jam across the parking lot? Aye. A terrifying thought.” The stranger leaned forward and I’ll be damned if Andy Weaver didn’t flinch. “I want no part of yer squabble. But needs must.”

Andy laughed. “*Needs must?* What the hell does that mean?”

“It means ye’re leavin’. One way or t’other, standin’ or prone. Decide now.”

The bigger man leaned to the side and sneered at his sister. “You crazy bitch! If you spent good money on this guy, you’re an idiot.”

Lynette grinned at him like a toad with a fly in its mouth, took a sip of coffee, grinned some more. The feverish look in her eye—wet and intense—was the only physical characteristic she shared with her brother.

“I’m only a bystander,” the stranger said, then nudged Andy toward the door with a hand to his arm. “Go on, now. What ye’re scheming to do this night will end badly for ye. I suggest ye go into the big city and take a nice long holiday

from that winch. Gain some perspective.” He pulled the door open and waited.

Andy yanked his arm out of the guy’s grasp, and by doing so, took himself out the door. “Did you call my sister a winch? Speak English! I don’t even know what that means!” But he’d understood enough not to come back inside.

The door swung closed, and the entire dining room stared for a minute before exhaling as a whole. I’d been watching Andy’s face through the glass, though, and realized I must have missed the meat of their conversation because he wasn’t as pissed as he was spooked.

“Sir,” Lynette called out, “I’d like to buy you a drink.” Her voice was childlike, flirty. Poor woman thought she was still young and blond and cute. To the rest of us, she was old, white-haired and skeletal and looked closer to ninety than sixty, probably the result of a spiteful life.

The stranger turned and scowled at her, then headed for her table. He put a hand on the edge and leaned in. Rena and I leaned too.

“Barring distraction, yer brother means to set fire to yer house this evening. Ye’ll be dead and he’ll be jailed. Though this town might be better off without the pair of ye, let alone that vile house that spawned such creatures, I believed it fair to warn ye. Spend yer day wisely.” He straightened and turned, his gaze boring into mine. “Where might a man wash his hands?”



I POINTED DOWN THE HALL, TO THE DOOR PAST PETE’S OFFICE, and as the stranger passed me, something...primeval woke

inside me, reminding me I was a woman, albeit a defective one. Though he was easily the sexiest man I'd ever seen, I wasn't exactly turned on. I was just...alive again. And suddenly, I wanted to strip off my orange dress and stained apron—not to jump the poor guy, but just to remember who I had once been without that polyester straight jacket.

Or maybe I was just feeling my oats after standing up to Pete.

Rena didn't stray far from the restroom door. I tried to ignore the scratch of my clothes against my skin as I seated the lunch crowd and got them started with menus and water. While we waited for the Scotsman to come out again, I couldn't help wondering how he knew Andy Weaver's plans, or if he was just trying to put the fear of God into Lynette, a woman he couldn't possibly know.

Or could he?

Rena ducked into Pete's office, then came out grinning. I wanted to suggest a few more questions for the interrogation she had planned for her new favorite customer, but the bathroom door opened, and time was up.

Rena smiled politely. "The owner would like to buy your lunch, sir."

The man shook his head. "No time, but I thank ye."

She laughed. "You mean you just came in here to save us all from Andy Weaver?"

He sidled away from her. "Not all. No."

Janice, the slightly useful teenager, appeared at the back of the hall. Her mouth fell open and her gum fell on the floor, ignored, while she stared at our hero. Pete stuck his head out

of the office with a sour look on his face, like he'd changed his mind about buying the man's lunch after all.

"Relax," Rena told him. "He's not staying."

The Scotsman came into the dining room and didn't stop. I backed up a few steps to keep him from running into me. "Come now, Lennon. Are ye not ready to be finished with this place?"

I glanced down at my nametag, or rather, where my nametag should have been. I searched his face, confused. "Just how do you know my name?"

He took a deep breath and rubbed one hand down his face. "I got ahead of myself." He took a step back and held out a hand. "My name is Wickham Muir."

"Lennon...Todd."

"Pleased to meet ye."

"If you don't want to eat, what are you doing in a café?"

"I have come to collect ye. To convince ye to come with me, to leave all this..." He gestured around the room.

I laughed and glanced at everyone now clustered around the register, trying to catch every word. Even Jericho watched out the pass-through from the kitchen. My attention caught on the shiny foil packet on the counter, the one with the two pancakes inside. It reminded me that my life was the opposite of some romantic movie.

The truth hit me like a wet slap to the face. The entire *day* must have been a setup from the moment I'd stepped through the door!

I made a face at Rena. "Sounds like someone went to a lot of trouble to make my day." I smiled at my would-be knight in

shining armor. “I don’t suppose Andy was in on it?”

The bell rang. A bunch of school kids. It was time to get to work.

“Lass, ye’re mistaken. I’ve come of my own volition—”

“I’m sorry. It’s about to get busy—”

“Name yer price.”

I froze. “Excuse me?”

“I require yer undivided attention, Lennon Todd. And I am willing to pay for it.”

I tried to warn him with a look. “This isn’t funny anymore.”

“This is no joke. I swear it.”

I stepped around him and headed for the teenagers, snatched four menus and waved for them to follow me. But they didn’t. They just stared at me like they were...frozen in place. Beyond them, Lynette held a loaded fork up to her open mouth but didn’t bite.

“Forgive me.” The Scot kept his distance, but I heard him just fine due to the absolute silence of a room full of people. “The nonsensical brother and sister have drained my patience. I didnae wish to shock ye like this—”

I turned in a circle and searched for just one person who wasn’t in on the joke. But it looked like everyone in Hazelton wanted me to believe I had entered the Twilight Zone. I couldn’t even hear traffic outside.

“Ah. This is a nightmare.”

I’d dreamed the same thing often enough—busted for eating something I hadn’t paid for, sure I was going to lose my

job. All the elements were there. And this Scotsman had stuck in my subconscious from the week before.

I pulled out the nearest chair, plopped down on it, and started slapping my cheeks. “Wake up wake up wake up.”

The Scot chuckled. “Nay, Lennon, this is no dream.”

I ignored him and pinched myself. It hurt. “But I’m just dreaming it hurt. Happens all the time.”

“What sad dreams ye must have.” He came around to stand in front of me and gave me such a sincere look of pity, tears pricked the backs of my eyes.

All my senses worked too well for a dream. My ugly orange dress was just as ugly, just as orange as usual. I could taste bacon grease in the air, feel it against my face. I couldn’t remember when my dreams had been so...saturated before.

I got to my feet again, looked at all the bodies frozen in place, noticed all the details that hadn’t changed. I wouldn’t have remembered all this stuff in a dream.

What. If. It’s. Not.

Those four words nauseated me instantly. I gripped the back of the chair for balance, and I knew for sure this was no dream because I was seriously going to hurl—not from unexpected motion, but because there was no motion at all. I would have run to the bathroom, but I couldn’t trust my legs.

I had to make it stop. “You’re doing this?”

“I am. The two of us have stepped out of *Time* is all—”

“Then stop it! I mean, start it. Whatever! Just make it stop or I’m going to puke all over the place!”

That got his attention.

Sound roared back into my ears again. The murmur of voices, the *tink* of utensils against plates. Lynette finally took that bite she'd been staring at. The teenagers stared at me, mouths open, as if I'd moved across the room in the blink of an eye.

"Whoopsie," the Scot said. "I must remedy that."

He wandered around the kids and other customers, smiling at them, nodding, then moving on around the room. I took shallow breaths and swallowed hard, trying to get my stomach back where it was supposed to be. The customers scowled, wondering why I wasn't taking care of them.

Rena grabbed both the coffee and the decaf and started around the room.

I need waters...

Behind the counter, Janice was already filling a tray with glasses.

The Scot was back to me again. "Ye see, Lennon? With or without ye, life will go on here." He prodded me to stand. "Fetch yer coat and say yer farewells. We must be off."

I'd wondered if this day would come, if someone with actual magic might come along who might save me from my secret curse. If I refused to go with the guy, would I be blowing my only shot?

In the fifteen years since Grandma died, there'd been no one who might really know what to do about it. If this one got away, would it be another fifteen years for another to come along?

He'd said to fetch my coat. Like a zombie, I started to obey, until I caught sight of that packet again. My stomach

dropped and I exhaled all that hope. It looked like I would have to wait another fifteen years after all.

I faced him and shook my head. “I can’t go. I need this job to—”

“Pay yer bills? I’ve paid yer bills, Lennon. And ye should know yer employer plans to replace ye by mornin’.”

I shook my head harder, refusing to believe him. “You don’t know anything about my bills, or my obligations—”

“Ye mean Charlotte?”

Panic filled my chest and froze there like deep tire treads in the cold mud. Did everyone in town know my business? Had this guy been following me too?

“Easy, lass. Charlotte is well...and will continue to be well. Andy Weaver’s family home is not the only structure he means to burn tonight. He kens about yer Charlotte, ye see...”

I imagined him sawing at my precious tightrope with a knife. “I have to go—”

“She’s not there. I’ve taken yer forsaken friend somewhere warm and safe where she will be fed and cared for the rest of her days.”

Pete growled my name. I ignored him. “I don’t believe you.”

The man smirked and held out his hand. “Then ye’ll want to come with me, Lennon Todd, to see for yerself.”

HOPE IS A MEAN THING

The farewells at Twila's café were anything but tearful. Rena whooped and hollered and ripped off her apron like she'd just won the lottery. Pete, of course, fired her on the spot and offered Lynette Weaver the position of head waitress.

I could see the wheels turning while the devious woman considered his offer. No doubt she was fantasizing about the look on Andy's face when he realized he could never walk through those doors again.

When she accepted the job, I exchanged a look with Wickham. Apparently, she'd already forgotten his warning about her brother's plans. Or maybe Andy threatened to burn her alive on a regular basis.

"Not yer problem," Wickham said quietly, and held my coat open.

Rena came close to pat my cheeks. "Don't you worry about the rest of us. Jericho will be leaving too. Plenty of places want him. He was just staying for us."

Against Pete's protests, I pushed my way back to the kitchen to give the big cook a hug he'd never forget. "I'm sorry you put up with all this just for us."

“You’ll be okay, you think?”

We both looked out the pass-through at the stranger in black—the man I hoped was not an escapee from an asylum.

“I hope so. He still hasn’t said why he wants me. But I have my suspicions.”

“And if your suspicions are correct? Will you be all right?”

“If I’m right, he’ll keep me safe. I think he’ll be able to help me with something, so maybe we can work out a deal. I’ll have to be careful, though, that I don’t end up owing him anything.”

The Scot asked for my keys and said I was in no condition to drive. We would have been better with me behind the wheel, though, since he kept wandering to the wrong side of the road every now and then. We headed east, up the hill and out of town, toward Burley.

“When ye’re good and ready, I’ll show ye a faster way.”

I had driven to Burley often enough to know there was no faster route than the freeway, but I wasn’t going to argue the point.

Farmland stretched out in all directions, but my attention was elsewhere. My eyes were on the road, but all I saw was my little secret, wrapped in my grandma’s embroidered blue handkerchief and hidden beneath a floorboard in front of my closet.

I wasn’t a fool. I knew it was what Wickham Muir had come for.

Since it had been passed down to me, I’d been torn between wanting it out of my life and wishing one day I could have had someone to hand it down to. I’d tried to get rid of it,

as my grandma had, but I'd failed. Now, I couldn't imagine anyone else who could be trusted with it.

There was no telling what a man like Wickham would do with it. And until I knew, I wouldn't admit I even had it.

After wending our way into the heart of Burley, we stopped at a cheerful yellow building. The sign read *Pomerelle Place*. Wickham opened my car door. "I thought yer friend would appreciate a suite to herself, considering."

Considering she'd been living in a three-by-six shack for two years?

How the woman kept herself alive through Idaho winters, was anyone's guess. A year ago, I'd done my best to help insulate Charlotte's small sanctuary, and I tried to bring her food on a regular basis, but convincing my friend to go to a homeless shelter had proven impossible. Even now, when this stranger was willing to prove it, I couldn't believe he'd blasted Charlotte out of her home.

Maybe he'd warned her about Andy.

Either way, the woman wasn't going to be happy...



MY GUTS TWISTED. THE WOMAN WICKHAM POINTED TO WAS not Charlotte. This woman was blond and tiny and having her toenails prepped for paint while she sat back in a fluffy pink robe and grinned at the women fluttering around her.

My friend would have never allowed strangers within ten feet.

This was all just some mean trick that lost me my job and put my friend at risk, especially if Wickham was right about

Andy's weeny roast planned for Charlotte's shed.

"I don't know what you're playing at," I hissed, "but don't you think I would know my own friend?" I spun on my heel and headed back for the maze of hallways that would lead to the exit. "Get your own ride. I've got to find Charlotte."

He didn't even try to stop me.

"Do I get a pancake today?"

I stopped on a dime. My guts untwisted at the sound of Charlotte's standard greeting, but when I turned, I didn't see her. The little blond waved her fingers and those hovering over her stepped away as I closed the distance.

"Charlotte?"

"The one and only." She held out her arms, obviously proud of her transformation and her fluffy robe.

I shook my head and tried to merge the old version with the new. "You're a blonde?"

She fluffed a curl below her ear. "I am today. When someone offers you something for free, you order the top of the menu."

Also, something Charlotte said often.

"When I saw you yesterday—"

"When you saw me yesterday, I hadn't won the lottery yet, had I?"

"Lottery?"

"The Pomerelle Lottery. I'm set for life, kid." A tear escaped out the corner of her eye and I realized my face was getting wet too. Someone handed me a tissue and I mopped up.

“I don’t believe it. You’ve suddenly decided you like people?”

Charlotte glanced at the women waiting by the wall. “My posse? You bet. If it means three squares a day...and that my Café Gal doesn’t have to worry about me anymore.” She gestured for me to come close, then leaned forward and whispered, “I intend to make them regret pulling my social security number. That kitchen’s about to lose money.” She glanced past me. “I see you’ve met the man from the lottery. Isn’t he just the most gorgeous thing God ever set to music?”

I’d noticed. And it only made it more improbable he wanted anything to do with me. But then again, I wasn’t what he was after...

Our little reunion was brief and turned more tearful when I told her I was leaving town for a while. “But at least I know where to find you when I come back, right?”

“That’s right. I’m not going anywhere. I have paperwork.”

I wondered if that paperwork would be stored with her marriage certificate in an empty binocular case of stained leather. I didn’t dare ask if they’d allowed her to bring it into the building.

Five minutes later, we were back in the car and leaving behind a nice little chunk of my heart. It took another five before I could keep my face dry. Then I stuffed used tissues into my pockets and swallowed my pride. “Thank you for what you did for Charlotte.”

“Ye’re welcome.”

“I can’t imagine how much it cost you.”

“Money means nothing to me, lass. Dinnae fash.”

I smirked. “Money means nothing to you? But we need *my* car to get around in.”

He smirked back. “For the now.”

“For the now,” I repeated, to show him how silly he sounded. But really, with that accent, the words hardly mattered.

We headed west again. I turned on the radio to feel less awkward, then I angled my phone away from him and leaned against the door. I wanted to pull up my accounts and check my balances, but I worried he wouldn’t take too kindly if I didn’t take his word for things. Now that I’d seen what he’d done for Charlotte, I almost dared hope he’d been telling the truth about the rest.

My power bill showed a zero balance, but without my spreadsheet, I couldn’t check to see if I’d already paid it. The coming month was going to be high, too, if I didn’t wear more layers and use my space heater less.

When I accessed my bank account, there was a notice that said my title would be mailed to... “Rena Wood now *owns my car?*”

Wickham glanced at my phone. “Charlotte has no use fer it, aye? But if ye’d like to leave it with someone else—”

“Leave it?” I looked out the window and took a deep breath. “You don’t think I’ll need a car when I come back?”

“Auch, Lennon. If ye want honesty...”

“I do.”

“I cannot imagine ye’ll be comin’ back to Hazelton again. But if ye do, I promise ye’ll have a sound vehicle. Will that do?”

I'd had a love/hate relationship with that Honda for four long years. But I'd never imagined I could afford to trade it for something else. If he was right, and he'd paid all my bills, a world of possibilities just opened up for me. But first, I'd have to pay him back. And I was pretty sure I knew what would settle the score.

I should have kept my mouth shut, but I had no self-control. "What do you want from me?"

We topped a hill and my ears popped. He shut off the radio. "I don't want, lass. I *need*."

My imagination got the better of me and I blushed. I cleared my throat and asked the obvious. "Then what do you *need* from me?"

"I fear we must learn that together. But for now, I need ye to collect yer things. Pack light but leave nothing behind ye wish to see again. Dinnae forget anything...*important*."

Oh, so he was going to deny that the one magical item I possessed was the thing he needed?

Fine. I could play along. But his kitchen was about to lose money.

A MORTAL'S DOING

*M*y building was just one street south of Main. What had once been a carpet store was chopped up into a dozen small apartments with questionable plumbing and at least one large window in each, but only because of the fire code. When Neal and I had been stranded, the cheap rent seemed like a godsend, and we convinced ourselves we could turn six-hundred square feet into something charming.

We painted the dark paneling an azure blue, made the ceiling look like puffy white clouds, and threw a few lighthouse pictures up on the wall to remind us our ultimate destination was the Pacific Coast.

When the weather warmed up enough to leave a window open, I planned to repaint, to remove the glaring reminders that Neal had reached the ocean and I had not. Taking down the lighthouses had been the only remodeling I could afford, so I'd put my head down and concentrated on paying down balances so I, too, could leave Hazelton in the rearview mirror.

Nine months left...

Only it wasn't nine months anymore, thanks to a perfect stranger. I should be more excited than I was. After all, I'd been dreaming of this moment.

Someone had sprinkled salt on the steps since I'd left in the early morning, when I'd had to count on the fresh snow for traction. The main entrance was unlocked, as usual. No amount of urging could get my fellow dwellers to lock the thing. My guess was they wouldn't consider it until there were break-ins on the street. In general, crime in our little town was pretty low. And if you took Andy and Lynette's pot-stirring out of the statistics, it was lower still.

I needed to ask Wickham how he knew of Andy's arson plans and promised myself I wouldn't leave the city limits again without knowing.

I tried not to make excuses as we wended our way through the hallways to my door. I sorted through my keys and Wickham reached around me to push on the wood. The door swung open, and I gasped.

"I never leave it unlocked," I hissed.

He pushed me back against the far wall and slipped inside, his boots making no sound. I couldn't imagine who would want to break into the apartment of someone as poor as I was. Had the landlord come snooping? If so, he wouldn't have left the door unlocked.

Suddenly, standing in the hallway, waiting for a criminal to run out of my apartment seemed like a stupid move, so I started back outside. Then I imagined some thief poking around and finding my hiding spot, and I forgot all about saving myself.

Even if a burglar hadn't found my "precious," I couldn't just let this strange Scotsman go snooping around. If I hadn't been hallucinating, the man had frozen a café full of people. Who knew what other capabilities he might have? Could someone like him sniff out my secret?

Of course he could!

I shoved the door open and lifted my forearms, fighter style, ready to defend myself. But all that greeted me was a mess.

My little apartment had been tipped on its head and shaken. Every little scrap of paper lay on the floor, my chair turned over, my couch cushions everywhere but the couch. There was only a half wall between the living room and the bedroom, and a drawer's worth of underwear decorated my fat little television and dangled from the antennae.

"This was personal," Wickham said, coming out of the bedroom with Neal's old green suitcase hanging from one hand.

"I had better luggage," I explained, "but my boyfriend took it."

"Good enough for today." He opened it on the cushion-less couch and leaned the lid back, then glanced at the lacy flags on the TV.

"I'll pack my stuff. Maybe you should wait in the car."

"Not bloody likely."

"All right, then. Sit down. You're making me nervous."

He uprighted the chair and sat facing the door, like a watchdog sitting on the doormat. I was glad he didn't see me smile. And I was glad he'd turned his back so I could check my hiding place. I figured if he'd found my secret, he would have been on his way already and not waiting around for me to pack my earthly goods.

I went to the dresser drawers set in the bedroom wall, but there was nothing left inside them. The contents were strewn

all over the bed, floor. My grandmother's jewelry box—the one thing I loved with all my heart—had been smashed. Its green fabric covering lay in shreds, the shattered wood spread across the room, and its beaded decorations lay in a heap against the baseboards, near my hidey hole.

I knelt and stuffed a handful of those silly, ugly beads into the pocket of my apron, temporarily swallowed my heartache, and pushed on the end of the loose board in the floor. The space had been perfect. One of the better hiding places I'd had over the years...

The hole was empty! No matter how many times I fished around it, there was nothing left.

Some guttural shriek deafened me, until I realized all I had to do was shut my mouth to turn it off. I was gasping for air by the time Wickham reached me. He took one look at the board and my grasping, empty hand and cursed.

“Who is Hank?”

“What?”

“You screamed *Hank*.”

“It's...what I call it.”

“And it's gone?” He couldn't know what he was talking about, but he did.

“It's gone.”

A moan started deep in my stomach, and he shook my shoulder. “Dinnae fash. This was a mortal's doing. All is not lost.”

Everything that defined me was suddenly paid off or stolen, and I had to either laugh or cry. I chose a combination of both, though no tears came.

My handsome stranger wasn't putting up with it. He put his hands under my arms and dragged me up to my feet. "Ye'll need some clothes. Nothing flashy, if ye please." He was probably judging my fashion sense by my lovely orange dress, but other than my underwear, my wardrobe was pretty boring.

I struggled for words and came up with one. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you still want me to go with you? I don't have it anymore. Hank...is someone else's problem now."

He was suddenly standing in front of me, putting his hands on the sides of my head and making me look him in the eye. "Yer Hank, *whatever* it may be, doesnae define ye, Lennon Todd. It cannot. Ye must be more than that if ye hope to survive this."

I choked on a laugh. "Survive? You didn't say anything about surviving."



ASTONISHING HOW LITTLE I TOOK OUT OF THAT APARTMENT. The car had been packed to the gills when Neal and I had left Powell, Wyoming, crammed with boxes containing everything we owned. What valuables he hadn't pawned off in our darkest hours, he took with him. Along with his clothes, he probably hadn't filled that knock-off Gucci suitcase I'd bought at Ross.

I stood in the doorway and surveyed the crap I'd once thought essential enough to drag down our gas mileage on our long quest for the ocean. It wasn't worth a good-bye.

Wickham took the suitcase to the car. It was filled with wrinkled clothes, a few Ziplock bags full of sentimental trinkets like a handful of beads from that jewelry box, and my feather pillow. Over the years, that pillow had dwindled to half its regular size, but I was taught young that feathers mean quality. Mother never specified the number of feathers.

“I need to call my landlord,” I thought out loud.

“I took care of all that. Ye’re well and free of this place.” He came around to open the car door for me, then paused, like he was allowing me time for a fond look back.

I just looked at him. “Are we leaving without Hank?”

“We are not.”

I climbed in the car. After he shut the door, I whispered, “Good.”

Hank was definitely a curse, but I really wouldn’t wish it on anyone else. At least, not yet.



WICKHAM STRAPPED ON HIS SEATBELT. “ENEMIES, LASS. NAME them all.”

I laughed. “All? Are you kidding me? I never had time to make enemies.”

He shook his head. “Think.”

I took a deep breath and tried. “Pete, obviously, but he wouldn’t leave his precious domain with Lynette at the till, just to rummage through my stuff.”

“But he knew ye were leavin’ town.”

“True. I only need to look at his face and I’d know. But I’d rather not go back to Twila’s if I can help it.”

“Not a problem. I’ll duck in and have a look.”

“At his face?”

“Aye. What else?”

If I protested that he wouldn’t know if Pete were hiding something, it would mean I would need to go inside instead, so I kept my mouth shut and hoped the for the best.

As we neared the mid-century building, dread built in my stomach like fast-cooling bacon grease, and I knew it wouldn’t go away until we put Hazelton in the rearview mirror. But just how would we do that without a car?

Wickham got out of the car and a minute later, I got a text from Jericho. *“Your Scotsman is back. You ok?”*

“I’m fine. Out front. Someone ransacked my apartment. He wants to know if it was Pete.”

“Hasn’t left all day. Training that nasty woman. He’s ready to skin you and Rena alive for leaving.”

“We were fired.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter.” His smiley face assured me he wasn’t suffering too badly.

“Rena said you were leaving too?”

“Enjoying the show for now, then I’ll go. You take care.”

Wickham got back in the car. “Wasn’t him,” he said.

“Jericho just told me Pete hasn’t left all afternoon.”

Wickham growled. “Text. Why didn’t I think of that?” He turned the key to start the car. “Next?”

“I was thinking the landlord might have come by. When did you talk to him?”

“If he wished to check the condition of the flat, he surely wouldn’t have ravished the place. Or is he the type of man given to tirades?”

“No. He’s a kind old man. Wouldn’t hurt a fly. Definitely wouldn’t touch my underwear. And wouldn’t steal anything.”

“Then we’ll save him for last.” He rested his hand on the stickshift, but didn’t put the car into gear. “Next?”

I shrugged. “I’m serious when I say there is nobody. Except for Pete and Andy Weaver, I haven’t so much as had an argument in this town.” I bit my lips for a second, looking for courage. “What about you? How did you know about my... Hank? And could someone else have found out the same way you did?”

He shook his head. “Not possible. I was sent to find ye by an old man, now dead. The prophet and protector of the Muir Witch Clan. No one else was in the room. Besides, I’m the only soul on this earth with whom he would have shared his... prediction.”

“Prediction?” I shook my head and considered bolting. “Look Mister Muir, you’re from a different world. We don’t even use the same vocabulary. Are you sure I’m the one he was talking about?”

A big laugh barked out of him. “Aye, lass. I’m sure. Unless there is someone else in Hazelton, Idaho with a Hank?”

I made a face and shrugged. “There is now.”

THE HOWLING

We drove around the streets of Hazelton with no destination in mind. I supposed we were hoping someone would jump out in front of the car and confess, but that didn't happen. So we moved on to the west where, seven miles down the road, lay another tiny town called Eden. It took both towns to fill an elementary school and high school, located halfway between them.

The basketball games were as popular as rock concerts. If you didn't have a kid at Valley, you were probably related to someone who did. And seriously, what else was there to do on a Friday night? The four bars between both towns were filled with old farmers who no longer had to get up to milk the cows, and a few old women looking for sugar daddies. Hardly a social atmosphere for the masses.

I suggested we pull into the quickly filling parking lot at the high school.

Wickham turned the car. "What are we lookin' for?"

"Andy's truck. Of course, if he's here, I don't want to go in."

"If he'd found Hank, would he set it aside for a basketball game?"

I laughed at the idea of Andy finding my secret and accidentally opening it. “I doubt it. Might not come out of hiding for days. Maybe forever. Can’t imagine anyone deserving it more. This might not be a bad thing after all.”

“Do ye see his vehicle?”

“I do not.” Excitement bubbled in my chest at the possibilities.

“Right then.” He turned the car back to the street.

“Where to now?”

“To find Hazelton’s would-be arsonist.”



ANDY WEAVER RENTED A LITTLE FARMHOUSE NORTH OF TOWN whose canal dried up a decade ago, but he still complained about it, as if he had crops to water or cattle to raise. Truth was, he worked at a big plant in Burley and probably never so much as pulled a weed, let alone farmed an acre.

No sign of his truck, and since he and his truck were inseparable, we went looking in town and hoped he wasn’t working the night shift in Burley.

“If he has it,” I said, “he would have called in sick. If he was able to think that clearly.”

We drove past the old, abandoned Simplot building. Charlotte’s shack butted up against the hill that lay halfway between the rear parking lot and the cemetery, and I was reminded of Andy’s plans to burn it down. Though I didn’t have to worry about Charlotte anymore, it pushed me to ask what had to be asked.

“Wickham?”

“Aye.”

“How did you know Andy was planning to burn down Charlotte’s shack? Or even Lynette’s house?”

“The shack! We should check it while we’re here, aye?”

He made a sharp turn into the Simplot parking lot, but I couldn’t let myself get distracted. “You were telling me how you knew...”

At the side of the building, he sighed and stopped the car, then cut the engine. “Ye’ve had enough shock for one day, lass. Can we not discuss this tomorrow? In my experience, normal folk must be spoon-fed, so to speak.”

“Normal folk? At my apartment, you used the word *mortal*. You froze everyone at the café, and you’ve been throwing around prophets and predictions and witches for hellsakes. I’m not sure you can shock me now. It may take some time to catch up to your vocabulary, but I’m pretty sure normal people don’t carry curses around with them. Or do they?”

“Touché. I’ll owe ye’re not the usual—”

“Just tell me. Was this all just a scheme by Andy to get me out of town?”

He looked me in the eye. “I am not in cahoots with Andy Weaver.”

“Then tell me. The truth, please. Can you read minds or something?”

He nodded once. Admitted it! “I cannot read minds as I once could. But I can look at memories. So not current thoughts, but often...fresh ones.”

I made a noise I didn't recognize. A laugh, maybe. "Not a mind reader, but a former one."

"Aye. We Muir witches usually come in sets of two. When my brother died, my ability to read thoughts diminished. Became...shoddy."

I imagined what he'd seen in my own head and thought I might be sick. But maybe he'd encountered *curses* like mine before, and he hadn't been surprised at all. That strange laugh escaped from me again. "Just to be clear, you can see people's memories?"

"I typically ask permission first, so ye can relax, Lennon."

And I did relax. As if all of this was believable. As if I could trust him. As if I wasn't headed for the State Hospital in Blackfoot. But first, I had to know that my curse was safely *contained*, where it couldn't do any damage.

"Okay. I lied. I am shocked. But I have to ask, can you read Andy's memories now? Remember where he went last? See if he found Hank?"

"Nay, lass. I have no connection to him. He must be nearby and within sight."

"Do you have to see him to freeze him?"

He grinned. "Now that is much more complicated. No time for that lesson tonight."

Time had ceased passing normally the moment the black-clad Scot had stepped into Twila's, but he was right. It was getting dark, and if we were going to confront Andy, I needed to clearly see where all the exits were.

Other than Neal cleaning me out, I'd never been robbed before. I kept waiting to feel like my personal space had been

violated, but now that I'd left that space, and considering the condition I'd left it in, I felt a little bit like I'd violated it myself.

As far as having my precious curse taken from me however, deep down, I was pretty pissed.

I meant what I'd said, that I couldn't wish such a fate on a nicer guy than Andy, but we'd all be better off if Karma took care of him the old-fashioned way—throw him in jail and keep him away from rational, peace-loving human beings.

Wickham got out of the car, and when I didn't wait for him to come open my door, he gave me a funny look. "I like to enjoy courtesy when there is time for it."

I shrugged. "I thought we were in a hurry."

He shrugged too. "When in America, I suppose..." Then he held out his hand to me. "Stay close."

Wickham Muir was possibly the most handsome man I'd ever seen in person. Slipping my hand into his should have been more exciting than it was, and I wondered what was wrong with me.

"Easy, lass. I'm marrit."

I huffed out my breath. "I thought you said you couldn't read my thoughts."

He chuckled quietly, grinned at me while we hurried toward the backside of the building. "Auch, but I can read faces fine."

Once the hub of the town, the old metal warehouse was now more rust than not. A few well preserved strips of galvanized steel offered a hint at what it might have looked like in its prime. Now, there were so many gaps, the wind

whistled and howled through it when it came from the north or south. And though everyone knew the source of the sounds, its proximity to the cemetery inspired plenty of local folklore.

Charlotte said it kept troublemakers away from her little home, so she considered the howling wind her guardian angel.

We shuffled to the corner of the building and peeked toward the hill a hundred feet away. The door of the shack sat open, but no sign of Andy. I took a step so I could see the rest of the back parking lot and sure enough, that big black truck was there, parked far enough away that flames couldn't damage it.

I had changed into a pair of jeans and my usual three layers of shirts, but the wind found its way up my pant legs and under my coat. I let go of Wickham and zipped up, then looked back at the shack.

Andy stumbled out of the doorway with a bottle of beer in one hand, a strip of cloth hanging out of it. His face lit when he saw us. "Lennon! You found me! Where's your little friend?"

My only consolation was that his nose and bare hands were bright red. I hoped he'd been waiting for hours.

Wickham squeezed my arm. "Tell him she's dead."

"She froze to death last night!" I pretended to wipe away a tear, then we started walking across the parking lot in Andy's direction.

Wickham stopped me at the edge of the crumbling asphalt, and I was relieved. I'd faced Andy alone only once, in the dark parking lot behind Twila's. Even with Wickham by my side, I didn't want to get close again. Not here, out in the wild, without a handful of witnesses to keep him civil.

The clouds shifted and exposed the sun, which hadn't crossed Idaho for a week. Bright light fell in a fat line on the frozen earth about five yards ahead, like a barrier we shouldn't cross, as if I needed discouragement. I no longer believed Andy had Hank. He wouldn't be running around town setting fires. He'd be home, sucking his thumb.

And if he didn't have it, we didn't need to be there.

“Wickham? I don't think he has it. Maybe we should go. He can't hurt Charlotte, even if he burns—”

“He has it. Didnae get a good look. He was in a hurry. Wasted too much time with yer...underthings. Took it and ran.”

It was too much. I couldn't...

I stepped away from Wickham and bent over to hurl on the ground, sickened by the knowledge that Wickham had had a glimpse of my most guarded secret. And that, combined with what Andy might have done with my underwear—the things I'd plucked off the antennae and tossed into my suitcase—made it impossible to keep my stomach down.

Thankfully, there wasn't much in it.

Wickham grumbled something, then shouted at Andy, interrupting his laughter. “Plannin' a fire...or two, are ye then?”

I straightened in time to see Andy's grin fall away. What replaced it was pure, nasty Andy. “I found your rat's nest, Lennon. I found your precious trinket!”

“Nice of ye to confess.” Wickham called. Maybe he was trying to keep Andy's attention on himself. “And just where are ye keepin' it?”

Andy's grin was back. With the bottle, he gestured over his shoulder at the shack. "In here...where it's about to get toasty warm!"

"So ye mean to negotiate, do ye?"

"Here's the deal." Andy flicked on his lighter, its flame nice and tall until the wind blew it out. He didn't notice. "You get your ass back to Twila's and get your job back, and get your boss to kick my sister out and ban her for life, and I won't fry this place."

"Ye're certain it's inside, then?"

Andy frowned. "I said so, didn't I?"

"Thanks, mate." Wickham patted my arm. "Trust me, now."

I smiled. "You gonna freeze his ass?"

"Aye."

"Can't you just leave him frozen?"

He chuckled. "I'll not murder him, love. I must save my sins for another day."

The wind stopped blowing as if someone had shut off the power to God's fan. Wickham started across the vacant field and up the rise while Andy stood perfectly still, as did the cloth hanging from the bottle in his hand. No distant cars, no howling gusts from the Simplot building behind us. Just... peace.

If I had Wickham's power, I'd freeze time a dozen times a day, just to catch my breath. Maybe take a nap. But considering how that might mess up the rest of the world, I figured it was a good thing I had no magical powers at all.

And maybe there was Someone up there, out there, with a grand plan, who paid close attention to who got what.

And if that were true, maybe Hank had come down through my family for a reason. Not just bad luck. Not for punishment, but for something else.

If so, maybe Wickham could help me figure out what that was.

The Scot wasn't inside the shed for long, and when he stepped out, he held up a familiar blue-edged handkerchief. If Andy had kept Hank wrapped up, maybe he hadn't touched it at all. Maybe he was still just as ignorant as before. And thankfully, Wickham was in no hurry to touch it.

He hurried back to me in the silence, held out his hand long before he reached the asphalt, in quiet assurance that he didn't mean to keep Hank for himself. I lifted it to my face to suck the smell of my grandmother's perfume into my lungs. It was faint, but there, mixed with the smell of dust and pinewood.

"I suppose, if you'd come to Hazelton only for this," I said, tucking it into my bra and under my left boob, "that you would have frozen me too."

He gave me a funny look, then turned to face Andy again. "Lennon Todd, its time ye trust me. I've come for *you*, not for Hank. We can toss him in the ocean if it pleases ye."

"The ocean? We're going to see the ocean?"

"Aye, lass. Ye're likely to see half the world before this is over."

"Well, why didn't you say so? Let's get going."

He chuckled. “Nice try. But we’ve yet to finish with this bastard.” He put his hands on his hips and shouted, “I dinnae believe ye’ll do it!”

After a second or two of surprise, the Arson of Hazelton flicked his lighter back to life and moved it closer to his Molotov cocktail. “Fine!”

“Wait!” I couldn’t resist once last taunt, since I might never get the chance again. “What was your plan, Andy? To just stand there while I go do what you want? Wait here in the cold?”

I could tell by the look on his face, he hadn’t thought it through, and he hadn’t expected me to have Wickham with me. He couldn’t very well warm up in his truck while he waited and not expect either one of us to go after my “trinket.”

Andy made sure I was watching as he turned and chucked the bottle at the shed. It shattered, but nothing caught fire—he hadn’t lit it.

I laughed. “I never said he was smart.”

Cursing as viciously as he knew how, Andy flicked his lighter and held it against the wood where the bottle had shattered. Flame eventually attached itself to the wall and he straightened to sneer in our direction. But the fire quickly spread and he danced away from it, eventually running for his truck.

I tucked that sight into my memory, to cheer myself up on rainy days.

“Come on!” Wickham grabbed my arm and we started running. “We’ve witnessed his humiliation. He’ll want revenge.”

The big engine roared to life as we cleared the corner. I headed for the car, but Wickham pulled me toward the side of the Simplot building as the monster-sized wheels squealed our way. We flattened ourselves against twisted, rusted metal and waited.

The headlights were weak in the fading light, but they found my car. For a second, I was sure Andy wouldn't risk a scratch on his truck just to punish us, but instead of turning away from my car, he turned into it. The truck's grill slammed against the driver's door and my poor Honda hopped sideways for ten feet before it finally flipped over.

Andy stared at me, his eyes framed in his rearview mirror. Fresh hatred, no doubt, for the damage to his truck.

He slammed it into reverse and bright white lights warned us to run. But Wickham held me in place as we watched that massive tailgate come at us.

"Trust me. Hold tight," Wickham shouted.

Suddenly, we were standing at the top of the hill, looking down on the fire now consuming Charlotte's sanctuary.

"Um. Um," I repeated, shocked I was still alive. "Um..."

"Easy, Lennon. Deep breath now. That is called stepping out of *Place*. And why we willnae need yer car."

Beyond the hellishly high flames, we watched Andy jump from his truck, now three feet deep into the building. He ran to the rear, probably expecting to see our bodies smashed between his bumper and the crushed wall of steel.

He collapsed to his knees, shaking his head and howling like he'd been cheated. The wind carried his angry ranting to us along with the smell of burning pine and chemicals,

probably from the insulation I'd stapled to some of Charlotte's walls.

Andy probably thought he was losing his mind, and I almost felt bad for him. "Hopefully, he's had enough fire for one night."

Sirens sounded in the distance. People gathered on the far side of Main Street. Despite witnesses, Andy jumped to his feet, into his truck, and took off like a bat out of hell.

Wickham let go of my hand, and a second later, my suitcase appeared in his hand.

I glanced at my poor smashed car. "You froze me?"

"I stepped out of *Time*, aye."

I looked pointedly at the ugly green case. "I don't want to open that."

He smirked. "I already have, and I added yer underthings to the fire."

I shook my head. "Still..." I sighed. "Where to now?"

"Let's visit yer friend from the café, so she willnae worry that Weaver has murdered ye."

In no hurry to fly through the air, or whatever we'd just done, I stalled. "Wickham?"

"Aye?"

"If you can do stuff like that. If you can freeze anyone, get what you want, and leave without anyone touching you, then what do you need me for?"

"Honestly?" He sighed. "I havenae any ken."

"Sorry? What does that mean?"

“Means I don’t know. I don’t know why I need ye. But I have no choice but to trust an old man whom I swore I wouldnae trust.”

“What exactly are you trying to do?”

He stared at the flames. “I must find...someone...and destroy him, before he destroys those I love.”

“Who is he?”

“One of the Fae race.”

“Fae?”

“Fairy.” His head swiveled. His eyes found mine. “I need yer help to destroy a fairy.”

Fairies. Magic. Survival. He’d done a poor job of packaging this vacation he was offering. Looked like it might cost me a whole lot more than money. And I could tell, the way he watched me, he was waiting for my final answer.

I sighed and nodded. “Don’t worry about me. Considering what I have in my bra, killing fairies doesn’t seem so farfetched.”

CLOUDS BETWEEN MY KNEES

I explained where Rena lived, in Eden, and a second later, we were standing behind a fat juniper tree across the darkened street. While we watched, country music leaked out the door when half a dozen people came and went, scurrying to or from a nearby house in the bitter cold.

“Looks like she’s dragged some of her neighbors over to celebrate leaving Twila’s.”

Inside the house was standing room only. When we declined Rena’s invitation to join the party, she put on her coat and came outside. I briefly explained that I had intended to leave my car with her, but Andy had totaled it. She was a little too drunk to understand, but at least plenty of people had seen us standing there, alive and well, though freezing our butts off.

Wickham explained we had an uber waiting around the corner and we had to go. After one last hug, Rena released me, and he and I headed down the sidewalk and around the corner. He stopped below a streetlight, looked up and down the road, then waved his hand and the light went out.

The darkness made it feel ten degrees colder.

“I’m pleased to find ye’ve an open mind, Lennon Todd.” He grabbed my left hand and held tight. “Take hold of my arm, for balance.”

“Balance?”

“I’m about to show ye Ireland. Would ye like that?”

“What? Why am I going to lose my balance?” I thought of Superman. “You can’t freaking fly, can you? It’s a little too cold to—”

If I finished that sentence, I left the last few words in Idaho. And when I say left, I mean I was somewhere else when my mouth stopped moving. It was still cold, still dark, but the little neighborhood of Eden—full of cars and lit windows and the streaking shadows of cats on the prowl—was gone.

Rolling hills of snow spread out in every direction. The only light came from a long cottage with a low roofline. Gridded windows filled with yellow light teased the possibility of warmth, if I could just get inside. The moon turned the snow blue, and the moisture in the air convinced me I’d be blue soon as well. I never thought anywhere could be colder than Idaho in the middle of a winter rebound.

When he’d asked if I wanted to see Ireland, I should have suggested we try Italy first.

“Lennon.”

“What?” I found Wickham’s face. He looked worried, but hopeful.

“Ye’re all right, then?”

I shrugged, too cold to worry about my mental state. “This is Ireland?”

“It is.”

“How about Italy? Know the coordinates of somewhere warm? A beach, maybe?”

“Come on, lass. There’s a fire in the hearth. Ye’ll be warm in no time.”

“How do you know that?”

He paused enough to point above the cottage where a steady stream of smoke puffed from a chimney. There was no telling how old the place was, or if we were visiting some other century. And just in case he was my only ticket back to the twenty-first, I clutched Wickham’s arm like my life and sanity depended on it.

An old man opened the front door before we had a chance to knock. He greeted Wickham and called him what sounded like Shannaher.

Wickham gave him a sharp look as if he’d been insulted. “Brian, this is Lennon Todd.”

While we hung our coats on hooks behind the door, I quietly asked him what the word meant.

“Grandfather.”

I snickered. “He called you Grandfather?”

“The intended meaning is Chieftain, but I have no intention of filling that role.” He pointed to a wood chair beside the huge fireplace and the warm fire he’d promised. The gesture said *sit there*. The look on his face said *sit down and zip it*.

I laughed again. “I don’t know. You may want to reconsider. You’ve got a talent for bossing people around.”

I moved to the chair but remained standing to expose more surface to the heat. When I turned to warm my backside, I noticed a laptop on a big wood table that took up most of the

space in the room. It wasn't until that moment I realized I hadn't been taken back in time.

I also noticed the old man was a duplicate. His twin, identical right down to the laugh lines around his eyes, sat in a chair beside the front window.

Most Muir witches come in pairs...

The brother winked. "Welcome, like."

I thanked him by winking back.

The main room took up the center of the house with windows at the front and back. The fireplace took up most of an inner wall with the kitchen on the opposite side, the table splitting the space in half. Brian turned from the stove with a large tray in hand. After he set it on the table, he brought a steaming cup of something to me. "Hot broth, lass. I could hear yer stomach growlin' an hour ago."

"Thank you." I had thawed enough to take a seat. The chair rocked, so I sat forward to keep from spilling.

"Dinnae fash," Wickham said, as he settled down at the table with both brothers, the second of which had been introduced as Flann. "Ye needn't watch yer words around Lennon. She's all in, ye might say. Learnin' as we go."

"So she is," the old men said in unison.

Warmed both inside and out, I found myself half asleep, trying to catch snippets of their conversation. Unfortunately, they spoke with such strong accents—and occasionally in another language—that I only caught a few words here and there.

The subject seemed to be a man—or rather, a fairy—called O'Ryan. That explained why we'd come to Ireland. They

talked about gold. Maybe gold hair? Or maybe, considering my traveling companion, the reference was to pots of gold, since money was no object.

Were leprechauns just short fairies? I made a mental note to ask later and suppressed a sudden craving for Lucky Charms.

I didn't know what to think. I was a Tinkerbell fan from way back. If this O'Ryan fairy had wings, it shouldn't be too hard to find him. He'd be the talk of the town, on national news, but maybe not in Ireland...

In my mind, witches were women and any man with magical powers called himself something fancier. Warlock, Sorcerer, Druid. A male witch didn't seem too manly, but then again, maybe none of those would-be warlocks and sorcerers had been man enough to pull it off.

I turned my head and studied Wickham through half-closed eyes. He could call himself a sissy and half-men like Andy Weaver would aspire to be one too.

One of the brothers mentioned Oxford and Wickham hissed. "It cannot lead there. My sisters saw their deaths there at the Bridge of Sighs. And where I go, they inevitably follow. We must find our answers elsewhere."

"Then send another," Brian suggested.

Wickham glanced at me. "Perhaps one day, I must. But not Lennon. I must keep her close by."

Flann frowned over the table at me. "And why is that?" His brother turned to stare as well.

Wickham's expression was full of both pity and promise. "I dinnae ken."

At last, an entire sentence I recognized.



THAT NIGHT, WICKHAM SLEPT ON THE FLOOR. I SLEPT ON THE short couch, on my stomach, my knees bent, and my feet hanging over the end. Considering how well I slept, I wondered if I was still in shock. By morning I needed to move to get blood moving in all the right places, so I offered to help with breakfast.

Brian gently refused. “But I promise ye’ll have food in yer stomach in twenty minutes, so ye will.”

Wickham was on the phone and didn’t seem to care what I did, so I bundled up as best I could, borrowed a hat and gloves, and stepped out into the fields of Irish snow on my own.

If I ignored the thatched roof of the cottage, I might have been standing on any farm between Hazelton and Burley. The large barn behind the house was made of cinderblocks and had a red metal roof that snow didn’t bother sticking to. There was a hundred-gallon gas tank on a high platform for refueling farm vehicles. Even the lean calico streaking across the yard and squeezing under the barn door could have been an Idaho cat.

Maybe Europe wasn’t as exciting as they made it seem on TV.

A snowplow had come through, so I had a nice snow-packed road to walk on. My tennis shoes weren’t going to cut it if we were going to spend much time there. As I trudged up the rise looking for a better view, I had to stop now and then to

stomp the loose snow off my feet before it had a chance to melt and soak through.

At the top of the rise, I could see another farm about a mile away. Just beyond it was a nice straight line of black asphalt, a main road. Traffic was sparse, but constant, and the sight of it put a crazy thought in my head.

What if I ran off?

LEARNING TO BOKE

Wickham hated telling his sisters anything, but the problem was this—if something went horribly wrong, Lorraine and Loretta were the next line of defense when it came to his family. They had to know what he knew—at least the important parts.

For instance, in case the worst happened, they had to know where he'd hidden his wife and sons before he went to the Black Isle to dispatch the old man. They needed to know that he had, in fact, taken the Grandfather's mantle. Though he'd assured them, five years ago, that the old man and his two attendants had only been toying with them, leading his sisters to believe he waited in agony for Wickham to end his life, they still worried.

They needn't know how he'd punished those attendants, or how he'd dispatched the Grandfather, who had tricked Wickham into replacing him.

From the window, he gazed out on the snowy landscape of County Kildare with a phone to his ear and reluctantly, ever so reluctantly, he told his sisters about the white mist.

Loretta was quick to reassure him. *"It doesn't mean you're possessed, Wickham. I'm sure it was just like the power you took from Grey's wife, Aries. Just a mist, that's all. Just his*

power. And maybe a more substantial power takes on a more substantial form. If it had been a possession, you should have sensed its manipulation, shouldn't you?"

Lorraine chimed in, agreeing. *"But you haven't said. Have you felt manipulated?"*

"I have not," he lied.

Lorraine sensed it immediately, perhaps by the tone of his voice. *"Brother? You must tell us."*

He looked around the cottage for Lennon, then remembered she'd gone outside. Brian and Flann had their heads together, chatting in the kitchen. Wickham lowered his voice.

"There was something...fleeting. When I first stepped into the café to collect the woman, the...mist...seemed to recognize her. I felt it...reaching out. Almost...yearning."

His sisters were silent.

"Dinnae mistake me. I feel no attraction. And though Lennon is perfectly lovely, my heart and soul are firmly with Ivy."

"But how does she feel about you?"

"Nothing there but fear and wariness. No longing glances. No flirting. And no matter how the mist might feel about her, it affects me not at all."

"Wickham, be careful," Loretta said. "You just said the mist feels. You named it, called it the White One."

He laughed lightly, relieved. To his sisters, it did sound as if he'd given more credit to the white vapor than he actually had. And the longer they spoke, the more he came to believe as they had at the start of the conversation, that the mist was

just a power like all the rest. Like another power he'd accepted long ago, an unexpected development he intended to never share with anyone, besides the man whose head he'd removed.

Lorraine wasn't ready to let it go. "I'm wondering," she said, "if the mist was reaching out to her talisman or whatever it is. What does she call it?"

"Hank."

"Is there a chance it was reaching for Hank?"

"No. She didn't have it on her at the time."

"Maybe a residue," Loretta suggested.

"If that were the case," he said, "then it should have reacted when we came in contact with *Hank* later that day. I sensed nothing at all from it."

Once Wickham had eased his sisters' minds and ended the call, he stared at the mysterious woman standing in the middle of the road at the top of the rise.

Just why would *a power* reach out to an *Uncast*?

"We've made a prediction, so we have," Brian called to him. "The lass is contemplating making a run for it. I say she'll come back. Flann says she'll flee without her breakfast."

Wickham reached for his coat.

"Here, here. No influencing the horse, now."

"She's no racehorse," he told the brothers and headed for the door. "But she might be the prize."



I WAS STILL DELIBERATING MY ESCAPE FROM WICKHAM'S madness when he stomped up behind me. I kept my eyes on the horizon. "The acoustics out here are crazy. I didn't hear you coming."

"Because I stepped *out*," he said, then gave me a pointed look.

"Ah. I see. Like we did last night."

"Just like."

"Worried I was going to run away?"

"Should I be?"

"I think you were." I smiled awkwardly, my face half-frozen.

"Not worried. But I reckon ye did entertain the idea."

"Yes. I did. But I'd just end up in the same life you bailed me out of. Pouring coffee in an ugly dress, paying rent, juggling bills and wishing I could afford a break." I shrugged. "I think I'll take my break now, while I can. On behalf of all the other single women out there who can't."

"Happy to hear it. Now, if ye'll turn yer back on temptation, breakfast is ready."

Turn my back on temptation? Was he kidding? Temptation incarnate was the guy luring me back to a quaint Irish cottage.



WICKHAM AND I WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR WITHOUT knocking, hung up our coats, and joined Brian and Flann at the table. The food had already been plated. Four heaping plates, including one set in front of me. To my embarrassment, my

eyes watered at the sight of my second big breakfast in as many days.

Flann worried they'd done something wrong, but I reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Looks like you've gone overboard for my sake. I'm just...overwhelmed is all."

The man appeared only slightly relieved and forced a smile while he held out my chair.

Brian said grace. I didn't understand a word, but it might have been due to the speed at which it was said and the strong Irish accent. But I did recognize *Amen*. My stomach tried to repeat the word, and everyone laughed.

"Just in time, so it is." Brian winked from the head of the table.

I didn't know where to start. I didn't want anything going to waste, but there was no way I could eat everything on my plate.

"No pressure," Brian said gently. "Just eat what ye like. A Full Irish in't fer everyone."

I stared at the assembly of sizzling breakfast meats, eggs, and toast combined with a puddle of canned beans, fried tomato halves, and sauteed button mushrooms. Though broth was all I'd had the night before, I willed my stomach to expand.

I started with the mushrooms. I never turned down a vegetable. It saved me the cost of vitamins. The men's attention shifted from my plate to their own, and I enjoyed my bounty in peace. I didn't know if they ate slowly to allow me more time or if it was simply the speed at which the Irish and the Scots consumed their meal, but I felt no rush.

“We must go to the library at Trinity College,” Wickham said, eventually breaking the silence. “We’re just outside Dublin,” he said to me. “Brian, if ye can spare a vehicle...”

“Nonsense. We’ll come along. Been a while since I’ve seen the old stompin’ grounds, so it has. And we do hold alumni library cards.”

“I’m grateful.”

I cleared my throat with a sip of cold orange juice and asked, “What are we looking for?”

“Mentions of Uncasts.”

“Sorry? What are Uncasts?”

They all answered at once. “Typical mortals.” “Humans.” “Without power.” “But found in magical circles.” “Communities of witches.” “Like to hunt for fairies.” “Obsessed.”

“So like, magic groupies?”

Wickham smiled. “Exactly that.”

I noticed Flann’s pinched face. “What’s wrong.”

He scowled at Wickham but pointed his fork at me. “I wouldn’t call our Lennon a groupie.”

“Me?”

Wickham held up his hands in a sort of surrender. “Aye. But something of our world has come to her. Her eyes are open. A mortal who is no longer oblivious to us is technically an Uncast.”

Flann nodded and went back to eating, but he scowled at his food until his brother knocked on the table.

“Ye owe me five quid,” Brian said.

Flann snorted. “I owe ye nuttin’ a’tall.”

“A bet’s a bet.”

“Ye interfered!” Flann pointed his fork at Wickham. “He interfered, after ye taunted him. So technically, ye interfered with the interferer. Therefore, the bet was null. If anything, ye owe me five quid for interferin’.”

Wickham rolled his eyes but didn’t bother explaining what the bet had been about. The rest of the meal was finished while the brothers explained to me the finer points of honoring a wager and the trick to cooking a Full Irish (breakfast) so as to serve everything hot at once.

I still couldn’t bear to open that green suitcase, so I had no change of clothes. Wickham promised to take me shopping that afternoon, but insisted we go to the library first. I was hardly dressed for a college campus, and there was nothing more appropriate in my suitcase. At least I was wearing my best shoes—a pair of slightly worn black Nikes I’d found at a secondhand store in Twin Falls. I couldn’t do anything to sober up my rose-colored coat. Even I wasn’t a big fan of pink, but in Idaho, warmth trumped everything else.

Wickham and I sat in the back seat of a small car with a steering wheel on the right. Just before the freeway, Brian pulled off to the left side of the road. Flann got out and opened my door, then insisted I sit up front.

“Why?”

He held out his hand and winked. “Because I sense ye’re about to boke, and I’d rather not be sittin’ in front of ye when ye do.”

I took his hand and climbed out, privately grateful I’d be able to watch the road. “What does boke mean?”

“Vomit. I take it ye have—”

“Motion sickness. Yes, I get sick easily. But how did you know?”

He laughed, waited for me to get back in, and closed the car door. Then I remembered Wickham saying he’d been able to read minds much better before his twin had died.

I turned to Brian. “Can all Muir witches read minds?”

He shook his head and pulled back onto the road. “Just the unlucky ones.”

GALAXIES AND FINGERNAILS

We reached Dublin just after noon, and the ancient, gothic architecture of Trinity College made me feel, again, as if Wickham had taken me back in time. I considered my wardrobe again and had never in my life felt so much like a hick.

I wouldn't have minded if they'd asked me to wait in the car.

Brian had spoken in the car about the Long Walk and the Long Room. It turned out the first was a path of white bricks that ran in front of a long line of campus buildings. The Long Room was apparently the part of the library where the oldest of books were kept.

At the library entrance, there was a sudden bottle neck in the line to get in. I couldn't help noticing that everyone else looked like they were dressed for church. Layers of wool and scarves and serious shoes. Not a Nike in the bunch. But no one else seemed to be looking at my shoes, so I relaxed a little.

Sitting on the desk at the front of the line was a classy sign in black and gold that said mobile phones must be silenced. I almost expected the gatekeeper to be dressed in a black robe and resemble Severus Snape, but it was a young cheerful girl with red hair and freckles. She smiled widely at each entrant,

then peered close at their identification before making a lovely gesture with her hand and repeating, “I hope ye find what ye’re lookin’ for.”

Brian and Flann set their cards on the high desk. “Two guests,” Brian said.

The girl glanced at Wickham, then me, then Wickham again. Without missing a beat, she pulled out two small scraps of paper and asked us to fill them out. “We like to know where our guests are from.” Then she waited patiently while we filled them out. Her fair skin couldn’t hide her blush, but I couldn’t blame her. I was pretty sure my own blush had been stuck in the *on* position since Wickham Muir had walked into Twila’s.

When I handed back my form, she read the word Idaho aloud with three distinct syllables, then rewarded me with the same lovely gesture and repeated her welcome as if saying it for the first time that day. “I hope ye find what ye’re looking for.” But there was a wistfulness to her voice, as if she were secretly wishing she could find a handsome Scotsman like the one with his hand on my back.

We wandered down hallways and paused while the brothers tried to decide which room to enter. Kind of like following teenagers around a shopping mall, waiting for them to choose a store.

“Here we are,” Flann said, then led us around a corner and into a room the size of a modest cathedral. “The Wren Library. It dunt have what we’re looking for, but I thought ye should see it, so I did. In case ye never have a chance to visit again.”

Over a black and white checkerboard floor, perpendicular rows of deep elaborate bookcases lined the walls, each held above the common flooring by matching wooden platforms. A pedestalled, marble bust sat at the end of every other case with

a full-sized statue at the far end of the room, beneath a massive stained-glass window.

Brian pointed to one of the busts. “Famous students of Trinity College. Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon and the like.” Then he gestured to the full statue. “Lord Byron is there.”

Another row of busts sat atop the cases themselves, on their own wood boxes. Fifteen feet in the air, they were almost lost against the white upper walls and continuous lines of arched windows. The cathedral-like library seemed light and airy despite a few pirate ships-worth of dark oak.

The Long Room was another cathedral but much darker. It resembled a library in that there were, in fact, books on the shelves. But only some. According to the signs, they were in the process of putting nearly a million books into storage before renovation would begin in October.

Even half full, it was the most imposing place I’d ever seen.

There’d been no long empty shadows in random bookcases in the county library in Laramie where I used to go as a child, for reading time with Hilda the Witch. She was the mean library lady who slapped on a hat and a smile, every Wednesday at three.

I was so overwhelmed, I laughed. “So what now? We all just pick a book and scan for the word *Uncast*?”

Wickham shook his head. “We must look in the oldest of books, which are often not strictly available to the public. With this storage business, we may be finished before we begin.”

“I thought the Book of Kells was the oldest book.” I’d seen the signs for the tourist attraction only a minute ago. When I

googled it, it said the book contained the first four gospels, along with illustrations.

“Oldest?” Brian scoffed. “Hardly.”

We sat down at one of the tables in the center aisle. “Any books to do with the Fae will have wards on them,” Flann said quietly. “Any witch’s touch is sure to set them off.”

“Lennon might be useful there,” Wickham said, “if I can get her to them. We can always pop out again, but only if the books are away from watching eyes.”

The brothers exchanged a look, obviously impressed, as if popping was a new idea to them. “Then all ye need to ken is where?”

“Exactly.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “We’re going to...pop...into a restricted area?”

“Aye.” Wickham bit his lips together and waited for my reaction.

“And if we’re caught?”

“Then we’ll pop back to Brian’s house when their backs are turned.”

“Cool. But why didn’t we just do that in the first place, to get here?”

He shook his head. “I’d rather not frighten someone out of their wits nor expose myself to *their* memories in order to alter them. Ye can never judge by looking at a person what disturbing recollections they keep at the fore of their minds. I am often compelled to shower after only a peek.”

“Ancient books on the Fae, aye?” Brian tapped his knuckle lightly on the table. “I suppose I shall go chat up a pretty librarian, shall I?”



WICKHAM WAS RIGHT. THE BOOKS WE WANTED WERE IN A restricted area where they kept books and papers so old and so delicate that signs were posted every ten feet—*Gloves required at all times*. I assumed the string of unreadable letters below that were the same words, but in Irish. *Lámhainní a chaitheamh i gcónaí*.

“I think fairies were involved in the spelling of Irish words. You can’t read them, can you?”

“I can,” he whispered.

“Who knew Irish was a language?” I whispered back, as we passed yet another sign.

“The Irish, for one.” Wickham pursed his lips to shut me up.

I followed like a puppy at his heels while he rushed around the surgically clean room. He quietly sounded out the words on signs with no English on them at all, his scowl darkening with each section he eliminated. The low ceiling accommodated only short bookshelves and at one point he was nearly standing on his head while he tried to read small, handwritten words on bits of tape.

Despite the lack of dust, it seemed like the room hadn’t been disturbed for years.

My *Full Irish* was all but a memory by the time we neared the back wall, and I thought more about my next meal than old

books. If a leprechaun showed up and granted me one wish, it would be that I'd never be reduced to eating ramen noodles ever again...

A little piece of blue painter's tape caught my eye. It sat on the end of the last bookcase, both ends rolled up and dry. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had painted. In fact, the walls seemed like original plaster.

I left Wickham's side to step closer. There were letters scrawled in pencil in the short, still-adhered space in the middle, barely discernible against the intense blue. I reached out and unrolled the right edge and fully expected more unreadable Irish nonsense.

Fae—do not touch.

I thought it funny that the *do not touch* part had been rolled up, like maybe fairies *did* want their books to be touched, thank you very much.

“Fae means fairies, right?”

Wickham stepped out from between the stacks, looked at my face, then followed my nod.

“Says *Fae, do not touch.*”

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply like he was trying to recover from a marathon, or like me trying to recover from a lunch shift. I stepped aside so he could slide into the narrow aisle first. He took one look at the books, scowled, then squeezed my arm. “Stay here.”

Then he was gone.

I was left alone in a restricted room, breaking the rules if not the law, in a foreign country, with nothing on me but an expired Wyoming driver's license. Did the U.S. have an

embassy in Ireland? Should I google it in case I had to make a run for it?

I stepped into the narrow aisle if only to be less visible if someone came through the main door. The shelves weren't filled with books, however, but with boxes. Glass boxes. With chains attached. And those chains were in turn attached to a long pole that was fastened at both ends to the shelves themselves.

What is this? Game of Thrones? People actually chained up books?

I reached my fingers between the bar and the shelf to turn one of the fiberglass boxes to the side. Inside stood a few loose papers and that was it. On the glass, a bunch of stickers, all with warnings—*Bulletproof. Fireproof. Do not open. Use gloves.*

“Why would I need gloves if I'm not allowed to open it?”

I remembered what Wickham said about wards, alarms that might go off if a witch touched it. But I was pretty sure those stickers weren't just for witches. The notion made me pause—that whoever applied them probably believed in fairies.

Did I, now, believe in fairies too?

I returned the box to its original position, pulled my hands away, and put them behind my back, hoping Wickham wouldn't know what I'd done. After another five minutes passed, I hoped he hadn't forgotten about me.

The door at the front of the room opened with a whoosh, and my ears popped. I assumed Wickham wouldn't have used the door, so I held perfectly still. Didn't dare google for American embassies...

Sharp heels clicked on the tiles and pumped adrenaline into my veins. Wickham always moved silently, even in a full café.

Quick steps, then slow ones. Then none at all.

I held my breath, worried I'd made a noise. If Wickham popped back now, he'd be busted.

"Keys!" A woman's voice from only ten feet away. Then a curse. Those quick steps receded, stopped, then another whoosh when the door opened again.

Wickham appeared in the center aisle, and I nearly had a heart attack. Flann was with him looking both stunned and giddy.

"We have to hurry," I hissed. "Someone was just here. Left to get her keys, maybe. Pretty sure she'll be back."

Wickham lifted a small set of keys and shook them. "Hopefully, she has just the one set."

"I wouldn't bet on it," I said. "Besides, if she needed keys, and these are the only books locked up, doesn't that mean she's coming back for one of these?"

He gave a quick shrug. "We can only do what we can do."

I shuffled to the back of the row to give them room.

After a couple of tries, Wickham unlocked the bar, then stared at the boxes. "Flann can read Irish much faster than I. But ye must open them, Lennon." He handed me a pair of white gloves. "Ye mustn't touch so much as the boxes with bare skin, aye?"

I winced. "Um...I, uh, already did. Sorry."

His frown was brief. “Right then. Use the gloves from here on. We’ll hope for the best. Here now,” Wickham said. “First box. Quickly.”

I stepped close, reached in front of him, and pulled out the first box, the one with the loose papers. The chain, still attached to a loop at the bottom of the spine, made a ruckus when I moved. I snapped the glass box open, but it took some muscle. When the air flooded inside, the pages fluttered like butterfly wings before settling in the deep side of the box again.

I gently lifted one edge and heard hissing.

At the end of the row, watching over Flann’s shoulder, was a tall woman in a white lab coat. Her eyes shone with a purple light, her white teeth exposed, but she wasn’t smiling.

“Fingers to yerself,” she said. “They don’t care to be touched!” She nodded at the pages I was about to remove, looked long and hard at Wickham, then nodded politely at Flann. “As I said at the information desk, if ye tell me what it is ye’re lookin’ for, I might help. Or I might just call security.”

Wickham inclined his head. “Forgive us. I fear what we seek might...draw too much attention—the wrong sort of attention—just to speak of it.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out something tiny, then laid it in his open palm and showed it to the woman. A small white gemstone, and considering the way it shattered and reflected the light, probably a diamond. “Can ye help us?”

“Out with it, then.” She held out her hand and let him drop the stone into it. Without looking closely, she shoved her hand into her lab coat pocket. “We’re all awake now, so we are.” She nodded at the box in my hand, then whispered something unintelligible.

The little pages ruffled again, on their own, and I nearly dropped the box. I mouthed sorry, closed the clear lid carefully, then squeezed it until it snapped tight.

“Uncast,” Wickham said. “We are looking for any reference to the Uncast.”

The woman clicked her tongue on the back of her teeth. “Dublin’s chock full of ‘em.” She gestured toward me with a purple fingernail intricately painted like the stars. I could easily imagine those tiny galaxies swirling.

Wickham nodded. “Aye. I ken *what* they are. But I hope to find some *prophetic* mention of them. Some specific *use*...”

The woman’s smile fell away. Her purple eyes bore into Wickham’s for a long time, and I knew her interest had nothing to do with how handsome he was. “No use ye could understand, *witch*, had ye lived a thousand years.” She looked pointedly at the box in my hand, then at the shelf, in an unspoken command to put it back where it belonged. “Ye cannae begin to know the answer, let alone the question. And neither will be found in these pages.” Again, she nodded at the shelf and stepped away.

“Please.” Wickham stopped her retreat with his sincerity. “There is something else. Two more questions.”

She moved back to Flann’s side and held out her hand once more. “Two more, then.”

Wickham reached into his pocket again, then placed two stones in the woman’s waiting palm. A larger stone of pale lavender and a small one of dark emerald green. “What does it mean when a creature claims he is *older than name*? And what pray tell is the *King’s Covenant*?”

Her mouth fell open, her purple eyes wide as she glanced from me, to Wickham, to me again. “Impossible! Impossible!” She shook her head rapidly. “How long? How long have ye... had these questions?”

“Five years.”

“Five!” In obvious rage, she pulled the stones from her pocket, threw them at the floor, and disappeared. Flat out disappeared. But her voice hung in the air.

“Despair, witch. Yer questions will not matter now.”

Seconds felt like minutes while the three of us stood staring at the empty space she’d left behind. Finally, Flann’s hand shook as he lifted the near end of the pole, ready to help lock up the books again.

Since we’d already been busted, I asked if we should take them all with us.

Wickham shook his head. “They’ll be easily followed. I won’t bring Fae wrath down upon Flann and Brian’s heads. Now that I ken where they are, I can come back if necessary. Besides, she admitted our answers arenae here.”

“She said it’s hopeless, right? Does this mean I go back to Idaho?” I couldn’t imagine anything more bleak.

“Nay, Lennon. Never trust a Fae. Not a word. Not a smile. And especially not a forecast of doom. At the end of the day, if ye dinnae wish to continue this hunt, I’ll take ye wherever ye wish and never bother ye again. But I’ll expect yer commitment, one way or the other, by the end of—”

“Where do we go next?”

He inhaled slowly and smiled. Gave me one of those proud-of-me looks. “It is time I introduce ye to the others.”

“Other Uncasts?”

“Ye’ll see.”

WORLD'S END

The biggest city I'd ever been in was Denver, Colorado. It seemed like Edinburgh might have started out a similar size, but it spread as far and wide as gravity would allow, like a scoop of cookie dough made with too much butter.

Compared to Edinburgh's long avenues of ancient buildings, Denver was the wild and modern West. The recorded history of Colorado went back about two centuries. The history of Scotland, more than two millennia. We were infants compared to this.

Sure, I'd seen enough on the TV screen to know the world was much bigger than just a few western states, but to see centuries-old buildings up close was like escaping the Matrix and finding out my world view had been painfully narrow.

"I'd once thought Archeology might be an interesting life choice," I told Wickham, as he led me down a street literally made of bricks and cobbled stone. "But if I'd seen this," I gestured to the row of spired buildings on the hillside, "I think Architecture would have won me over."

"Aye? So ye studied Archeology, then?"

"Never got around to it. I only had two years of college, and I mostly studied boys...and whatever they were studying."

“Well, now it seems ye’re about to earn yer degree in Mythology. Here we are.” He nodded to a low building painted the shade of intense blue you’d expect a high school to choose for their football team. “Ye see this brass here?” He pointed at a handful of golden bricks tucked in among the regular ones on the sidewalk. “This pub takes its name from the City Walls which once surrounded Edinburgh. Back in the sixteenth century, the English defeated us at Flodden, and we put up the walls for protection. The city gate was located here. And the people inside them believed the world was no longer theirs, hence, The World’s End.” He pointed to the sign above the door. “The World’s End Pub.”

Pub be damned. I smelled food.

My stomach became that happy, tail-wagging dog again as we stepped inside the building. The ceilings were low, but made lower still by black beams. A longer, slightly narrow version of railroad ties.

A tall man led us to a table. He kept his head cocked to one side as if he worried he might hit it on the ceiling, though there was enough room for him to stand straight. The space between tables was tight, but the folks sitting around us seemed happy and grateful as they soaked in the details of the place. The women seemed happier still when they soaked in the sight of my companion.

“Famous pub,” Wickham said, then did a little swirl with his pointer finger to indicate the room in general. He was a master at ignoring female attention, but then he’d have to be.

“I hope it’s famous for its food, too.”

“Oh, aye. It’s why we’ve come. My favorite fish and chips in the city, though the competition is fierce.”

Being land-locked all my life, I wasn't much into fish, but I ordered it anyway. Chips meant fries, I knew that much, so at least I'd have something filling.

After the waiter disappeared, I looked around the packed dining room. "You said I was going to meet others. Are they coming here?"

Wickham shook his head. "Just around the corner. But I reckoned we should eat first."

I just hoped the pub would accept American money. I had about a week's worth of tips in the lining of my purse, hidden from snoopy café owners. But when it came time to pay the check—for the food I knew I would crave for the rest of my life—Wickham waved my money away. So I tried to leave the tip.

"Tips is an American custom, lass. We dinnae do that here."

I laughed. "What? Will it insult him or something?"

"Aye. It will. Wait staff are paid differently. Trust me."

It was physically painful to take the money off the table and put it back in my purse. I felt like I was stealing. "I'm going to need time to adjust to this," I said aloud, primarily to myself.

Wickham gave me that look. Even though there was no chemistry between us, I blushed and turned my attention back to my purse. A younger me might have fallen in love on the spot, despite the existence of a Mrs. Wickham Muir. But I hadn't been that girl for a long time now. I'd changed when I learned I would never have children.

When Wickham said, "just around the corner," he'd meant just around the building. We reached the end of the bright blue

paint when he turned us toward the opening of a tunnel. The plaque above it read *World's End Close*, and the same thing was etched in the stone beneath our feet. Thankfully, there was light at the other end, and the tunnel opened up into a small courtyard. We entered a doorway under yet another World's End sign, but this time, apartments.

"I will tell ye now, before we go in," he said, "that Hank is yer business. I will not speak of him without yer permission."

At the end of the hall on the second floor, he knocked on a door. I had no idea what to expect, and asking questions made me feel...ungrateful, even though he'd insisted it was I who was doing him a favor, and not the other way around. It didn't seem to matter that he'd forked out ten thousand dollars to bail me out of my Hazelton servitude, and another five hundred that afternoon replenishing my Andy-defiled wardrobe.

The door to 24A opened. A taller, fiercer version of Wickham Muir filled the doorway. Half a head taller, he also had dark hair past his shoulders, and though he wasn't as pretty, he was a rustic kind of handsome. He had hazel eyes and wore a drapey kilt of intense blue and looked like he'd stepped out of Scotland's distant past. I may have gasped.

The man blinked, looked at Wickham, then nodded deeply and stepped back so we could enter.

"Lennon, this is Urban MacKenzie." Wickham had to nudge me to keep me moving. "Urban, this is Lennon Todd. She's with us, now."

The taller man lifted a brow but said nothing. I took that to mean he wasn't interested in shaking hands.

A stunning brunette stood in the tiny living room, smiling and patient while I stumbled toward her. She wore her shiny

smooth hair in a long ponytail that started at the crown of her head and still hung well below her shoulder blades. Her muted green outfit turned out to be tweed that looked so soft I was tempted to touch it. She held out her hand and when I didn't take it fast enough, she scooped up my hand and shook it.

“Everly MacKenzie. The big one's mine.” She winked at me, then laughed. “Lennon, is it?”

I nodded. “You're American?”

“I am. My family's in Portland, in the tree business.”

We sat on the small couch. “And what do you do here?”

Everly glanced at Wickham. After he nodded, she said, “I hunt fairies. And what do you do?”

I laughed. “I pour coffee for farmers, mostly. Or at least I used to.”

“And now you're a Fairy Hunter.”

“Am I?” I turned to Wickham like a school child, waiting for permission to aspire to something awesome.

“Aye, lass. No turnin' back.”

“Ye're not a witch, then?” The intense god in a kilt finally joined the conversation and perched on the arm of the couch beside his wife. I expected my end to fly up like a teetertotter.

I tested out my new title. “I'm an Uncast.”

Again, Wickham gave me that funny look. “A normal mortal who has been exposed to the paranormal.”

Urban took his wife's hand as if she were made of glass. “Like Everly?”

“Aye and no.” Wickham's brows drew together. “The Grandfather said I would need her, though he didn't know

why. And for once, I believed him. Just before he...died, he had the chance to tell me more, but he knew nothing.”

“How did he ken about her in the first place? An Uncast so far from here.”

“I’ve known her a pair of days, and I can say she’s surprised me at every turn. I think you’ll find she’s much like Everly—accepting, rather fearless. For instance, I’ve plucked her out of her life entirely. She’s seen me read a man’s memory, I’ve taken her out of Time, and taken her out of Place. Delivered her to Ireland in the blink of an eye. Accidentally exposed her to one of the Fae and popped her into the heart of Edinburgh with little warning. She only complained when she was cold and holds her tongue when she is starving.”

He laughed and winked at me, waited a second for me to deny it before he went on.

“And after all this, she only asks for time to adjust...to the fact that Europeans do not tip their wait staff.”

True to his word, he never brought up Hank, thankfully, but he wouldn’t have much to tell them anyway. He and I hadn’t really discussed it, and for all I knew, he hadn’t had time for a close look before he rescued *My Precious* from Charlotte’s shed.

Urban’s fierceness softened a little when he looked at me, probably because I’d been compared to his beautiful wife. I couldn’t see anything redeeming in Wickham’s description. In fact, I sounded like an idiot for not questioning everything he’d shown me and demanding he leave me alone.

If I mentioned Hank, he might consider me special, but I wasn’t ready to bring my big secret out of the closet—or out

of the old money belt resting around my abdomen, where it always traveled when I had to leave home for more than just a work shift.

Everly announced that the rest of the party would be along in a while, and I wondered how cramped it would get, considering the entire apartment was the size of my glorified studio in Hazelton. I would have asked how many we were talking about, but I didn't want to seem nosy. I also thought it might seem rude for someone like me to ask if more witches were coming.

Hell, I didn't even know what other types of beings existed in this twilight zone. The possibilities were suddenly overwhelming. I took a deep breath and shot a look to Wickham.

His brows pinched for only a second before he smiled and slapped his hands together. "Time for a break, aye? Lennon needs rest. Time change and all that." He glanced at Everly, who got up and waved for me to follow her.

"You can have the second bedroom," she said. "Bathroom's in the hallway. Space is scarce in the city, but you'll have privacy."

Alone in a tiny bedroom, I was grateful for a window. I stood on a chair to reach it, then opened it long enough to cool my face and suck in a few breaths of fresh air. Layers upon layers of thick white paint made shutting the window difficult, but I finally got it. When I stretched out on the bed, I discovered I was not just mentally exhausted.

I reminded myself I was safe and warm, and I fell asleep with a stomach still full of the most amazing fish and chips.

Things could have been so much worse.

LOOSE TIES ON THE CAT BAG

Urban got a list of food stuffs from his wife before he and the rest of the men were kicked out of the flat. Everly wanted the new woman to have peace and quiet whilst she rested, so as soon as Kitchens arrived, she sent the men packing. As if women never made a ruckus.

Kitch and Wickham accompanied him to the shops, a scouting party in search of rations. He welcomed the chance to niggle more information out of Wickham.

As soon as they passed The World's End and were accosted by the smell of fried foods, Kitch piped up. "Oy, what's on the menu?"

Urban shrugged. "Any party larger than four, she makes the same thing."

"Tacos," the other two said in unison. Even Wickham knew Everly that well.

Kitch grinned. "Tacos means no man will starve."

"Speaking of starving," Wickham said, waiting for them all to move closer to hear him. "Lennon has been struggling for a good while. If she eats more than is seemly, try not to notice."

“Aye, ye mentioned it once before. Said she didnae complain when she was starvin’.”

“She was scrapin’ by, tryin’ to pay off bills so she could move on to a better life.”

“We could help with that—”

“Already done. The woman is free to do as she pleases. I only hope it pleases her to stay with us.”

“But ye’ve already said it is too late for her to change her mind.”

“And I hope she goes right on believin’ it.”

“Ye’re certain she’s necessary?”

Wickham nodded emphatically. “Aye. The old man said she was vital and, other than the bloody Covenant, he stressed nothing else as much.”

“Vital.” Kitch nodded. “Means lives are at stake.”

Urban reckoned the same. “So we’d best guard her with ours.”



I SLEPT FOR THREE HOURS!

Horried that I had left my hosts waiting on me, I jumped out of bed, straightened the blanket, and ran a brush through my hair before emerging. No one noticed when I ducked into the bathroom and brushed my teeth.

I was ready to apologize when I stepped out again, but I didn’t dare. The living room was full of people, but it was as silent as the cafe had been when Wickham froze everyone. This time, however, everyone moved normally.

A table had been assembled down the center of the floor. Bowls were passed quietly, though I heard the regular tapping of utensils. Urban glanced up from the far end of the room, saw me, and closed his eyes for a second. “God’s eyes, she’s awake.”

All heads turned and even the newcomer smiled. “Thank God,” he said, just before laughter erupted around the table. The men got to their feet and waited for me to take the empty chair in front of me, and I realized they’d been eating silently for fear of waking me. I couldn’t remember when anyone had been so considerate, and it brought tears to my eyes.

Wickham noticed and started to stand again, but I shook my head. “I’m all right. Just a little weepy for some reason. You’re all so thoughtful.”

Urban rolled his eyes. “Thoughtful as pigs. Forgive us, Miss Todd, for not waiting.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. I’m sorry I slept so long.”

“Nae harm done and not a pound lost,” Wickham said, then passed me a plate of fresh tortillas. “Tacos.” He gestured to the bowls of cheese, lettuce, and ground beef as if he thought I wouldn’t recognize them.

“Yum!”

Everly grinned. “She knows what they are. This is bangers and mash to Americans. Always a standby.”

The new arrival introduced himself as Dominic Kitchens. I was invited to call him Kitch. No one bothered explaining his role in the group. His black-on-black security outfit told me nothing, but I supposed he was just another Fairy Hunter like the rest of us.

His eyes were dark, as was wavy hair that covered his ears and reached his collar, but compared to the other two, it might as well be a high and tight military cut. He had a beauty mark on his left cheek that distracted me each time he spoke.

His smile was honest, his general character that of a tease, but there was something behind his eyes that hinted at serious danger. No nonsense kind of danger. Like he'd cut your throat and not lose a step if the occasion called for it.

Throughout the meal, conversations moved like the Egg Scramble ride at the fairgrounds. Everyone talked in clusters, then new topics made new clusters. I eavesdropped here and there, free to ignore them all while I ate.

Everly and Urban cleared the table and refused to let me help. The table boards that had been put together with sawhorses were taken apart again, stored somewhere, and we shifted to the more comfortable furniture against the walls. The extra chairs disappeared. I would later find them stacked in the corner of the room I'd been assigned.

Wickham, Kitch, and I waited in comfortable silence for the MacKenzies to join us. When they did, I felt comfortable enough to start asking questions.

“I know Everly is an Uncast, like me. I assume you men are all...wizards, like Wickham?”

They all burst out laughing, then exchanged some rather telling glances, as if my guess wasn't too far from the truth.

Kitch answered first. “Afraid I'm just another Uncast.” Then he grinned at Urban and waited.

Urban gave him a good scowl that didn't intimidate the shorter man in the least. But finally, he cleared his throat and smiled my way. “I am...not strictly an Uncast, I suppose.

Wickham's niece was once a powerful witch who brought myself and a few dozen of my fellows...back from the dead. We'd perished on the battlefield at Culloden Moor and had been haunting the place for nigh three hundred years when she came along. She set her cap on freeing us from our chosen fate, and nearly all of us were given the chance to live again."

He and Everly shared a sweet smile and a kiss. I had to look away.

"Obviously, I was clever enough to catch him." Everly reached for her husband's hand. The man rolled his eyes but kissed her again. "This O'Ryan creature and his monsters came looking for the Muir witches who lived one floor below my sister, and we just happened to get into the middle of it. Killed them with a silver cake server. Now I never leave home without it."

I didn't dare laugh. Though everyone else smiled, she wasn't joking.

"Kitchens has been my head of security for years, guarding my family when I had to be away."

"And where is your family?"

Everyone sobered, and though no one moved, an invisible tension flooded the room.

"Where they are," he said, "they need no protection."

"Wine," Urban muttered, got to his feet, and disappeared around the corner.

"Glasses." Everly jumped up and followed him.

Wickham's answer made it sound like his family was dead, but I wasn't about to ask. That would explain the tension. And the sudden need for wine.

Once we all had a glass in hand, Urban offered a short toast in Gaelic, which the others repeated. Then he turned to me, “It’s a proper Scottish welcome that means ye’ve made a terrible mistake and ye’ll live to regret it.” Everyone chuckled, assuring me he was joking. When it grew quiet, he addressed me again. “So, Lennon. Tell us. Have ye any ken what plans Fate has for ye? A theory as to why ye’ve been set apart for our wee hunting party?”

Of course, I thought of Hank. I trusted Wickham hadn’t mentioned him, just as he’d promised. But for the first time in my life, I was honestly tempted to share my secret. After all, they’d confessed some pretty crazy things to me. And if we were going to hunt together, protect each other, they probably should know what they were protecting.

“I do,” I said, then wondered if Wickham had drawn in a quick breath, or if I’d imagined it. “I have a talisman that was handed down through my family. I call it Hank. Maybe one of these days, I’ll tell you about it.”

There it was. I hadn’t let Hank out of the bag, but the ties were loose.

My heart pounded. I imagined the same pounding coming from the money belt, and I nearly cried out, just to burn off the adrenaline dump.

“Hank?” Everly was amused. “Why Hank?”

I took a deep breath and blew it out through tight lips. I could do this. I could talk about it without giving any more away. “It’s a love/hate relationship. Like I have with country music. So I started calling it Hank, after Hank Williams.”

She laughed, and I relaxed, believing she understood me, though just a little. Everyone else was probably just playing

along.

I finally looked to my left. Wickham sat with his head down, listening. Suddenly he straightened. “I dinnae believe Hank has anything to do with the Fae we’re against. I was given the impression it was yerself we’ll need, not whatever ye have in yer pocket. Perhaps Hank was just the means to opening yer eyes, so when we came along, ye wouldnae be so surprised.”

“You believe in Fate? Or is it God who has pre-ordained us to fight fairies?”

“I am a believer in everything. *Every* thing. Except, perhaps, Country Music. I have seen too much not to be.”

While we snickered, he straightened in his chair and scanned the faces in the room.

“The gift of precognition, among Muir witches, is far from perfect, but some warning is better than none. I would never dismiss a prediction made by my sisters, for example. As for the Grandfather, the ancient chieftain of the Muir witch clan, whose mantle I am expected to assume, I believe his insight was more to do with the past than the future. With a thousand years behind him, he had plenty of experience from which to draw.”

Kitch made a noise. “A thoosand? He admitted it?”

Wickham shrugged a shoulder. “He was there for the Battle of Hastings and old enough to take sides. I have met Fae too many times to count, now. There is no arguing the race exists, and that they have been here for longer than we can guess. As far as God is concerned, I shall ask His plan when I meet him again.”

“In a thousand years?” Kitchens bit his lips together as if he wished he could take the question back.

Wickham looked him squarely in the eyes. “I was coerced into taking the job. I do not plan to keep it. If that means I die tomorrow, I die tomorrow.” He laughed. “And you’d all have to find a way to thwart this O’Ryan without me.”

I waved my hand to get his attention. “And he’s the bad fairy?”

“He’s the Fae we’re huntin’,” Urban said. “I’ve met him twice now. Once, when he’d followed Everly and I, after she killed two creatures in Oxford. Then again when he and his minions crashed a wedding, killed one of our own, and promised to return for us and our loved ones after he’s completed some...collection.”

Wickham cut in. “So we intend to prevent his success from happening in the first place.”

“But we don’t know what he’s up to?”

Discouragement was written on all their faces. Everly answered. “No. We don’t.”

“We have three mysteries to solve,” Wickham said, leaning his elbows on his knees again. “We must learn what O’Ryan is after, why Lennon is necessary to our endeavors, and what it is that frightened that fairy in the Trinity College Library so badly she was willing to sacrifice three gemstones in order to flee us.”

A laugh bubbled up inside me and burst free, then I couldn’t stop. Finally, the worry on Everly’s face sobered me up.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Two days ago, my priorities were catching up on my power bill, borrowing some duct tape to fix

my work shoes, and hoping to sneak some food to my homeless friend. It's like I've stepped through the mirror, into a different world."

"Trust me," she said. "You have. But at least you're not alone in it."

INVISIBLE FRIENDS

I slept fast and hard that night despite my three-hour nap before dinner. When Wickham shook me awake in the darkness, I was glad I'd stocked up. "What time is it?"

"Four o'clock local."

"Is this a Scottish thing? Or is something wrong?"

"We must go and quickly. The Fae have struck. Witches are dead. We will try to pick up their trail."

I was out of bed and pulling on my pants before I realized he was still in the room. Thankfully, it was dark and he was headed for the door.

"Dark clothes, if ye have them. Just a purse or a shoulder bag. We mustn't stand out."

I bit my tongue. If he thought a bunch of buff Scotsmen and a striking woman like Everly could blend into a crowd, he was fooling himself.

"Wickham?"

"Aye."

"Where are we headed?"

"Italy."

“Good.”

He glanced back.

I beamed. “Italy’s warm, right?”



THE SIX OF US GATHERED IN THE LIVING ROOM, NO ONE looking for keys or discussing breakfast, so I assumed we’d be travelling via Wickham Transit.

Everly wore a gray jumpsuit and nearly managed to look casual. Urban had gotten the message about blending in, so he wore jeans and a leather jacket instead of his kilt, but people were still going to stop and stare. Wickham’s long hair was bound behind his head, and Kitch had changed into blue jeans but still wore the rest of his black stuff that singled him out as security.

We heard the toilet flush, and a quick minute later, a redhead came out of the hall to join us. Her mass of red curls was anything but inconspicuous. She wore black leather pants, a washed out, brown denim jacket with a button-down shirt beneath, chocolate brown with black, nickel-sized paisley swirls. Urban and Kitch stepped apart to give her space. Her eyes were only half open, but she smiled and nodded. “Morning.”

“Morning,” we repeated.

Wickham nudged me. “Lennon? This is Persephone. Persi, this is Lennon.”

I got an extra nod.

“Ready?” He reached his arms to the sides, put a hand around my waist, and put his other hand on Kitch’s shoulder.

Everyone linked arms or held onto each other as if they'd traveled with Wickham before. "Eyes open, aye? There is an alley two blocks away from the scene. Nice and quiet. But we never ken, do we?" He took a deep breath. "Now."

One second, we were standing in a low-lit living room. The next, we stood outside, in the fresh air. A bunch of hot tourists...and their waitress of choice.



THE GROUND SHIFTED ONLY SLIGHTLY UNDER MY FEET AND someone flipped on the sun. The sky was still a pre-dawn blue, but we could clearly see the buildings surrounding us. Three story modern office buildings with only a few windows lit from within.

I was right. Italy was warm. While the rest of our little band were decked out in leather jackets, I was glad I had only the gray t-shirt and black denim vest. I'd chosen both on a dreary October day, hoping to cheer myself up. Now I wondered if Fate had chosen it for me.

Everyone stepped out of our would-be prayer circle, all on alert. Kitchens had one hand in his jacket pocket, which made me guess he held a weapon of some kind. Urban didn't bother hiding the sheath on his belt out of which protruded the small black hilt of a knife. The snap that might hold it in place now dangled at the end of a thin black strap.

I guess we're ready to rumble, I thought. The adrenaline in my blood felt like excitement and not fear. After all, if I could face down Andy Weaver, I could handle just about anyone. Besides, if some Fairies showed up and started kicking our

butts, Wickham could probably buy them off with a few gems banging around in his pockets.

Everly looked calm and elegant as always.

I reminded myself that people had been killed here. There was real danger. And this Twilight Zone I'd stepped into wasn't something I could escape when the episode was over. I was an Uncast. My eyes were open. But it was Hank that had opened them, not Wickham.

I watched the others as we moved down the alley toward the street. They circled me, protecting all but my back. I realized I was probably the only one not wearing a weapon, and wondered if that was the reason. It couldn't just be my status as an Uncast, because Everly was one too, and she was out front, leading us all.

At the street, we gathered just long enough for Wickham to break us into three groups. Urban and Kitch crossed the street. Wickham and the redhead went ahead, and Everly was stuck guarding me.

"Don't worry," she said. "I've fought these bastards before, twice. If we meet one, remember, they like to talk. You distract them, and I'll do the rest. Just stay beyond the reach of their claws."

I stopped walking. "Claws?"

She laughed, so I thought she was just pulling my leg and started walking again.

Italians, it seemed, were not early risers. A handful of cars passed, a few dozen people hurried in different directions, only some of whom had the time to stop and gawk at the half a dozen police and emergency vehicles blocking the narrow

road. Only a few drivers seemed put out by the sudden need for a detour.

I tried not to watch Urban across the street. Just the way he walked was...magnificent. I guess that made he and Everly a perfect pair. Then I started noticing others noticing the big Highlander. A couple of old women leaned over their balcony, watching and pointing at him, as if they didn't trust their own eyes.

A wolf whistle came from another balcony, a shrill wakeup call that reminded me I wasn't quite awake yet.

Ahead of us, Wickham took the redhead's hand, and they joined a small mob of onlookers gathering at the edge of the red and white police tape. Urban and Kitchens moved further down and joined another group of gawkers.

I wrapped my arm around Everly's and walked closer. "So...is Persephone Wickham's wife?"

She laughed. "They're just blending in. His wife is Ivy. They have three small boys. He's hidden them away until this is over."

"So they're not dead?"

"They're not." She didn't seem surprised by the question, but she didn't elaborate.

"So he does expect this to end? He made it sound like I'll never go back to my old life."

"Oh, it will end all right. One way or the other."

We stopped short of the cross street, backed up against a stretch of empty wall and watched from there. Though she appeared casual, Everly was constantly scanning the crowds, the streets, the buildings.

We were the rear guard. I tried to hold up my end by watching for monsters, though I didn't know if we were expecting zombies or something out of a swamp. I wouldn't be surprised by anything at that point.

I sighed. "I wish I had a weapon."

She looked me over, her face pinched with concern. Then she smiled and all those lines disappeared. "I'm your weapon today. No worries."

I chose to take my lead from her. If she wasn't worried, I'd pretend I wasn't either. But when we had a chance to relax again, I was going to nail her down on that claw comment...

We only had an angled view of the building ahead, but we saw a gurney with a body bag being wheeled out to the ambulance by a couple of guys in paper hazmat suits. One of them had a smear of blood down his leg. We got just a glimpse before Wickham's crowd blocked the view. I watched for his reaction and realized Persi was missing.

His arm lifted in a yawn, his hand rubbed his head like he was trying to wake up, and he made a quick gesture clearly meant for us.

"Come on." Everly tugged me off to the left. "We're going to take the back of the building. Maybe we'll get lucky and find a trail."

She wasn't talking about breadcrumbs.



OFFICERS STOOD IN EVERY DOORWAY AND RED AND WHITE TAPE cordoned off half the block, so getting close was out of the question. A massive amount of blood pooled at the side of the

road and had been splashed against the curbing, but that, too, had been cordoned off. We walked fast, searching the sidewalk at our feet and every bush or hiding place along the way. By the time we gave up and turned back, Everly and I had covered half a mile of concrete and cobblestones.

“I’m sure they were long gone before the sun rose,” she said. “Dammit. I really wanted to catch one.” A fancy silver handle stuck out of her front pocket, and she worried at it with her fingers. She caught me looking and pulled it out. On the other end was a square cake server, like from a wedding. But the neck had been flattened. “Like I said, I never leave home without it. These buggers’ weakness is silver.”

“I thought that was werewolves,” I said, just joking. It worried me when she didn’t laugh.

“Don’t worry,” she said, and tucked her odd weapon back in her pocket. “We’ll get you a silver blade. This is just my... security blanket. Anything silver will do as long as you can get it through their skin.”

I kept peeking sideways while we walked, waiting for her to break character and admit she was only trying to scare me.

She never did.



WE JOINED THE MEN AT A SIDEWALK CAFE TWO BLOCKS beyond the crime scene. Persi was still missing, but there were chairs for six. Wickham straightened and set his phone aside. “We’ve ordered breakfast. Shouldn’t be long now. Persi must be seeing some success—”

The chair beside Wickham suddenly jumped back from the table *on its own* and Wickham grabbed it, pulled it back even further. Then scooted it forward again.

“Not yet,” he said quietly, then looked up and down the sidewalk.

“Not yet,” Everly repeated, then nodded at a woman seated inside the window, watching us through the glass. When the woman looked away, my elegant friend said, “Now.”

Wickham nodded. “Now is good.”

Persephone appeared in the chair, suddenly, *magically* and reached for the nearest coffee cup, turned it right side up, and set it on its saucer. “Tell me someone ordered me coffee.” She glanced at Wickham’s stern expression and winced. “Sorry. Completely forgot. I should have gone visible around the corner. I’m just...a little shaken, that’s all.”

Wickham turned to me. “She didn’t mean to shock ye, lass. Are ye all right?”

I gave him a thumbs up, fearing my voice might give me away. If invisibility was possible...then fairies with claws must be as well. *Dammit.*

MONSTERS & DOLCE & GABBANA

Three waiters carried platters to the table and placed them ceremoniously on the surface. “Family-a-style,” one of them said, though his facial expression said he disapproved. One charcuterie tray of meats and cheese. The other three were covered with different filled pastries and croissants with fruit as garnish.

Urban scowled at the latter. “No fry up?”

The waiter’s eyes widened, but he said nothing and walked away. A fourth man came with another platter, then walked around the table leaving a tiny pitcher of milk, a small bowl of flower-shaped pats of butter, and an egg cup. A fifth man came outside bearing a tray of coffee cups.

Persi waved him to her, took the first cup, and drained it while he made his way around the table. She lifted her empty cup into the air and pointed at it before he could get away. “Any chance you can bring a pot? Otherwise, you’ll be running your...uh...*legs* off.”

He turned to Wickham. “Family-a-style, eh?”

“Aye. Family style. Thank ye.”

Urban picked up his tiny pitcher and sniffed it. It was a Barbie toy compared to his hand. “Milk.”

“For your coff—” Everly didn’t bother finishing, since he poured it all down in one gulp. She rolled her eyes and turned her shoulder, like she was pretending they weren’t together. He grinned behind her back and I laughed. He sent me a wink that made the chocolate in my pastry melt onto my hand.

When we were left to ourselves again, Wickham nudged Persi. “What did ye learn?”

Her eyes popped. “Now?”

“Now. We’ve never arrived so soon after the fact. I have to believe it will make a difference.”

They’d done this before, then—rushed to a murder scene, hoping to catch evil fairies in the act. I didn’t dare ask if they’d ever been successful. Sitting there with a belly full of nerves, I really didn’t want to know. At least, not until I had something thick and fluffy to fill the rest of the empty space in my gut.

Something like Jericho’s pancakes.

Persi eyed her egg cup and slid it away from her, then took a quick bite of croissant. “Don’t blame me if your appetites are ruined.”

Kitch pointed to the disappointing charcuterie tray. “Too late.”

“Fine,” she said. “One was sliced and mangled like what happened in Oxford. Some furniture overturned, so there wasn’t much of a fight. The other...was different. The body was the color of...of this.” She held up a piece of thinly sliced turkey. “Coroner thinks she’s been drained of blood, or at least I think that’s what he said. My French is much better than my Italian.”

“Drained of blood.” Wickham nodded. “What else? Wounds?”

“Yeah.” Persi looked a little green, but it didn’t keep her from tucking turkey into the center of her bread. “Two holes in her thigh. Big holes.” She held up her ring finger and wiggled it. “Diameter of my finger, maybe.” She stared at the pale meat sticking out of the croissant, but eventually took a big bite.

She and I stared at each other over the table while she chewed. I looked down at my plate, stabbed my own slice of turkey, then examined it for a few seconds. When I put it in my mouth without puking, I was pretty proud of myself. Even more so when a few of my new friends applauded. I didn’t know they’d been watching.

The cherry on top was that look from Wickham—relief, pride. I felt like I’d impressed my big brother yet again, though I’d never had a brother.

I was suddenly embarrassed to find myself eating up attention like a needy child, scarfing up every morsel like that last breakfast I’d eaten at Twila’s. Like I was starving for it.

Pathetic.

I ate while Everly reported on the puddle of blood we’d seen. Then we heard the rest of what Persi had learned—apparently, while playing her invisible woman routine. She had to translate a few words on her phone, but the rest was pretty simple. The milkman had found the drained woman lying halfway out her doorway. The bloody one had been inside. Massive footprints in the blood. The police thought someone left them as a taunt. If real, the murderer would have to be close to eight feet tall, so they dismissed it.

A nervous laugh escaped me, and I laughed harder to cover it up. “Someone’s going to have to draw me a picture. Eight feet tall with claws?”

We sat and smiled in silence while the waiters came out to drag our plates away. It took a few minutes and the same small army. Then the coffee man returned. The fact that his pots were only half full was a message I didn't know if the others understood.

When he was gone, Kitchens tossed a paper napkin across the table. It landed in front of me, and he nodded. When I turned it over, the monster he'd drawn was much worse than my imagination had produced.

Fangs. Claws. Muscles. And a face not even close to human. I only hoped his skills as an artist sucked.

Wickham snatched it out of my hand, drank in the image, then pulled out a lighter to set the napkin on fire. "We know what this one looks like. But what killed the other woman?" He pulled up his sleeve and laid his forearm in front of Persi. "How far apart?"

She pointed to two spots on his skin with about three inches between them.

He shook his head. "Not the same creatures. We're hunting something new, then." He dug in his pocket and pulled out a wallet, then a credit card. "It bothers me that it bit her leg. Are we dealing with a snake?"

"Whoa! Okay!" I jumped to my feet and turned to push my chair back while I searched under the table. Everyone else jumped up too, but they didn't seem too concerned about snakes. They were just on guard, ready to fight. I held my hands up. "I'm okay. I'm okay," until they relaxed. None of us sat down again.

A waiter rushed out like he was worried we'd take off without paying. Wickham waved his credit card and we all

stood around while the man ran it through his handheld machine. When none of the others tried to pay their share, I felt better about being a kept woman.

Everly came around and wrapped her hand around my arm. “While you all poke around for a while, Lennon and I have some serious shopping to do.” She looked pointedly at Wickham. “You let her buy underwear at Brand Max?” She clicked the front of her tongue, then turned me toward the street.

“Inconspicuous if ye please,” Wickham called after us. “Meet in the alley at one, local.”

Everly glanced back. “We’ll try. Urban, darling, don’t let him leave without us.”

TOMATO SAUCE SANDWICHES

“Clothes first.” Everly pointed to a store front with long thin mannequins that were never expected to mimic real life. Judging from the wild outfits, the clothing couldn’t be taken seriously either. But she walked through the doors like it was the corner barista she patronized every day.

I was confident we wouldn’t be staying long, but I was wrong.

There was a dress highlighted in an alcove that had a metal top attached to a black mermaid skirt. Thankfully, I wasn’t in the market. Or at least I hoped I wasn’t. Everly was greeted by three saleswomen who came at her from different directions. She looked them over for a second or two, then pointed to one. “You.”

The other two slunk off, taking her rejection kind of hard. I stepped close and whispered, “You must smell like money.”

She grinned. Her eyes sparkled. She was in her element. “You will too, sweetheart. Just give me a little time.”

I bit my lips so I didn’t let the truth slip out and ruin her day, but there was no way I’d ever look or smell like she did.

The clothing was borderline disturbing. I’d seen similar flowery frocks in my grandmother’s closet—things so old

she'd stopped wearing them, and she'd been dead for fifteen years. In fact, they looked like they were from the same decade as my ugly orange work uniform, only longer.

I looked at the price tag on one particularly homely dress and blinked a few times. 903 Euros. *903!* For a dress I'd probably seen on a Simplicity pattern in the drawer of my grandma's old sewing machine. I must have laughed out loud because Everly took it away from me and hissed that I wasn't allowed to look at prices.

I sighed loudly. "Doesn't Italy have a Target or something?"

She bit her lips together for a few seconds, trying not to laugh at me, then shook her head. "It does not. Or a Walmart, or a Macy's. And if we're going to traipse around Europe and blend in, you're going to have to trust me."

I didn't laugh when she gave me a pair of wide-legged pants from the Alexander McQueen collection, but even the saleswoman was concerned when Everly pointed to a spot on the silk-covered wall, about four feet high, and asked me to kick it.

"Kick the wall," I repeated, and looked at her like she'd lost her mind.

"If you can't do karate in them, they're no use."

The Italian woman's eyes widened. She said something like *translator* and went for help.

"I hate to break it to you," I said, "but I don't *know* karate."

Everly nodded. "I know. But you'll have to learn some. And you can't risk getting caught off guard in a tight pair of

jeans.” I waited to see if she was joking. She stepped back and pointed to the wall again. “Hurry, before she comes back.”

I retreated a couple steps, then did some combination of a basketball layup and dance move, but I finally got my toes to touch high on the wall. About six inches short, but at least we learned the important fact that I could, indeed, move in those pants.

Everly laughed her ass off, and I relaxed a little. Maybe she had been joking all along. I certainly hoped so, since I’d probably suck at karate.

The saleswoman was back, along with a concerned coworker. They both glanced at the wall and gestured wildly, but had nothing but smiles for Everly, who pointed to the white Alexander McQueen pants with huge blue/grey flowers. “We’ll take these in black. Two pair.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d bought two pairs of pants just because I could.



WE LEFT THE “BOUTIQUE” WITH FIVE BAGS. I WASN’T GIVEN so much as a peak at the receipt, but thankfully, two bags were for Everly.

My new wardrobe consisted of a pair of surprisingly soft and flexible leather pants—in black, of course—a loosely woven sweater, and three camisoles of white, black and pale green, which she assured me were not undergarments. Since I didn’t want leather underwear, we would have to shop for regular stuff in Scotland. Apparently, my new cotton panties from Brand Max weren’t going to cut it.

I waited until we were outside before I pointed out that the wide-legged pants were too long and would have to be altered.

“We’ll get the right shoes and they’ll be perfect. But we’ll have to hurry. I’ll allow you to buy underwear in Edinburgh, but Italian shoes are a must.”

I soon found out why.



WE MET THE MEN IN THE ALLEY WHERE WE’D STARTED THAT morning. We’d cut our shopping short, not because we’d finished, but because the shoe store had closed for an afternoon break. I was pretty sure my country would go out of business if we did the same thing.

No one mocked us when they saw the nine bags hanging on our arms. Nor did they complain that we were late. Wickham did give me a funny look, though. “Ye kept yer own clothes, then?”

I looked down and took in the frumpy layers, the jeans, the Nikes. And I realized my “poor as a church mouse” look really did set me apart, even though I wore no loud colors. I shrugged. “I didn’t want to waste the new stuff—”

“You’ll have to wait,” Everly interrupted. “We have more to do in Edinburgh, then we’ll give you a big reveal. But are you sure we’re finished here? If we spent another day or two —”

“Aye.” Her husband leaned down and gave her a brief kiss. “They’ve moved on. Besides, if we give ye another day or two, the six of us couldnae step out with all the baggage we’d need.”

Everly's face lit up. "Luggage! You're going to need luggage!"

We gathered in a circle. The men took our bags, and we all linked arms. We took a quick look at the surrounding windows, and when Wickham was satisfied no one was watching, we disappeared.



WE REAPPEARED BEHIND TWO MASSIVE DUMPSTERS THAT smelled like a carcass, but it wasn't the smell that brought up my stomach, it was the disorientation of moving without actually moving. While I threw up in the gutter, Everly hurried everyone else away, not to give me privacy, but to make sure those smells didn't attach themselves to our new purchases. I finished spitting and forced my feet to move so it didn't attach to me either. The five of them stood at the end of the street and watched with pity as I staggered toward them.

"Don't worry," Everly told them, as I came within earshot. "I'll give her the rest of the day off. Her makeover can wait until tomorrow."

So...it was more than just my clothes that weren't up to par.



"DON'T THINK OF IT AS PIZZA." PERSI SHOULDERED CLOSE AND took a slice out of the box in front of me. "Think of it as a tomato sauce sandwich. The cheese and the rest are just bonuses. You're lucky there's much on them at all."

Tomato sauce sandwich, I told my stomach. *Brace yourself.*

Persi and I joined the others in the living room, plates in hand.

“The puddle of blood confounds me,” Urban was saying. “Why remove it only to spill it? Why not drain her on the spot and leave it there. Even if we were dealing with vampires, they wouldn’t have left it behind, aye?” He followed this with a big bite of tomato-covered food, and I realized I really had to toughen up to run with this crowd.

The mention of vampires, though, made me laugh. “You can’t be serious. About the vampires.”

Wickham chuckled. “Nay, lass. No vampires...at least, not the traditional sort. But the Fae folk species are various. Only a few are widely known. Most prefer their own realms, and even those who would come into ours dinnae have the power to do it. They must be brought by one of the more elite. We suspect this O’Ryan must be one such, and now he has brought more than one species to do his biddin’.

“In the past five years, including this morning, he and his minions have killed eleven sets of witches in various cities. The first was in Oxford, England. Everly caught two of them red handed and killed them. Their bodies were summoned back to Fairy as if to hide the evidence.”

“Back to Fairy?”

“The fairy realm.”

I looked at Everly in a new light. Her husband might treat her like she’s made of glass, but she was a serious bad ass. Which also meant, sadly, that she hadn’t been joking about the karate.

“We’ve been trying to catch them again, to take one alive if possible,” she said, “to get to O’Ryan. But it’s impossible to anticipate where they will hit next. And Muir witches are spread throughout the world.”

From my memory, I pulled up an old map I’d had pinned to my dorm wall, when I’d been dating a geography major. “So...Oxford, England. Where next?”

Urban and Everly worked out a list, including Brighton in England, Nantes and Saintes in France, Valencia in Spain, one in Ghana. Then Barcelona, Paris, and Algeria, and after a long stretch, Milan, Italy.

“And the one in London,” Urban amended.

I could see it all clearly. “In that order?”

“Nay, not strictly in that order. Brighton happened after Oxford, but before London, then none in England after the one in Nantes. We thought they were moving north to south, but then the two in Spain happened before Saintes. And why would they go back to Barcelona, then Paris, and back to Algeria when they’d been in Ghana before?”

“Because it’s not just north to south,” I said, then looked around to see if anyone else might be thinking the same thing I was. “If you look at a map, the two in France are a little off course, but both cities are fairly close to Bordeaux, right?”

Wickham sat forward, scowling. “Aye. Both.”

“And if you think about it, he might have been spreading his...monsters...out a little. The ones in Spain might have been successful before the ones in Saintes found the witches they were looking for.”

“Logical. Aye.” Wickham waited. I was still surprised he hadn’t thought of it.

“It’s methodical. If I needed to search the entire earth, I’d have to be organized, somehow. I’d pick a starting point, then sweep up and down.” I made a painting motion, down and up, down and up, moving a little each time. “The Prime Meridian is kind of a poetic place to start, don’t you think? If I had to guess, you’ve missed some attacks in the Netherlands and Norway. Milan is probably on about the 9th Meridian East, so —”

Wickham was suddenly in front of me, his hands on my upper arms, pulling me out of my chair. He searched my eyes like his life depended on it. “Are ye playin’ with me?”

I didn’t mean to laugh in his face. It just came out when I was nervous, and standing that close to him would make anyone nervous.

“I dated a geography major who used to drill on stuff like this. Most of the cities they listed are on the Prime Meridian.” I rattled them off like I’d done a hundred times before, just a long time ago. Apparently, my tongue had some muscle memory. “Peterborough, London, Brighton, Bordeaux, Zaragoza, Valencia, Tamale and Accra...in Ghana. What are the chances—”

Wickham wrapped his arms around me and squeezed me so hard I couldn’t breathe, but I wasn’t about to complain about it, even if I ended up passing out.

The rest of them whooped and shouted words I didn’t understand, then came over to slap whatever body part Wickham didn’t have dibs on. When I was finally let up for air, and the rest of them had settled down, I laughed again.

“I guess I just earned that pair of Italian leather boots, then, huh?”

A SEMI-DANGEROUS LIFE

The following days were chaos.

As an added bonus for my insight, Wickham moved us all to a house outside Edinburgh. He said we needed a safe place to pop back to that didn't include dumpsters and dark alleys. Before I did anymore popping, however, Everly and I found a pharmacy and the British equivalent of Dramamine.

"I think you'd better buy more than one package," she said. "Sounds like we might be...busy."

I bought everything they had.

We were only required to pack up our personal things because the house itself was completely furnished when we arrived. The east-facing mansion was the size of a small hotel back home and easily a couple hundred years old.

One of the rooms on the second floor was designated as our "landing" room. What Wickham called the parlor, I called the living room, was left alone for unexpected visitors. And the large study, with a passage to a private library, was designated as the war room.

Wickham, Persi, and I chose bedrooms upstairs and left the main floor master suite to the MacKenzies. Kitch went looking

for a room by the back door. I picked the bedroom at the top of the staircase. I liked to know where my exits were—a habit born of being cornered in a dark parking lot by Andy Weaver, once upon a time. If I got spooked and felt the need to run, it was a straight shot down the steps and out the front door.

I wasn't anticipating any panic attacks, though, considering the size of the place. Plenty of places to run and hide. Plenty of room to stand and fight. Anything but being cornered.

I had my own bathroom with a porcelain bathtub and gold fixtures. When I found Persi looking over my shoulder, I asked if hers had a shower.

She smiled and pointed to a pole that went up one side of my tub. "That's your shower. Called a French shower. The head attaches up there, if you want to stand." Thankfully, she didn't laugh. "My room is pink. I'm not a fan of pink. Clashes with my hair. But it reminds me of the bedroom I had as a little girl."

"We can always trade if it starts to wear on you."

"Thanks." She headed for the door. "Kitch said he'd feel more comfortable in the servant's quarters, but apparently, there are *servants* in the servant's quarters. Two sets of Muir twins. Married to each other. It's going to get really confusing around here."

"You're a Muir, right?"

"My grandmother was."

"And you're a witch. But you don't have a twin?"

"No. I'm called a *Third*. Daughter of a witch who was the daughter of a witch. Some *Thirds* have incredible power, like

Wickham's niece used to have. But mine is pretty mild in comparison—I'm a *minor Third*."

I pointed out the obvious. "You can make yourself *invisible*."

"Technically, I keep my reflection to myself and will the reflections of the things around me to pass through. I have to concentrate. It's not just an on and off switch. And if I get distracted, I can let it slip, which is a problem."

"Still."

"Yeah. I know." She nudged me with her shoulder. "But you've got Hank, right? Might not be a power, but it's significant enough that the Grandfather knew about you." She bit her lips together, then started poking around the room and stopped at the window to take in the view. She wasn't going to ask for details about Hank, but I knew she was dying to.

"Hank doesn't do anything for me. It's just a... responsibility...given to my family. A babysitting job, really. Since I can never have kids, I don't know who I'll hand it down to. And come to think of it, if I'm going to be living this semi-dangerous life, I should make a plan—"

"*Semi-dangerous*?" Persi rolled her eyes, then dropped her smile. "No. You're right. Semi-dangerous it is. Ironic, though, that Wickham's sisters call their powers *The Responsibility*, don't you think?"

"I hate to pry," I said, "but I feel like I need to catch up with the class, if you know what I mean. Do you mind telling me what power Wickham's niece had? And why doesn't she have it anymore? I didn't know you could stop being a witch."

"Now *that* is a very long story. You'll have to have Urban tell you sometime. But Soni's powers? Wickham thought her

gift was to literally move the earth. The Grandfather thought it was to open graves. I don't think Soni understood it completely, but she was forced to give it up to her very evil grandfather, who was Wickham's twin."

"So there's another bad guy out there? With the power to raise the dead, like she did?"

"Oh, no. We don't have to worry about him. Dead and gone."

I sighed and plopped onto the bed. "You're right. It's getting terribly complicated around here."

"Don't even try to keep everyone straight. Just focus on our goals. Learn what O'Ryan is after and what frightened that fairy at Trinity College. Then destroy the bad fairy. All the rest is window dressing."

At the sound of voices, we both turned toward the open door and watched Urban and Wickham coming up the stairs. The eighteenth-century man was dressed in his pretty blue kilt again.

I smirked. "As far as window dressing goes, I guess I shouldn't complain..."



WHILE THE MEN WERE STILL SETTING UP THE WAR ROOM, Everly took me back into the city to finish my makeover. I thought that meant a haircut, though she'd promised it would take all day.

"I don't want to dye my hair," I told her. I already felt guilty for how much money had been wasted on my new

wardrobe, let alone everything else. And I was pretty sure I couldn't pull off her slick black ponytail look.

“Your color is good,” she lied with a smile. She and the stylist eyed my mousy-brown, grown-out layers as if they were interesting. “But you need something intentional. Something without a lot of upkeep. Something that won't insult your wardrobe.”

The stylist glanced at my t-shirt and jeans.

“I didn't want to get hair on my new clothes,” I explained.

When the woman stepped away, Everly bent to whisper in my ear. “I'm burning these as soon as you change out of them.”



MY INTENTIONAL HAIRCUT WAS CALLED A BLUNT Collarbone.

My layers were cleaned up and left messy, but the bottom was whacked dramatically at my collarbones. A little longer than shoulder length, but not long enough for slick ponytails. I had to admit, I was stylin'. But when I said it to Everly, she forbade me from using that word again.

My vocabulary, it seemed, could use improvement too. But the chances of upgrading that were pretty slim.

Makeup was next. I usually only used mascara and maybe a little eyeliner, but now that I was in my thirties, my skin color wasn't as uniform as it had once been. Everly assured me the heavy bag of products she paid for wouldn't have to be a daily routine, but I'd have them when I needed them.

“Either your lying is getting worse,” I told her, “or my bullshit radar is getting better.”

She shrugged. “I’m probably getting worse.” Instead of heading for the entrance, she led me to the back of the salon and through an opaque glass door marked *Grooming*.

When we walked out two hours later, we were no longer friends.



I TOOK A CAB BACK TO THE HOUSE AND PAID WITH THE TIP money I had left. The driver wasn’t happy about taking U.S. currency, even though I gave him a healthy tip, but we’d already arrived, and I was in no mood to give a shit.

Everly had a car and could drive off a cliff for all I cared.

I took my bags straight up to my room, tossed them in the closet, and put them out of my mind. I drew a hot bath, pulled down the shades, and soaked in the darkness, shedding at least one angry tear for every individual hair that had been ripped from my body.

My only satisfaction was that cursing at the top of my lungs, each time an inch of wax was stripped away, had left Everly mortified.

I fell asleep in the water. Thankfully, I was tall enough that I didn’t drown. My bath had cooled to body temperature, and I shivered while I dried myself, careful not to buff the angry red bits. “No thank you,” I said aloud to the idea of being a true European, and willed my hair to grow back fast.

Because I never again planned to be naked in front of another human being, I wrapped in a towel before stepping out

of my bathroom, unsure if I'd locked my door.

I hadn't.

More than half a dozen bags sat on the bed. I assumed they were from my torturer since no one else in the house had a penchant for shopping. Most of my anger had burned off in the tub so I wasn't up to throwing another fit or tossing the bags out the door.

"If she went to this much trouble, I should at least take a look." I went for the biggest bag first. Didn't recognize the store name.

Four pairs of jeans. Two were blue. I tried them on without grabbing underwear first. They fit like gloves—made of butter. And in two of them, I was even able to kick a spot high on the wall. But better still, they looked as lovely as they felt and made my butt look like more than just a place to hang a couple of pockets.

I felt like a woman.

In jeans.

The next two bags had t-shirts and sweater vests, all in muted colors that could be layered and worn together—my style, but a thousand times better. And with my new haircut, I wouldn't look like I was trying to look like a teenager.

In another bag, a thick and fluffy pink robe, like the one Charlotte had worn the last time I saw her. No need to blend in while wandering around my own room, it said.

A lightweight bag had four nightgowns with matching robes. Powder blue, crimson, white, and leopard. The next bag was full of panties in various styles, various fabrics. Not a granny panty in the bunch. Lots of colors. Everly had said, in

Italy, that we only had to blend in on the outside. What we wore underneath was our business.

I was suddenly sick with remorse. I had cut short what would have been a fun afternoon because my pride stung... along with my legs, my pits, and other parts.

A plan began brewing in my mind. I had to find a way to apologize.

The last bag was from Tiffany & Co. I had never imagined I'd need expensive jewelry in my life, but once I held it in my hand, I started to understand the appeal. Nothing from Penny's ever felt so heavy, so...intense. It had some magnetic pull that demanded I try it all on.

Each piece came in its own box. With labels. A matching set of gold creations by Paloma Picasso. *Olive Leaf* was the pattern. A heart necklace, a wide bracelet, small branches of the leaves for earrings, and a ring. I wasn't a fan of gold, but it was growing on me. Fast.

A small red *fleur de lis* pendant. Far too flashy to wear out in public. Far too expensive to flaunt around my bedroom. Silver teardrop hoops I totally would have picked for myself. A watch with a soft leather band. Solitaire studs I was sure were diamonds—and yes, the enclosed papers verified it.

It was a bizarre dream I never dreamed for myself. Never thought in a million years I would want diamond studs, let alone have a place to wear them, or an outfit I might wear them with.

Money meant nothing.

I stared at the bed now covered in it. Tried to convince myself it was true. But those blue walls of my Hazelton apartment were still out there, waiting for me to wake up.

SERVANTS IN THE SERVANT'S QUARTERS

When Wickham moved us to the house, he'd announced that dinner would be at seven every night for whomever among us was in town. And we wouldn't need to do the cooking, or the dishes, which was a lucky thing because of how I was dressed.

I came down the stairs just before seven wearing my black Alexander McQueen wide-legged trousers, a black camisole, and a new poncho-like loose-knit sweater, gunmetal gray, with the collar open to my belly button. My arms were a little bare for my taste, but I wanted Everly to know I appreciated her.

I wore the diamond studs and the red *fleur de lis* necklace, a black watch with a mother of pearl face, and the silver open-heart ring of my own, from a boyfriend a long time ago. It was the only jewelry I'd ever been given that hadn't turned my skin green. It was still going strong.

Who knew a car mechanic would have good taste in jewelry?

I had never worn so much bling at one time before. It felt heavy, gawdy. But even if it was just once, I wanted to look as polished, as finished, as Everly MacKenzie.

I had reapplied the makeup, though not as thick as the cosmetic chick had done. I'd brushed through my hair, then

ran my fingers through it like I'd been taught. Together with the new threads, I was pleased with the result. I might be able to do it all from scratch sometime.

At the bottom of the steps, Kitchens headed past me, but looked up and stopped, to let me go ahead of him. "Lovely hair," he said, his Scottish accent heavy. "Shall I take ye in to dinner?"

He didn't mention the clothes, but I was sure he'd noticed just by the way he avoided looking directly at them.

Wickham sat at the head of the long dining room table chatting with Persi, seated on his right. Urban sat between her and Everly. That left the opposite side for Kitchens and me if we didn't want to yell from the distant end. I could feel all eyes on me as I walked, felt like I was wearing only the red panties and *fleur de lis*, as exposed as I'd been in that brightly lit salon/dungeon where I'd been tortured earlier.

Kitch pulled out the chair beside Wickham, and I sat down without incident. Only then did I look at the faces around me.

I smiled at Everly. "I'm so sorry about today. I...I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry too," she said. She pointed to my neck where the *fleur de lis* sat in all its glory. "That's supposed to be my apology."

"Wait, wait, wait." Persi pointed at the necklace. "Don't you owe me an apology too?"

Everly's brows rose. "Do I?"

Persi snorted. "Surely...I can think of something."

Everyone laughed, but the men were obviously waiting for an explanation. Everly rolled her eyes. "We'll explain later..."

to Persi, maybe.”

Urban scowled until his wife said, “Woman stuff.” Then he coughed and shook his head. “We’ve mounted the maps,” he said. “The war room will be ready...”

The double doors opened. A middle-aged man pushed the doors wide and left them that way, then stepped aside while his twin and two women carried in two plates each. Green salads with a side of berries. The first man brought a tray and went around the table to place little pewter pitchers of vinaigrette dressing for each of us. As in Italy, individual portions seemed to be a thing.

“Everyone,” Wickham said, before our servers could get away. “This is Deb and Ranald Young,” he pointed to the couple on his right. “And this is Becca and Daniel Young. Ye’ll come to know which is which soon enough. Ye’ll notice they wear nametags to make it easier on us.”

We were poured water, and two bottles of wine were left on the table. The main course of fish and peas followed. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the deep-fried-World’s-End kind, and Wickham gave me a knowing look and a commiserating grimace, letting me know he felt the same. I was able to get the fish down without making a fuss, though, and dessert was compensation enough—a gorgeous, decadent little thing called Banoffee Pie.

“I could eat fish every night if it came with this.” I looked up and checked the nametag. Becca was wide-eyed and worried. I tried to backtrack. “I’m not saying the fish wasn’t good.” She nodded and scurried out. I turned to Wickham, who was trying not to laugh and failing badly. “You don’t think they’ll make us eat fish every night, do you?”

Wickham laughed so hard he had to leave the table.

I CAN'T HAVE NICE THINGS

The following morning, we met in the war room after breakfast, which was a buffet-style feast. I realized if I kept eating like I had been the past few days, I'd grow out of my wardrobe in less than a month. I also reminded myself I no longer needed to store up calories for those days I couldn't afford more than ramen noodles.

The study accommodated three small conference tables set in a U-shape. We all staked out our territory along the outer edges and sat facing the wall of maps. I sat on the far edge with my back to the wall. Kitchens sat on my left. Urban and Everly had the next table and faced the maps head on. Persi sat opposite me with another chair left beside her for Wickham, who stood before the center map with a long stick in his hand with a black rubber tip, like I remembered from school days.

The map itself was typical, with England at the center. Meridian lines were already prominent, with each line bowing more dramatically the further they moved away from Prime, to account for the curve of the earth.

"I've marked the cities where O'Ryan's dogs have already struck. They do, indeed, lie close to the meridians, and ye were correct. Milan is very near the Ninth Meridian East. If his north-to-south, south-to-north pattern continues, he should still

be on the down-sweep. I propose we test our theory, all credit to Lennon, of course. I don't want to spook him, however, so even if we guess his next strike zone correctly, I don't want him to know about it."

Urban interrupted. "Which cities are next, then?"

"The French Island of Corsica, Sardinia," Wickham dropped his pointer to North Africa. "And Tunisia."

Persi gave her head of red curls a shake. "But surely there aren't Muir witches on every island, in every country."

Wickham's expression hardened. "Ye'd be surprised how many there are. Been multiplyin' like weeds for centuries, haven't we? By *twos*, many of us."

"Wait a minute." Persi again. "If you're now the Grandfather, don't you have to keep track of them all? *Us* all —"

"Not if I can help it." Wickham tapped on the map. "Any ideas?"

I raised my hand. "If we move out ahead of him, search these places and warn any witches to flee, won't he suspect we've been there? He'll know we know. And if we don't warn them, I'd hate to think three more sets will have to die just to prove our theory."

Kitchens shrugged. "But that's just the point, lass. We arenae doin' this to save the next set of witches, are we?" He directed his question to Wickham, who moved to the empty office chair and dropped into the seat.

"Nay. We're not." Wickham's expression remained hard when he looked at me. "I should have been clear from the start. I must destroy the Fae bastard to protect my family and you lot, obviously. He threatened to come back for everyone at

the weddin', and I mean to make certain he never gets that chance. As far as I'm concerned, that takes precedence."

I bit my lips together and told myself I should at least hear him out. Protecting his family, I could understand. But purposefully withholding information from people who might be hunted down and murdered by those monsters? I didn't think I could be part of that.

Was I missing something?

Obviously, cracking the code to predicting where the monsters would strike next had been a rush. But it looked like no one would be saved because of it—at least not for a while. We were going to sit back and wait until people died so we could put another pin in the map...

I was walking out of the study before I realized I'd gotten to my feet. Apparently, my body didn't need time to think things over. It just knew I had to get out of there. Behind me, I heard one of the men say, "I'll go," and I started running.



IN FIGHT OR FLIGHT MODE, I ACTED PURELY ON INSTINCT.

I took the stairs two at a time. With every step, I felt the weight of my jewelry tugging on me like a kid yanking on the tail of my shirt, reminding me that my compliance had already been bought and paid for.

Money didn't matter? More like, *No price is too high. Whatever value you've placed on your honor, we can pay it.*

Outside my bedroom door, I paused for only a second, listening for footsteps. When I heard nothing, I hurried inside and turned the lock.

I saw the wide bracelet for the manacle it was and ripped it off. All the jewelry, I peeled off and left in a pile on the dresser. I went to the closet and pulled out the smallest of the leather luggage—a small duffel bag. Neal’s green suitcase had gone into a dumpster days ago, so I had no choice.

Ignoring the feel of the fabrics, I shuffled through hangers, looking for the least expensive stuff. I’d left Idaho with four outfits, and every scrap of them had been confiscated. It was only fair they be replaced, since they’d probably been added to the burn barrel in the backyard.

Jeans. Three t-shirts. A vest and a sweater. Underwear, socks, and a second bra. I tossed in a few toiletries, and because my Nikes were also missing, I took a pair of flats. I figured I’d earned the boots on my feet.

Last but not least, I pulled out the bottom drawer of the dresser and turned it over on the bed. Hank was where he was supposed to be, strapped to the wood with some masking tape I’d found in the kitchen.

A sharp rap on the door. “Lennon? It’s Kitch.”

Ah, so *he* was the volunteer.

“Go away.”

“Nay, lass. Let me in. I must see ye’re all right.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then I’ll just sit out here, shall I? On the cold floor...and wait for ye to come out. No pressure. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

The whine in his voice would have made me laugh under ordinary circumstances. But now he was the man standing between me and the front door. If I let him in, though, he wouldn’t be...

I opened the door, stepped back, and pointed to the chair on the far side of the bed. “Sit there. Don’t speak.”

“Oh. I suppose ye were tellin’ the truth. Ye’re all right, then.” He moved around the bed, noticed the open bag, the drawer, and the scrap of tape, but bit his tongue.

“No talking.”

He mimed zipping his lips.

To avoid his scrutiny, I went into the bathroom and searched one last time for anything personal. The open-heart ring sat on the shelf over the sink, and I was grateful for Kitch’s interference, or I might not have taken that last look.

I went back into the bedroom and put the drawer back where it belonged. I pointed to the balcony. “Will you see if I left a ring on the little table?”

He jumped up, happy to help. As soon as he was outside, I grabbed the bag off the bed, my new coat from the chair, and I ran. I don’t know if my feet actually touched the stairs. The front door was locked, but all the bolts turned easily, only eating up a second or two. No one outside to stop me.

I hit the big brass button that started the front gates opening, ran out through the growing gap, then turned to the right. At the corner, I turned again, to stay out of sight. I finally slowed after the next block. A little drizzle of rain helped cool me, but my heart still raced. Someone would come looking for me. Wickham believed he needed me, and probably not just to explain about the Prime Meridian.

Or was I wrong?

Maybe I’d been enough help already. Maybe he was right, and Hank had nothing at all to do with destroying his enemy.

Although, if he knew what Hank was capable of, he'd see differently.

I'd been fooling myself. There was no getting rid of my curse, no trusting anyone else with it. I truly was stuck with it for the rest of my life. But at least, leaving Wickham's team meant my life was no longer semi-dangerous. I had plenty of time to find someone I could pass it on to.

I turned down into an alleyway. Halfway to the next block, I found a little square playground with a bench perfect for catching my breath.

I was amazed by how fast I slipped back into poor mode—probably because I hadn't really left it. First and foremost, I needed a place to spend the night. Then I'd need to find a way back to the States. Since I had never had a passport in my life, I couldn't claim I'd lost mine. But I figured my best bet was to find an American embassy and put myself into their hands. If they decided to punish me for getting into the country without documentation, the worst they would do was put a roof over my head, feed me a couple times a day, and when they were satisfied, they'd send me home. Wouldn't they?

I'd just have to find a clever and secure hiding place for Hank first...



THE MOST DIRECT BUS ROUTE BACK INTO THE HEART OF Edinburgh dropped me at Waverly Station. Still had some tips left, so I wasn't completely broke. The U.S. Consulate would be a seven-minute walk.

I split my attention between the map on my phone and expecting Kitchens or Wickham to come after me. But no one

tried to prevent me from getting on the bus. No one chased after when the bus pulled away. Nothing dramatic at all.

Maybe Wickham didn't care if I bailed. Or maybe he didn't realize I'd taken some good clothes with me.

It was winter. My pink coat had gone missing with the rest; I had no choice but to take the leather one Everly bought me at the shoe store in Italy. It smelled like heaven and guilt. I decided I didn't care. If they came for it, I could always hand it back.

I kept my eyes glued to the road so I wouldn't get sick. I hated busses, but this one was my salvation. Literally. If I'd stayed with the team, I might really lose my soul.

In a mere ten minutes, we'd arrived at Waverley. I got off the bus and crossed the street, leaving the bustling train station behind. I slipped back into Loner Mode as smoothly as I'd reverted to Poor Mode. And as I walked down the sidewalk, following my map, I was the same waitress I'd been a few days before...under the camouflage of a new haircut and better clothes.

No one in Hazelton would recognize me, but I did. Inside my shiny shell, I was still Lennon Todd, the girl my grandmother would be proud of. And that was all that mattered.

My overstuffed duffle was getting heavy, so I stopped for a second to pull the strap over my shoulder. Someone behind me stopped too, and I tried not to freak out. It might have been a coincidence, or it might be Kitchens, but I didn't want to look.

I started walking again, a hundred times more aware of things around me, of footsteps coming from twenty feet behind. People passed, and I watched their faces for any sign

of alarm or excitement. I saw neither, so I relaxed a little. If I were being followed by monsters or handsome Highlanders, my fellow pedestrians wouldn't be able to keep a straight face.

At the corner, I was glad for a big picture window I used as a mirror to see behind me.

Two tall men with a woman walking between them. It was impossible to make out their faces in the glass. When I stopped to stare at the items on display, they missed a step before continuing around the corner as if my stopping hadn't thrown them off.

I stood there, frozen with indecision. It wasn't like I'd stopped in their path, and they'd had to quickly cut around me. They were following me. But why? What would they want with me?

There was no earthly reason why anyone in Edinburgh would even know who I was. Or did they recognize me from the salon and assume I had the same kind of money Everly had?

Muggers? They hadn't looked the part. The men wore the same caps I'd seen a dozen times between there and the station. Their clothes and jackets non-descript. The woman wore a plaid skirt and long coat, her hands deep in her pockets. I'd noticed nothing else.

My senses told me to turn back and run. The train station was full of people, full of witnesses. No one would try to mug me there.

I moved out to the edge of the sidewalk and took a few steps so I could peek around the corner. The side street was lined with cars on both sides. The sidewalk was clear. The trio was gone. I stared at a dozen shops and doors they might have

ducked into. If I passed the wrong one, would they pull me inside?

I tried to convince myself I was paranoid, but it didn't work. My alarm bells clanged like the bell on an old firetruck. There was no way I could walk down that street. So I backtracked half a block and started looking for a taxi. A woman on the bus had been happy to make a few bucks by trading some pounds for dollars, so at least I wouldn't piss off another driver.

One of those old-fashioned black cabs I'd seen lined up at the train station headed my way. I raised my hand and waved. The driver waved back and slowed to a stop. Since other cars were waiting, I grabbed the door that opened backward and let myself in.

"American consulate, please." I held up my two five-pound notes. "Or as close as ten pounds will get me." He took off without a word, turned the next corner, then stopped abruptly. Since this was precisely the second time I'd ever taken a cab, I had no idea what was going on. But I wasn't about to pay him ten pounds for taking me less than half a block.

He just sat there, staring at me in his rearview mirror.

I reached for the door, but it opened on its own. One of those men dragged off his cap and barged inside, shoved me over, and sat beside me. The door on the other side opened and the woman and second man climbed in, then sat on the seat facing me and the back of the car.

When she smiled, I recognized her. Or at least, I recognized her glowing purple eyes.

“I have nothing to do with those people,” I said. “And I don’t have any gemstones.” I patted the pockets of my coat to demonstrate they were empty.

She nodded at me with her chin. “Search her.”

The car took off. I had to tilt my head to see the road ahead, more worried about motion sickness than being mugged. After all, nothing was mine. If they took everything I had, it would serve me right.

The hatless man next to me forced me out of my coat. I cooperated if only to keep him from ripping it in two. The other man grabbed my boot and dragged it off, searched it and reached for the other. When the first guy started running his fingers through my hair, I stopped caring about the road and slapped at his hands.

He slapped my face. Hard enough to make the muscles in my neck burn with the violent turn of my head.

I screamed my outrage and looked at the woman—no, the fairy—who was pulling my clothes from my bag and tossing them on the floor. “How can you just sit there?”

She ignored me.

The buttons on my vest popped. The first guy nearly ripped my arm off, so I finally let it go.

He pointed to my t-shirt. “You do it, or I will.”

I held out my hand. “Fine. I’ll do it.” I bugged my eyes at the woman. “But whatever you’re looking for, I don’t have it!”

She finished digging through the bag and chucked it onto the floor too.

I pulled my shirt over my head and held it in front of my hot pink bra. The man in front of me laughed creepy and low.

“All of it, Uncast.”

It was probably that laugh that did it. Andy Weaver had sounded much the same that dark summer night he caught me in the parking lot and backed me into the far corner. I'd promised myself that was never going to happen again.

And a promise was a promise.

Everly hadn't taught me karate, but I remembered the one move I didn't realize I'd been practicing. I launched myself off the seat and pretended the creep's face was that spot on the wall and nailed his nose with the heel of my bare foot. The other guy wrapped his arm around me, put his hand to my nearly bare chest, and slammed me to the floor.

I kicked and screamed with every gulp of air. I bit and scratched any leg or arm I could get a hold of. But they got my pants off me.

The car turned and the sunshine was gone. Soon after, it stopped.

I kept fighting, hoping the doors would open, hoping one or two of them would get out and improve my odds.

I finally got my butt under me and sat up. With the first man's face within reach, I flung out my arm and grabbed his cheek, tried to dig my thumbnail into his eye. I was almost grateful when the other one hit me so hard it broke my arm. Through the fog of pain and howling, I was only half-aware of the barehanded searches inside my body.

The next howl of outrage came from the woman hovering over me. “Where is it? Where is the claw realta? Tell me!”

I'd been reduced to whimpering, breathing shallow to keep from feeling too much, but I forced myself to fill my lungs and answer her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...*you fairy bitch!*”



I WAS PRETTY SURE SOMEONE STOMPED ON MY HEAD.

At least it felt like it when I started to come to. The pain in my head and the pain from my right arm competed for my attention. I fought to ignore them both so I could hear what was happening around me.

Shouting? No, roaring. Outside the car.

The floor bounced beneath me and the air shifted. The doors opened, finally, finally! Booted feet kicked at me, then were gone. Cold air flooded over my bare body like water and the resulting shiver awakened the pain in my arm, in my head.

If only the clothes beneath me could be on top...

Cursing. Lots of cursing. Then nothing.

HOUSE OF PAIN

*P*ain took my breath away, wouldn't give it back. I tried to rise from the blackness to the surface.

I kicked my legs and was rewarded with a new wave of pain.

Gave up. Let myself sink again.



“LENNON? LENNON.”

Someone patted my face. I turned away and prayed they'd take the hint.

“Lennon, I need ye to sit up a little. Ye need to drink this. It will make the pain go away.”

I tried to say *You go away*, but I only grunted.

“That's it, sweeting. Stay with me. Drink this and ye can go back to sleep.”

I drank. I choked, coughed, then wept when the pain punished me for trying to escape it.



I OPENED MY EYES AND FOUND BLESSED DARKNESS. A LACK OF light, not a haze of pain. My arm ached. My head throbbed. I barely breathed for fear of making the pain worse. Unfortunately, I needed to pee.

My eyes adjusted quickly. I was back at the big house, back in my room. The bathroom light was a vertical yellow slit near my feet. The hall door was closed. If I was alone, I would never be able to get out of bed. If I moaned, would anyone hear me?

The glass door to the balcony glowed slightly behind the curtain. A dark shadow sat in the chair beside the bed, its head back, its mouth open, snoring softly. Deep voice—Kitch or Wickham?

Either way, I wasn't going to ask them to help me pee.

Pillows propped up my arm. Hell, I was thrilled it still resembled an arm, though I could barely make out the pale layers holding it together. I tried to clear my throat quietly, but the shadow started, jumped from the chair, and came to hover over me. Wickham.

"I..." I put more effort into clearing my throat, then spoke as clearly as I was able. "Need. To. Pee."

He grinned. His white teeth glowed brighter than the window. "I'll get the nurse."

Nurse?

I looked around the room again, verified it was indeed my bedroom. He'd brought a nurse to the house?

He left the room. I would have surrendered to sleep again, but my bladder forbade it. Already, he was back with a woman in scrubs. She turned on a lamp and smiled kindly.

“Ready for a trip to the loo, then?”



IT TURNED OUT THAT I HAD SLEPT FOR A DAY AND A HALF, AND I'd never come as close to dying as I thought I had. In the morning, a doctor actually came to the house to check on me and discuss my injuries.

“Wickham won't let me look in the mirror,” I grumbled.

“Ye've got a shiner, lass. All else seems to be in place. Though, the nurse tells me yer neck hurts?”

“Might be whiplash. He slapped me pretty hard.”

The man's face paled. “Ye have a linear skull fracture...”

“I'm pretty sure someone stomped on my head. But my clothes were in a pile beneath me. You know. A cushion. So it could have been worse.”

The doctor scowled at Wickham. “I'm askin' ye to leave the room, sir.”

Wickham rolled his eyes. “Lennon, I believe Dr. McAvoy needs to ken who did these things to ye. In yer own words, not mine.”

I finally got it. “It wasn't him.” I struggled to remember. “They followed me from the train station. Two men and a woman. I hailed a cab, but the driver was one of them and let them in the car too. They...” I had to stop myself before I started using words like “fairy” and glowing purple eyes. “They were looking for something. I think they had me confused with someone else. They...” I couldn't find the words. “They...”

“Miss Todd, perhaps ye could ask Mr. Muir to step outside?” McAvoy scowled at Wickham, but the Highlander only scowled back.

“He’s fine,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“So be it.” He sighed. “I found evidence of sexual abuse —”

“No!” I lowered my voice. “No. Nothing like that. They were just...searching.”

He looked doubtful.

“Maybe they thought I was a drug mule or something. Hiding something in my...you know. They didn’t appreciate me fighting back. And when they didn’t find what they were looking for,” I locked eyes with Wickham, “they weren’t happy.”

The doctor nodded, a little more convinced. “Tell me again, who slapped ye?”

“The man sitting beside me. I slapped him first, for trying to take off my shirt...” I was suddenly back there, seeing it all again. I got a funny taste in my mouth. Panic swirled in my stomach like the worst case of motion sickness. “I’m going to be sick.”

McAvoy handed me a plastic container. Running to the toilet was apparently not an option. “And who stomped on yer head?”

“I’m pretty sure that was the woman. She asked me where *it* was. I told her I didn’t know what she was talking about. I think I called her...something unkind. That’s when it happened. I think. But I’m not sure. Pretty sure I checked out after that.”

“Let’s talk about yer arm.” He gently lifted the limb in question and pointed with his pen. “It is broken here, and here.” He pointed above the elbow, then below it.

“Same guy maybe? When I finally got off the floor, I tried to gouge his eye out and one of them whacked me hard.”

The doctor sighed, then nodded. “And what about the scratches on yer arms and legs?”

I smiled. “You should see the other guys.”



WICKHAM STAYED AWAY FOR THREE DAYS AFTER THAT DOCTOR visit. The nurse stayed another night until I was sure I could get to the bathroom on my own. Everly promised she would help me with everything else. And there I was again, naked in front of another human being, like I swore would never happen again.

At least I had a thick layer of bubbles between us most of the time. She sat on a chair to make sure I didn’t drown in the bathtub. We never talked about why I left. And for those two days, we all walked on eggshells, waiting for some unseen shoe to drop.

Kitch, Persi, and I sat in the dining room eating lunch on the fourth day when Wickham stuck his head in the door. “Meeting in the war room at one o’clock, aye?” Then he was gone.



WE SETTLED INTO OUR PREVIOUS SEATS AT THE TOP OF THE hour. Wickham came in and propped his hip on my table like

some high school teacher playing it cool. “How are ye feelin, Lennon?”

“I’m fine.”

“And the headaches?”

“Gone.”

He seemed surprised. “That’s grand, grand. Do ye feel up to speakin’ about it now?”

I nodded, resigned. I knew this moment was coming. The meeting was for shoe dropping then.

“We all understood why ye left. So we’ll skip that for now. But we need to ken how those fairies caught up with ye, and why.”

“So you saw her too?”

He exchanged an odd look with Kitchens, then nodded. “Aye. The Trinity library. I assume she wasnae asking for her gemstones back?”

“I tried to tell her I didn’t have any.”

“First things first. How did she find ye?”

“I don’t know. I took a bus from here to Waverly Station. They weren’t on that bus. I would have remembered. From the station, I started walking to the American consulate—”

“The consulate?” He was surprised again, then a little hurt maybe.

“I couldn’t very well get back to the States without a passport. So...”

“Right then. I suspect they were watchin’ then, at Waverly. When we filled out that form, at the library, I did write Edinburgh...”

“A couple of blocks from the station, I stopped to adjust my strap, and I heard them stop behind me. I hadn’t noticed anything until then. Like I told the doctor, I hailed a cab. It took me around the corner and stopped so the three could get in with me.” My mouth went dry. “Then the woman told the men to search me.”

“I am sorry, lass. I cannae imagine how frightened ye must have been.”

“Yeah. For a minute. But then I remembered Andy Weaver and decided to fight back.”

Persi piped up. “Who’s Andy Weaver?”

“A bully from back home. Cornered me in a parking lot one night...” I shook my head to chase the memory away. Too much of what happened in that cab had happened in that parking lot six months ago, right after Andy heard my boyfriend had skipped town. “I don’t like being cornered.”

Everly laid a hand on my arm. “We hear you. Don’t we, Persi?”

“We certainly do.” Persi flushed pink and proved the color did, indeed, clash with her red curls. “I wish we would have gotten there sooner.”

That got my attention. “You were there?” I tried to remember what happened after the stomping, but the only memory I retained was pain. And maybe some shouting. And the car doors opening. I shivered, remembering the cold. Then I looked at the faces around the room. “How did you know where to find me?”

They looked at Kitchens, sitting beside me, looking guilty as hell. “Small tracker, tucked into a pocket. Just in case.”

My jaw dropped open.

“Well, ye didnae want me chasin’ after ye. Though now, I wish I would’ve, o’ course.”

I sighed and squeezed his forearm. “I might be dead if you hadn’t thought of it. So thank you.”

He went red in the face, bobbed his head once.

Wickham regained my attention. “Did they say anything? Anything at all?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Told me to strip.” I took a deep breath and let the memories come back. The feel of that hand on my chest, slamming me to the floor. The tangled legs. That woman hovering over me, her purple eyes alight. “She said, *Where is it? Where is the claw something.* Made me think of soccer.” I closed my eyes, knowing it would drive me crazy until I remembered.

“Soccer?”

“Claw something.”

“Claw?”

I held up my hand so they would be quiet. *Soccer; soccer...* Then I remembered the professional soccer team in nearby Utah—Real Salt Lake.

“Ree al,” I said aloud. “Ree al. It’s a soccer team. Claw *real?*”

Wickham started pacing. “These are fairies. We have to think Irish. *Real* in Irish could mean process. Claw? *C l o c h* is pronounced claw, means stone. *Cloch real.* Stone process?” He shook his head. “Nay.” He paced to the maps and back. “*Real, real...*” He stopped in front of my table. “Could it be *realta?*”

“Claw *realta.* Yes, that’s it!”

“Cloch realta. Stone star...star stone!”

“Star stone?” I was on my feet again, looking for the doorway, looking for escape. But Wickham stopped me with the way he said my name—gentle, understanding.

“Lennon...”

I took a deep breath and turned to look him in the eye.

“Lass, it’s time. Tell us now. Tell us what Hank looks like.”

SENIORS, MY ASS

*A*fter all I'd been through, I didn't consider myself a chicken. However, I couldn't help but be relieved when Wickham moved our little gathering into the living room at the front of the house, near the door, near the stairs in case I felt the need to hurry to my room and fall apart behind a locked door.

The room was decorated in baby-boy blue and gold. Gold silk curtains with tassels any grandmother would admire. Cream wingback chairs with blue dogwood blossoms and gold branches. The fireplace shone with dozens of coats of rich, provincial blue paint. In its deep black maw, fresh logs were laid for the next fire. Not a crumb of ash was left from the last one.

On the mantle, a small brass globe with only continents for detail. A foot-tall gold stag pawed at the ground. On an end table, a stack of cloth-bound books and a magnifying glass on a swinging arm and pedestal.

Watercolors of white mansions and gardens reminded us of the size of house we slept in. I looked for the artist's name. *B. Austin.*

"Everybody comfy?" Wickham stood in the double doorway, noting that I was the only one who hadn't chosen a

seat. I picked a wingback nearest the doors. He started to close them, then paused and cocked his head. “Unless ye’d rather the staff hear...our discussion?”

I shook my head. He wasn’t locking us in. And I didn’t have my back to anyone. It was as good as it was going to get.

My heart pounded on the double doors of my chest, but I ignored it. If *I* had to stay, *it* had to stay.

Wickham moved to the fireplace and opened a little trap door that hid a box of long matches, maybe giving me time to gather my thoughts. But I’d been trying to gather these particular thoughts for fifteen years...

The fire caught and Wickham moved to the chair beside the mantle. Urban and Everly held hands on the sofa facing the fire. Kitch and Persi sat on the other sofa, facing me, wedged as close to their respective ends as they could get, like they were afraid to accidentally touch each other.

Interesting.

“All right,” Wickham said, when it became clear I wasn’t going to take the lead. “Why don’t ye tell us how ye came to have Hank in the first place.”

“It was handed down...” I shook my head, started again. “In all my life, I’ve only told one person about it, and I busted him sneaking out of our apartment with it, headed to a pawn shop. Sometime in the night, he cut out, but at least he hadn’t gotten his hands on Hank again.”

I looked for a friendly face and Everly smiled at me. “No rush.”

I relented. “I’m okay. So...it belonged to my grandma. We were very close. It should have gone to my mother, but she refused to take it. When Grandma decided to pass it to me,

they had a falling out. I had to sneak to see her after that.” I laughed lightly. “Her name was Faye.”

No one seemed to see the humor, so I continued.

“She told me where she’d hidden it, warned me never to let it touch my skin, and explained our job, as a family, was just to keep it safe. That was all. No end date. No warning that a Scotsman or anyone else might come looking for it. Just keep it safe and hand it down. She confessed she’d buried it once, in a Scooby Doo lunchbox, but it would call to her, keep her awake. So she dug it up again and kept it reasonably close. She was able to sleep just fine after that.”

I looked at the circle of faces waiting patiently for more. No one was going to ask to see it, but it was the invisible pink elephant in the room.

Persi raised a hand. “I’m curious. You said your grandma told you not to let it touch your skin. Did she tell you why?”

“No. But I found out.” That was an incident I would share with no one, ever. “Sorry. Not going to go into details. Suffice it to say I wasn’t dumb enough to let that happen again. I eventually found a way to seal it, laminate it, so I could handle it. Like my grandma said, our obligation was only to protect it, not to use it. And I’ve thought about it, after meeting you all, and there is no possible way it could be helpful. If those fairies want it, they certainly know something I don’t.”

“Lennon.” Wickham’s tone caught me again and I faced him. “Would you say Hank must be the *cloch realta* they’re looking for?”

I stalled as long as I could, then nodded.

Urban hunched forward and leaned an elbow on one knee. “If we promise to keep our hands to ourselves, will ye show it

to us?”

I shook my head immediately. “I can’t. It’s not...here.”

Wickham gripped the arms of his chair, but kept his butt on the seat. “Tell me the Fae *didnae* find it!”

“The Fae *didnae* find it,” I parroted. “I knew I might be in trouble for coming into the country...without a passport. That it might be illegal for me to be here. So just in case I ended up...behind bars for a while...I hid it before I got on that bus.”

He relaxed. “Well done you.”

“It’s basically a rock. Dark, like it’s wet. And imbedded in the rock are nine gemstones, like they grew there. Different sizes, different shades of the same blue, random pattern.”

“Nine, ye say?”

“Nine. Then there’s metal—not sure what kind exactly, but it weaves around it like a decoration. Whatever it is, it’s darker than gold and still looks melty, like it could just run to the edge and drip off. Besides being pretty, it makes the stone easier to hang onto.”

Wickham blinked for a long time, then shook his head. “Nines are everywhere in Irish and Norse, even Greek mythology. We shall have to look into that. But my first concern is how this Fae woman knew ye had Hank in the first place. Did ye have him with ye at Trinity College?”

“I did.”

“Then she should have tried to take it then and there. She must not have known, so she mustn’t be able to sense it. The answer has to lie in something we said. She saw ye as an Uncast. But the only other things we mentioned were *before name* and The Covenant. I can only assume Hank has

something to do with O’Ryan’s monsters or The Covenant spoken of by the Grandfather.”

That tripped my memory. “I meant to ask you about that. You never said what covenant we are looking for.”

Urban grunted and leaned back. He raised an eyebrow and stared at Wickham like he was daring him to answer. Everly bit her bottom lip and looked away.

“Listen,” I told Wickham. “You just made me share my big secret. Let’s hear one of yours. What’s The Covenant?”

He huffed out a breath. With a look, he sent invisible daggers at Urban. “The old man first mentioned The Covenant to my sisters, when they went to him looking for help. But he was more interested in sending a message to me. He played on their sympathies by pretending he was near death and suffering. Then he played upon their fears by telling them they would find their answers in The Covenant, which could be found at Oxford.”

“They’re afraid of covenants, or Oxford?”

“Oxford,” Persi said. “They’ve seen their deaths. They know they’ll die at the Bridge of Sighs in Oxford, England. You’d recognize a picture. It’s famous. And Wickham refuses to go there, knowing his sisters won’t be able to resist following. I’m surprised they haven’t shown up here.”

“I had a feeling we’d catch you all talking about us!”

The doors stood wide and two identical women in their sixties or seventies, stood in the opening. They wore long blue coats with thick, feathery collars and blue sunglasses pushed up into their hair, which was more gray than red. They looked like they were just back from a ski resort for seniors.

“Seniors my ass,” said one of them, then moved close to nudge me on the shoulder and wink before she moved around the room greeting everyone. The men were on their feet, but dutifully bent so they could be kissed and patted on their cheeks. When their rounds were finished, they both plopped onto the couch between Persi and Kitch, who immediately relaxed.

The second sister shot a look at me, then winked and nodded, as if agreeing with something I hadn't said.

More mind readers.

One of them tapped her sister's knee and leaned forward to get Wickham's attention. “We were listening, naturally. Is someone going to Oxford?”



GARMENT BAGS AND SUITCASES ARRIVED A FEW HOURS LATER. Though Wickham's sisters, Lorraine and Loretta, insisted they could take the stairs just fine and invited Urban to race them, the broody Scot insisted that they take the master suite on the ground floor.

Thankfully, it took the rest of the afternoon to move Everly's things upstairs and shift the delivery of luggage from the foyer to the master suite. Thus, the discussion in the living room was left unfinished. I hoped against hope that Wickham was distracted enough by his relatives that he would leave me alone for a while. I know it seemed illogical, but I didn't want to show Hank to anyone. I liked where he was. Nice and safe. Far enough, but not too far.

I overdid it. I didn't help carry things, and I didn't climb the stairs more than a few times, but that night, my arm

throbbed, and my head felt like it was going to split. In fact, I was sure someone was stomping on my head again when I woke in the middle of the night. But after a few seconds of close listening, I realized the sound I heard was not my brains leaking out of my ears, like I'd dreamt, but something else.

Something hissing at me...from a few blocks away.

The frozen little garden with the little bench...was apparently too far after all.

Still buzzing from the pain pill, I climbed out of bed and got dressed again. My movements drowned out the hissing enough to make it bearable. And when that stopped working, I mumbled and cursed aloud.

My door swung wide. Persi stood in the doorway holding her hands over her ears. "Please tell me you hear that."

I stood there, stunned, until she came and shook me.

"You do hear it, right? I'm not losing my mind?"

"I...I hear it."

"Any idea what it is?"

I nodded. "It's Hank. He thinks...she thinks...it worries I'm trying to get rid of it. I have to...go get it."

Persi nodded once. "I'll go with you."

"Bundle up. It's a...a few blocks away."

Swathed in as much wool and leather and yarn as we could get our hands on in the middle of the night, we set out, arm in arm. I didn't want to think of how horrible the trek might have been if she hadn't come along.

I finally asked, "Why do you think you can hear Hank?"

“No clue. Obviously, it’s not a Muir witch thing, or Wickham and his sisters would have been up too.”

“And it can’t be an Uncast thing, or Kitch and the MacKenzies would have heard it.”

“Oh, shit!” Persi stopped, so I had to stop, since our arms were still locked. “What if it’s a Fae thing? What if they can hear it?”

We looked at the shadows beyond the puddle of light at the end of the street. She probably expected monsters too.

“If we turn back,” I whispered, “that hissing will never stop.”

Persi laughed. “I just realized...the dead can’t hear.” She started moving again, but I pulled her back.

“What does that mean?”

She let out a big breath that made a massive cloud between us. “I’m saying, considering the beating they got, those guys who...assaulted you in the car...probably never recovered.”

I tried to swallow but couldn’t.

“Listen. We don’t know. It’s just that there was suddenly a tear...in the air...and they were sucked back into the fairy realm. Or somewhere. Like the monsters we killed at the wedding. They just...disappeared.”

I’d heard monsters came to the wedding. I hadn’t wanted to hear the details of what else had happened, worried I wouldn’t believe them—worried I’d thrown my hat in with a bunch of lunatics.

I asked her what happened to the woman with the purple eyes.

Persi shrugged. “I don’t know. Wickham...took her somewhere. He wasn’t gone more than ten minutes. She could be anywhere. But I doubt he left her free to chase after you again. If she can hear Hank, she can’t do anything about it.”

We agreed that neither one of us could stand the hissing long enough to go back for the others. But Persi sent a text to Kitch to tell him where we were and what we were doing. If he wanted to come play hero, he was welcome. About two minutes later, we reached the corner just as Wickham, Urban, and Kitch popped into the shadowed side of the street.

Before any of them could rip into us, Persi explained that we could both hear a hellish hissing noise from Hank, and if they couldn’t hear it too, then they had no room to judge us for wanting that sound to end.

They weren’t happy, but they kept their mouths shut and fell into step behind us as we cut down the next block, found the alley, and then the garden. I moved to the little rock wall and started to kneel, but Wickham grabbed my arm and lifted me up again. “Show me.”

With the toe of my boot, I patted a brick at the bottom of the wall. “In the dirt, about six inches straight down. Still wrapped in the handkerchief.”

He pulled out a knife, loosened the soil, and pulled it up by the handfuls. He would have had it in a matter of seconds had the ground not frozen again.

He lifted the handkerchief-wrapped stone and shook it at me. “You thought this was a safe place to leave it? A child could have—”

“I didn’t intend to leave it here long,” I lied. Who knows how long I might have been in jail? But thankfully, Wickham

dropped the subject and handed Hank to me.

I turned my back and slipped the handkerchief away, then wrapped my hand around it. After a few seconds, the hissing stopped. The silence was bliss.

“Praise God,” Persi said, then closed her eyes. Wickham stared at her until she opened them again. “What?”

“What sets ye apart, Persephone?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what sets ye apart from the rest of us?”

She rolled her eyes and disappeared, the answer to his question.

He shook his head again. “What sets ye apart, lass? Talents aside, what sets ye apart from most other Muirs?”

She reappeared. “I’m a *Third*.”

“Aye. Ye’re a *Third*.”

“And I can hear Hank.”

“And ye can hear Hank.” Wickham tucked her shoulder under his arm and turned her back toward home.

Kitchens moved to my left side and offered his elbow for support. He grinned at Urban. “Everly’s goin’ to be radge ye left without her.” I assumed that meant angry. Or worse.

Urban chuckled. “*I* left without her? Nay, mon. *We* left without her.”

Kitch’s smile disappeared.

MEET HANK

At the end of the alley, we gathered around Wickham and popped back to the house, to the room we jokingly called *Engineering*, from Star Trek—where *Scotty* could beam us up. Technically it should have been the Transporter Room, but we weren't sure how much the Youngs knew about our comings and goings.

When we popped in, we found Everly sitting in a chair in the corner. She jumped to her feet and took a quick inventory of faces before she relaxed. Once again, Persi explained what had happened, why we'd worried fairies might be drawn to the little garden too. Then she ended with an apology.

All eyes then turned to me, to my hand in my pocket, but I was in pain again and too tired to satisfy their curiosities.

"I'll see you in the morning," I said, then went to bed. Though my pet rock was as silent as any other rock, I imagined it purring and content to be back in my possession. I tossed the well-loved but abused handkerchief into the hamper and fell asleep with Hank tucked into my palm, just inside my soft cast of plaster that cupped the bottom of my arm, with padding on the top, all held in place by stretchy bandages.

The next morning, I felt surprisingly refreshed. No pain, no headache, even though a rare sunny sky glared in through

the wide blinds of my windows. I had no idea what time it was when I headed for the dining room, but I hoped there was still something left to eat. I was famished. And my stomach was now used to something more than just mid-morning milk and oatmeal before the lunch rush.

I peeked through the open doors and laughed to myself.

I really shouldn't have been surprised to find everyone present and accounted for, including Wickham's sisters. They sat along the near side of the table with their backs to the door, an empty chair between them. Opposite them, Kitch sat in the center with Persi on one side and Everly on the other, their backs to the windows. Urban and Wickham sat at the ends.

The only empty plate waited for me. Everyone else picked at their food as if they'd been dragging their meal out for hours.

The clock chimed ten.

I breezed in like I owned the place, cheerful and bright despite my subdued outfit of black, black, and pale green. Maybe it wasn't appropriate to wear jewelry to breakfast, but I couldn't help adding a shiny gold ring on my finger—a celebration of our sunshine.

They eyed me like I was a stranger walking in off the street. Persi's mouth hung open and a bite of toast fell out onto her plate.

"What?" I pulled out my chair and sat between the sisters, who beamed at me, a hundred matching wrinkles around their eyes. "No pain this morning," I said, to explain my mood.

That seemed to satisfy them, and they went back to picking at their plates.

Kitch cleared his throat. “We were, uh, hopin’ that after breakfast, ye might want to introduce us to Hank.”

One of the sisters poured me some orange juice and I took a sip. “Sure.”

After a moment of stunned silence, they all dug into their breakfasts, smiling and chatting. The sudden change in volume reminded me of the moment Wickham unfroze a café full of people, bringing them to life again.

Every once in a while, I’d catch someone watching me. Urban’s expression said he didn’t trust me, that he expected to be disappointed yet again. I just smiled and shoved a whole triangle of potato pancake in my mouth and winked. No one spoke to me directly. Maybe they hoped I would keep my head down and eat fast.

As soon as the four Youngs had cleared the dishes and food away, Wickham got up and closed the doors. With everyone’s attention on him, I slipped Hank out of my cast and laid him in the center of the table, then slid him to the left. Urban caught it, lifted it, and looked close. After a few seconds, he handed it to Everly, on his left.

“Impossible,” he whispered, but nothing more.

His wife’s mouth opened a few times, but she said nothing before she passed it to Kitch. And on it went to Persi, then Wickham, and the sister on my right, Loretta. She counted the stones aloud. “Yep, there’s nine.”

I handed it to Lorraine. She caught her breath, then nodded. “That’s the Pleiades all right.”

“What?” I took the stone from her hand and stared. “What does that mean?”

“Greek Mythology,” Wickham said. “The seven daughters of Atlas. A star cluster in the constellation of Taurus. Some of the closest stars to us.”

Persi chuckled. “It’s also on the logo for Subaru. The seven stars of the Pleiades.”

“Then why nine stones?”

“Two for Atlas and his wife.” Wickham held out his hand, asking for another look.

For some reason, I was horribly disappointed that my one-of-a-kind personal treasure could be explained away by something as ubiquitous as Greek Mythology and a car brand!

Kitch shook his head. “Ye see why that’s impossible, aye?”

Wickham nodded. “And she was right about the metal appearing molten. We need Macklyn.” He set my pet rock on the table, then stood. “I’ll be right back.” He disappeared. Loretta picked up the stone again.

I looked across at Persi and struggled not to sound indignant. “Who’s Macklyn?”

“The Dragon’s wife. Long story. He’s one of Soni’s Highlanders from Culloden. She’s an expert jeweler. Possibly a jewel thief, but she also catches jewel thieves. Anyway. If there is something to know about those stones, she’s our resident expert.”

Hank made his way around the table again. Persi wrapped her hand around it and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she shrugged, then handed it back to me. If she’d felt some sort of connection, I’d have been pissed.

I fought the urge to tuck him back into my cast and run upstairs like a petulant child who doesn’t want to share her

toys.

Ten long minutes passed before Wickham popped in again, this time with a man and a woman clinging to his arms and to each other. I immediately related.

I made a mental note to ask Persi if all the men Soni brought back to life were as big as a mountain. This one made Wickham look small.

“Lennon Todd, this is Macklyn and Ander McFie. I realize now I should have asked before bringing others to see yer... uh...”

“My pet rock?” I shook his hand, then hers. “It’s okay. They told me you’re an expert.” And once again, I put Hank in someone else’s hands.

Macklyn sat in Wickham’s chair at the end of the table and cradled the stone with both hands as if she appreciated it as much as I did. Her husband opened her bag, pulled out a small leather kit, and spread a small cloth on the table. She laid the stone in the middle, then pulled on a pair of familiar white gloves. Next, she strapped a jeweler’s loop to her head before she picked Hank up again.

“There’s a plastic coating?” She didn’t look up. “Can we remove it?”

“No!”

The chorus of voices made her jump, then she chuckled. “Right. The coating stays.” Her husband opened the curtains and switched on every light in the room. We all held our tongues while she examined the fanciful metal, each gemstone, and the rock that encased them.

Finally, she laid Hank back on the cloth and removed her gloves. She looked up at Wickham, who stood beside her.

“You know this is impossible, don’t you?”

“That such stones could hold their shape and position while a rock grew around it? Aye. Impossible is a mild word for it.”

“Not just that. And forget the living metal. These are all *stars*. *Nine* star stones. All the same color, all with perfect asterisms. Nearly all...perfectly...centered. These are not man made. I don’t know much about fairies, but I doubt it’s even fairy made. We’re talking tens of millennia. This is...*hand of God* kind of stuff.”

This all coming from a woman who had just popped in from who knows where, with her eighteenth-century husband, on the arm of a witch.

“Forgive my ignorance,” Kitch said, “but what is an asterism?”

Macklyn nodded and pointed to one of the gems with a small stylus. “It’s an inclusion, which is a flaw of sorts. Mineral crystals or cavities filled with fluid or gas. An asterism is the result of needle-like lines that all intersect. Six of them. Their reflection makes a star. An asterism can occur in sapphires, diamonds, rubies. But if they are a good size, they’ve been named.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of the Star of India? It’s a grayish-blue sapphire nearly the size of a golf ball. The Black Star of Queensland is a black sapphire. And the biggest is The Star of Adam, a blue sapphire the size of a large duck egg. Fourteen hundred carats, and worth a hundred million dollars if not more.”

Lorraine cleared her throat. “The Pleiades themselves are called an asterism.”

Macklyn's eyes lit up. "Right!" She bit her lip, thinking, then her eyes lit again. "The Irish call it *réaltach*. It means *starry*."

LYING LIKE A RUG

I thought maybe all those bedrooms at Fairy Hunter Headquarters were going to fill up, but Macklyn and her dragon of a husband didn't stay long. Once they were gone, I was able to relax, believing no one left in the house would be tempted to remove the plastic coating that protected us all.

There was only one more uncomfortable subject to address now, and that was why I'd taken off in the first place, only to be captured by the fairy and her goons. But now, my fate—and Hank's—were tied to Wickham's quest for answers. And clearly, I wasn't safe out in the world alone if that woman with the purple eyes had told others about me.

So I was stuck.

Things weren't cut and dry anymore. It didn't matter if I disagreed with Wickham's nonchalance about witches dying. I needed him now. For protection, at the very least, and at most, to find answers to the riddle of my *cloch realta*. It was a dangerous little pet rock, and the more I knew about it, the better equipped I'd be to find the right person to hand it off to.

Another family that could pass it down.

Urban and Everly were terribly affectionate. I figured she'd be popping out children any day now. But hunting fairies

was enough of a burden. Protecting me was enough of a burden, at least for the time being. They didn't need to be saddled with Hank for the rest of their lives.

Persi was about my age. And she was an obvious choice since she could hear Hank when he complained. But from what I'd gleaned from snippets of conversation, her childhood had been pretty rough, so I didn't know if she ever intended to marry, let alone have kids. She was more of a solo act.

The fact that there were other *Thirds* out there in the world, however, gave me hope. Maybe I could find another one who was fond of keeping secrets, who wouldn't toss Hank in the city dump when they got tired of him.

Him, I say...even though I know Hank is a she...



THE NEXT DAY, I SHOWERED AFTER BREAKFAST AND HEADED to the war room. Someone hissed, and I looked around to find Persi standing in the doorway to the gold and blue living room, waving for me to join her. Only she wasn't alone.

As I headed her way, I heard a deep voice shouting from the study. "*You are not going to Oxford!*"

Then women shouting back. "*Then you go!*" "*Somebody has to!*"

Persi grimaced. "This is why we don't say the 'O' word."

Urban was bent over the wood piled in the grate of the fireplace but glanced up as I entered. "Reckon we may be here for a wee while."

The rest of the team lounged on the comfy furniture. Persi picked up a book and took it to a chair by the window. Kitch

seemed content to watch her read while he fidgeted with the small globe. Everly sat and smiled while she admired the sight of her husband on his bare knees, his kilt caught to one side. I chose the chair that faced away from him, not wanting to jeopardize our friendship a second time by ogling Urban.

The fire had just caught nicely when the arguing voices grew louder.

A door opened. Wickham's voice. "*I mean it.*"

"Fine."

"For now."

The sound of footsteps receded. A door slammed further away. The master suite was down that same hallway. "Sounds like the sisters have retreated," I said.

Persi stood and set her book aside. "But they'll never surrender. They're certain the Covenant will have all our answers. Wickham is holding out hope that there is more than one copy. And the longer he holds out..."

"The more witches die..."



THE LIVING ROOM FIRE WENT TO WASTE.

Back in our classroom setting, we sat in strained silence, each on their own computer, searching for who knows what. I searched for mentions in the news of Trinity College and reports of missing persons from their library staff, but I found nothing.

I didn't dare look Wickham's way, let alone ask him if he happened to have executed a certain purple-eyed fairy. I

remembered how those eyes sparkled when he pulled that lavender gem out of his pocket. It was hard to believe it was the same woman who had me kidnapped and searched, the same woman who had inflicted as much damage as two big men, with a single stomp of her foot.

Wickham's advice was engraved in me now. *Never trust a Fae. Not a word. Not a smile. And especially not a forecast of doom.*

But did I want her dead?

I wondered how fairies might be punished. But who would hold them accountable? Other fairies? Were there lesser punishments than death? I decided to count my blessings and be glad her punishment wasn't up to me...

Wickham's words repeated in my head again. *Never trust a Fae. Not a word. Not a smile. And especially not a forecast of doom.*

I gasped, then repeated them out loud. "Wickham! You said it yourself. She couldn't be trusted. So, when she said our answers couldn't be found in those books at Trinity..."

Wickham leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face, hiding his reaction. But when his hands fell away and he got to his feet, his eyes sparkled like that fairy's. "Come on, Lennon. Let's go to the library." He held up his hand to stop me from touching him. "Let me see that the coast is clear."

He popped out.

I wondered if maybe the fairies had sent a replacement for the woman with galaxies on her fingernails. I pulled Hank from inside my cast and handed it to Persi. "Just in case."

Wickham popped back again and took my hand.



WE DIDN'T HAVE TO BOTHER WITH LIBRARY CARDS AND charming old Irishmen from the snowy countryside. We just inhaled Scottish air and exhaled it inside the restricted section of Trinity College Library, a few steps from the little piece of tape that read *Fae—do not touch*. My body, it seemed, was getting used to the sensation of popping; I didn't feel the least bit queasy.

Wickham found two sets of white gloves and we stepped into the narrow row as we pulled them on. The long bar was still locked in place—protecting nothing but air—and he cursed.

We stared at the empty shelf for a bit, then he sighed and reached for my hand. I pulled it out of reach. “Wait. Just wait. Do you think she came back to hide them on other shelves? Or do you think they're really gone?”

“I think she would want them protected, not just out on a shelf, hidden in plain sight, where anyone might touch them.”

“But if she could have removed them at any time, why didn't she? Why were they allowed to be here in the first place?”

Wickham shook his head.

“What if they were *required* to be here? What if locks and keys and plexiglass were the only way they could protect their own history?”

He blinked a few times, trying to follow my logic. “Then she couldn't have removed them.”

“So if she couldn’t remove them...” I turned and reached up, over the bar, and felt for that box with the loose pages.

Nothing.

I swept my hand to the right just to make sure and hit something—something I couldn’t see. I turned wide eyes to Wickham, and his eyes crinkled, much like the way his sisters’ did when they smiled.

He pulled a wad of keys from his pocket and sorted through them. His hands shook, but he got the lock open.

I chuckled. “Just one problem. How do we read pages we cannot see?”

“One impossibility at a time, love.”

The air whooshed and we froze. Someone stepped into the room and the air whooshed again with the closing of the door. Wickham grabbed my hand, but we didn’t go anywhere.

Is his popper broken?

He stepped into the aisle and I followed. A man in a lab coat stood just inside the room with a clipboard in his hands, poised to write on it, but he didn’t move. Frozen.

“Good thinking,” I said. “How long can you keep him that way.”

“Nay, lass. It’s not he who is frozen, but we who have stepped out of Time. We have all the time in the world if we never choose to step back in again.” He nodded behind me. “Let’s get those books.”



CREEPY DIDN'T QUITE COVER THE FEELING OF SITTING UP TO A high table and trying to concentrate while the body of a random librarian hovered in limbo ten feet away. But since it didn't bother Wickham, I pretended it didn't bother me.

We counted the boxes to make sure we didn't lose one, which was a risk since we couldn't actually see them. We cleared the better part of the worktable in the center aisle and laid them out, seven in all.

I was careful to keep track of the first box, hoping it still contained those little pages that had moved by themselves. I felt around the edges, then tried to pry it open. Across the table, Wickham pulled something into his arms. His fingers strained briefly, followed by a *pwah*.

A book clattered onto the table. Visible. Tangible. We both looked at the glass case in his hands, now wide open. I could see the plexiglass clearly, and Wickham's shirt on the other side. When he turned it over, though, it disappeared again.

"Only the boxes are enchanted," he said, then set that one aside.

The book itself was about eight by six. Not large at all. More like a diary than a history book. The cover had striations in the texture, like silk, or something else organic. The corners were well worn like it had been carried around in a backpack for half a century.

Wickham pulled it close and opened it. He moved his mouth as he read silently, slowly.

"Don't tell me. It's written in Irish?"

He nodded, his lips never stopping.

I pulled at my own box, turned it, and pulled the other side. Two more tries and I had it open. I was careful not to dump the

little pages onto the table for fear of them fluttering away. But other than a ruffle of air, they lay perfectly still in the bottom of the box, the interior of which I could now see.

“Hello again,” I sang. “Sorry to disturb.”

The pages trembled *all on their own!* I hadn’t imagined it the first time! They shifted, separated just a bit. A little bug, drawn in the margin of the top page, blinked at me.

I hid my surprise, and my probable insanity, and glanced at Wickham. He went on reading, had noticed nothing.

“Um...how do you like the fresh air,” I whispered. Inwardly, I groaned at my choice of conversation, but what did you say to a sentient piece of paper?

On the page peeking out from the bottom, a face appeared in the center of an illustrated flower—and smiled.

THOSE RUFFLING EDGES

I asked, “Are you fairies?”

I felt Wickham come around to stand at my shoulder. The flower’s eyes flew wide and the face disappeared. The bug hid its head under a wing.

“Don’t worry. He won’t harm you,” I said. “Does this mean you are not fairies?”

One by one, other little faces appeared in the illustrated margins. The bug lowered its wing. The flower’s features returned.

“My name is Lennon. I’m...I’m just going to lay you out on the table.”

As gently as I could, I slid the pages apart. I picked up the edge of the first, moved it to the table, and prayed it wouldn’t disintegrate. Hopefully the air in the semi-sealed room was intended to do as little damage as possible.

I felt rather than heard a vague humming through my gloves, as if the page really did enjoy being touched. Just in case that was true, I held down one edge and smoothed my hand over the rest, then was rewarded with even stronger vibrations. I moved the other three pages onto the white

surface and ran my hand over them as well. All of them purred like tiny cats.

Yet another lie the fairy had told—that they didn't like to be touched.

Wickham leaned over them, his mouth moving as he read the words inside the decorative margins. The little faces watched him, warily, but smiled when they looked at me. I slipped into my courteous waitress personae, determined to keep them happy. But I had no idea what to say.

“This is Wickham.”

The shape of an oval appeared over the words and started growing, then little stars bloomed in the center. It became a fingernail. Turned purple. The bug's eye strained sideways at it, then looked at me.

“They...they want to know what happened to the fairy with the purple eyes.”

Wickham stared at the bug and the bug stared back. He glanced at me, then straightened to where I couldn't see his face without turning. “Dead. She's dead.”

Every little face was shocked. Tiny mouths turned into O's. Little eyebrows slid high. My face might have reflected the same if I hadn't deliberately hidden my reaction. Inside, my stomach turned to stone.

Suddenly, the little creatures grew leafy legs and started dancing, entwining arms and swinging each other in circles. Little bits of confetti popped onto the page and snowed down the paper, obscuring the wording as it fell.

“Seems as though they kenned her well enough,” he said, then pointed to the words. “Poetry, here. Odes to nature. Nothing we're looking for.”

The bug grew a little, looked at me, waiting for something. I couldn't imagine what.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you want."

It pointed at me. Pointed again. Looked at Wickham as if asking for his help.

"Could it be asking what it is *you* want?"

It smiled, looked back at me, and blinked.

"No one will ever believe this," I said, then asked, "Will we find the answers to our questions in these books?"

It went on blinking.

Wickham nudged me. "Maybe it doesnae ken what answers we seek."

"Who are the monsters who claim to be *before name*?"

One of the pages fluttered and rose like a breeze had scooped beneath it. It swirled around the table, rocked back and forth like a leaf, over the clear space where the other boxes lay. Wickham hurried around the table, grabbed the invisible containers, and forced them open one by one, until six books lay between us.

The page hovered over one, its margins fluttering like wings. The book flipped open, and the interior pages shuffled like cards, then settled. The decorated page turned vertical, then stabbed its bottom edge between the open pages.

The book closed with a thud. It lay lifeless on the table once more, but the margins of the animated page stuck out.

A laugh escaped me. "They're not pages. They're... bookmarks."

Wickham opened the book to the marked page and started reading.

The little bug smiled up at me with closed eyes, pleased it could help. Then it opened its eyes and looked expectant again.

“Hurry,” I hissed at Wickham. “Next question.”

“Auch, let me think.” He bit his lips, shook his head. “What is the connection with an Uncast and a *cloch realta*?”

The bug blinked. Nothing moved. Wickham pulled his hands away from the book to allow the first page to go where it wanted, but it, too, sat perfectly still.

“Maybe that’s not in any of these books. So next question.”

“Who is the golden fairy who calls himself O’Ryan?”

Another page lifted off the table and flew straight to the nearest book to slip between the pages without any help.

I nodded to the bug. “Very impressive. Now...what else?”

“How many copies of The Covenant exist?”

Another page jumped to life, leaving the bug’s page alone in front of me. It, too, went directly to the largest book and danced a little while it waited for the heavy cover to open and the right page to present itself. Instead of diving for the spine, though, it sort of snuggled in. The other pages spread over it, like so many blankets, then the heavy cover fell shut with a thud.

I nodded at the last page, “Anything else? We’ve got one last page here.”

Wickham growled with frustration. “I shall kick myself after we’ve gone, when I think of other questions.”

“I have a feeling we’re not going to be able to do this again. If fairy alarms go off after we step back into Time, or whatever, they’ll think of a better way to protect these.”

“Aye. They will.” After a minute, he nodded, then spoke gently to the last page. “Who was the first Grandfather to the clan of Muir witches?”

Nothing. No movement at all. And the little bug went back to being a little bug with no face. The rest of the faces faded and disappeared from the illustrations on all the pages, though the others still held their places in the books.

“Either the answer isn’t here, or we’re only allowed to ask so many.” I ran my hand over the paper one last time, took a picture with my phone, and gently moved it back into its box. “Thank you,” I whispered. A little thrill ran through me when I noticed the tiny flutter of a pale green leaf.

Wickham returned to the first book, skimmed for a few seconds, then pulled out his phone and started taking pictures. He snapped about a dozen shots before he closed the cover and handed the bookmark back to me. He did the same with the other two bookmarks. Plenty of pictures taken, with him checking each time to make sure the images had been captured.

I checked mine. Four clear pages, though no faces.

Reluctantly, he placed the books back into their boxes while I added the last page to mine. “Thanks again,” I said, and closed the lid with a loud snap.

Wickham checked his phone again.

“Still there?”

“Aye. Let us hope they stay.”

We put the boxes back, counted them, and made sure the one with the bookmarks stayed at the front before we locked the bar back into place. We even spread things out on the table again, hoping no one would remember how things lay before.

Before stepping back into the narrow row, I reached up and ripped off the tail of the little blue strip of tape. The part that read *do not touch* went into my pocket.

Hidden by the shelves, Wickham took us back into the flow of Time. Two steps from the librarian was all I heard before we popped back to headquarters.

The landing room was empty. Wickham hurried out the door, eyes on his phone. I hurried after him, though I'd been advised to take it very easy for a few weeks. By the time I caught up with him in the war room, he was already downloading the pictures onto his computer.

He looked up and grinned at everyone still sitting in their seats, as if we'd only been gone a matter of minutes. “Lennon, why don't ye entertain this lot with our outrageous tale whilst I go collect Brian and Flann? Best call my sisters in as well, so ye needn't tell it twice.” And he was gone.

“I don't think I'll ever get used to that,” I said, staring at the suddenly empty space last filled by a dark-headed Scotsman.

“I havenae,” Kitch said, rising from his chair. “I'll go fetch the sisters.”



I HAD JUST FINISHED EXPLAINING WHAT HAD HAPPENED THAT morning when we heard men's voices and footsteps on the stairs. Wickham, Brian, and Flann strolled into the study with books under their arms. The older men were flushed with excitement. Their eyes lit up when they caught sight of Lorraine and Loretta seated on a loveseat Urban and Kitch had carried in from the living room.

Wickham made introductions. To me, he said, "Did ye tell them?"

"Yeah. I did. But I don't think they believed me."

He laughed and pointed his thumb at the Muir brothers. "Those two are determined to see it themselves, no matter what I say."

"Did you tell them that might be dangerous now?"

"I did. They have promised to wait until we've finished with our hunt."

The mention of hunting fairies reminded me of the female Wickham said was dead. I'd been distracted by the enchanted bookmarks, but I wasn't distracted anymore.

Something must have shown on my face because he was immediately concerned and grabbed my arm. "What is it, lass?"

"This isn't the time—"

He shook his head. His voice softened. "Lennon. What is it?"

I exhaled loudly. "Is...is that woman dead, like you told the...bug?"

He stilled, looked away, then pulled me aside a little. "She is dead. And she was no woman, she was a fairy. She chose to

die rather than answer my questions.”

I recoiled, but barely, not wanting to make a scene yet again. “What did you do, torture her—”

His grip tightened on my arm, and I sucked in a breath from surprise alone. He let go and hurried over to his computer. He waved the brothers close, then scribbled something on a Post-it. “This is the password. I’ve downloaded all the files to this. But Lennon and I must take a short trip. We’ll be back by supper.”

I knew he wouldn’t harm me. I knew I was safe with him. But I took a step back anyway, when he came around the end of the table, and he noticed. He stopped short and held out his hand, leaving the choice to me. If I wanted to go with him, I’d have to close the distance.

Persi was watching. She caught my attention, then patted her jacket pocket, letting me know Hank was still in good hands.

I waited another few seconds just to make Wickham sweat, then placed my hand in his. “This better be good.”

FREEZING THE OCEAN

I was blind for a long time.

Wickham dropped my hand but stayed close. As my sight improved, I realized we hadn't gone from day to night, just from a well-lit study to a dark...dungeon.

God, help me!

I stood facing an eight-foot stretch of iron bars with a gate that took up half that space. Unlike a jail cell, there was no sink, no toilet, only a cot, a small table, and a chair. All empty. Apparently, I wouldn't have to share with anyone.

Or had Wickham brought me there to scare me? If so, that lack of toilet thing did the trick.

“Relax, woman. We're not stayin'.”

I took a deep breath and didn't realize I'd been shaking until the tremors eased, then stopped. “Maybe you should have said that before popping us here.”

“My apologies.” He pointed to the chair. “This is where I brought her, questioned her. All from outside the cell. Never touched her but the once, to bring her here. But rather than answer my questions, she used one of those purple fingernails to slit her own throat. Immediately, the universe gaped open to take her body back to her own realm.”

“So *you* didn’t execute her.”

“I did not. I swear it on the lives of my sons.” He took a deep breath, held it, then let it out slowly. “Just for you, I’m going to break a vow. Come.” He wrapped his fingers around my upper arm, and we went back into the light.

He released me again, and this time, he walked away, stopping with six feet of beach sand between us. I turned toward the ocean and found it suspended.

“Like a picture,” I said quietly.

“It is a picture,” he said.

I laughed. “This is my first time seeing the ocean, and it’s not moving.”

“We’re on a small island...out of Time and out of Place. Roughly four hundred years in the past.”

My mouth watered, but even Dramamine couldn’t have helped me with that one, and I bent and boked in the sand. Wickham, ever the gentleman, looked away. When I straightened, he pointed to a hut down the beach. The sun was just coming up on the horizon further on.

“My family is there, suspended whilst they sleep. When they wake, I will be here, to spend another day playing in the water with them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have removed them from *Time*, removed them from *Place*. It is the only way I ken for certain that O’Ryan cannae get to them.”

“And when will you wake them up?”

“The next time I miss them so badly I cannae bear it. And we will play and we will laugh, and we will pass another perfect day...until this is all over and I can return them to the world.”

I hated to say the words, but we currently lived a dangerous life, even if we pretended it was only semi-so. “And what happens to them if something happens to you?”

He turned his head, looked me square in the eyes. “Then my wife and sons will cease to be.” He closed the distance and grabbed my hand. “Come.”

Dark again. We were inside that hut. Morning sun slipped between the slats in the walls. Sprawled on grass mats, on the floor, lay three boys. The oldest was maybe ten or eleven, the next a couple of years younger. The smallest maybe six or seven and was wedged sideways between the other two—like any youngest in the family, trying to make trouble, even in his sleep.

Sand spilled off their hair and feet onto their mats. None of them were breathing. And though I knew they weren’t dead, it was upsetting. Even Wickham didn’t look at them for long.

“Alexander, J.W., and Gavin.” He turned to gaze at a blonde woman on a bed in the corner, her face tan, her bare shoulders slightly pink. “My wife. Ivy. Grew up in Wyoming as well. Did I tell ye?”

“With Persi, that makes three of us.”

His gaze lingered. His hand closed around my wrist, and the scene was gone. We were back in the landing room. This time, he didn’t hurry for the door, but moved to the window and pulled the curtain aside. “Now, perhaps ye’ll understand if

I do not risk this mission unduly in order to save other witches.”

“Thank you. I can’t imagine...” I paused at the door.
“Thank you.”



WE HAD A STANDING POLICY TO NOT DISCUSS BUSINESS, AS IT were, during mealtime. That must have been a British or European custom because it certainly wasn’t an American practice.

The Youngs adjusted seamlessly to a dinner for ten. The table was long enough to accommodate four to each side. Everly, Kitch, myself, and Persi sat with our backs to the windows and watched the Muir sisters in action, flirting with Brian and Flann. Sometimes, I suspected the silence meant the men were either chatting telepathically with the women, or with each other. It was impossible to tell until two of them would burst out laughing after saying nothing at all.

It was like watching a tennis match, though much more was said aloud between Brian and Lorraine.

What was left of my attention was spent trying to get the meat off my little quail. Kitch suggested I use my fingers and give up on my fork. Then he demonstrated. It was thanks to him I didn’t starve.

Too excited to eat any more, I excused myself before dessert was served and went up to my room to decompress. The day had been long and bizarre and promised to get even more so. The Muir brothers planned to share what they’d interpreted thus far. And though the bookmarks hadn’t led us

to any links between an Uncast and a star stone, I was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

Someone knocked on the door and I lost my chance for peace.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Persi slipped inside. She pulled Hank from her pocket and handed it over, then sat on the bed. “I don’t think he appreciates me when you’re around.”

“Sorry. I’d forgotten. Did it hiss at you?”

“No. No hissing. Just...a feeling.”

“Since I spent the morning sensing the emotions of four illustrated pages, I can honestly say I believe you.”

Persi stared for a minute. “So?”

“So what?”

“Did he kill her?”

I realized she must have heard part of my argument with Wickham before we popped out, so I shook my head to reassure her. “She killed herself. He showed me where he took her. A dungeon somewhere. Said she slit her own throat with her fingernail rather than answer his questions.” I omitted the fact that the little pages were happy to hear of her demise. The more I talked about them, the more I worried I’d lost my mind.

“I’m relieved. I mean, I wouldn’t have blamed him. We all went a little berserk when we found you...like that. The men were sure he’d ripped her apart, like one of O’Ryan’s dogs, but I still couldn’t quite believe it.”

The effect that memory had on my stomach made me wish I hadn’t eaten so much, and the last thing I wanted to do was

talk about it. So I kept the conversation on Wickham. “Maybe he’d rather they went on believing he is that ruthless. Maybe it’s a street cred thing.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I won’t say anything. But I’m glad you told me.” She got up to go.

“Pers?”

“Yeah?”

I decided not to tell her that I’d seen Wickham’s family. But I had to say something. “Um, no matter what, we need to make sure Wickham makes it out of this alive, okay?”

We stared at each other for a long second, then she nodded and slipped out the door.

I made a mental note to tell Everly that it was time I started learning how to do more than kick a wall.

FROM MOIRE, WITH LOVE

An excited tension built in the house for the next hour, waiting for the big reveal from the Muir brothers. If they found enough answers, we might be able to get down to the business of saving lives and move O’Ryan off the board right away.

Wickham sat on the back of the loveseat, and the Muir brothers squished together at the end of the table, facing Wickham’s computer. The maps had been covered with a white sheet, and the computer screen was projected onto it so we could all see.

After a drawn-out explanation of the books they’d brought with them and how pleased they were to have found them helpful, Flann addressed the page on screen.

“First of all, to the question of the monsters. Though they themselves were never described nor identified, there is a passage in this first set of pages, so there is mention of an event called The Naming. A gift from *Moire* before the Fae came to our *realm*? Possibly our *world*? The translation is not exact, could mean either.”

“In either case,” Brian took over. “It says afterward, none of them would continue...in the *mode*—possibly the manner—

roimh ainm, pronounced, *riv aimn*, which means *before name*. Essentially, after the naming, everything changed.”

“Now, the pair of us was thinkin’ that if these creatures claim to be before name, it could mean they weren’t given this gift of naming. But interpret it as ye will.”

“Thank you,” Wickham said, then gestured for them to go on. “You have more?”

The brothers preened. “Indeed we do,” Flann said, then changed the picture on the wall. Yet another page with scribbles that meant nothing to me. How they saw words or pronounced them was a miracle. So many consonants that shouldn’t go together...

Brian got up and moved to the wall to point at some of those words. “Right then. The second set of pages talks about *uaillmhian* of all things—the word for *ambition*. It’s mentioned a few times in each of these pages, as is *mian*, which means *ambition* or *wish*. Then it seems Ambition is reference to *someone*. We suspect this might be your O’Ryan character, if indeed your bookmarks understood your question.”

“What’s interesting,” Flann added, “is that in Fairy, or rather, in their previous world or land—could be either—ambition is the most grievous of sins.”

Brian came back to the table and consulted a notebook. “You said the second question you asked was ‘who was the gold fairy who calls himself O’Ryan?’ But these pages do not mention that name. Nor do they mention gold per se. We found *a hunger for power*, but that power, *cumhacht*, includes force, influence, might, reach, and violence. No mention of wealth or riches. So either your bookmarks know who he is

and where he was mentioned, though not by name, or they were confused and marked these pages for no reason.”

“I think they knew,” I said, automatically feeling the need to defend my four flat friends. “If they are as old as those books, I wouldn’t bet against them.”

“I think she’s right,” Wickham said. “Anything else on the subject?”

“Not at the moment. We plan to go over these again, at our leisure. We might find something useful.”

Flann changed the screen. “Next, the question of the elusive Covenant.”

No one moved, but the tension between Wickham and his sisters crowded out the oxygen in the room. Still, it had been Wickham who had asked that question in the first place.

“There are two copies of The Covenant between a special contingent of men and the King of the Fae. King or God or head. Not sure. He is called all three things in these pages.”

“Two.” Wickham sighed with relief. “Does it say where to find them?”

Brian’s brows rose, but he nodded. “One must remain in this realm...and one must remain in the land before. One for man, one for Fae.”

No one spoke. We all understood. If Wickham didn’t know how to get to the land of Fairy and back, then Oxford was our only choice.

Thankfully, Lorraine and Loretta sat with their backs to their brother...so he couldn’t see those smiles. It seemed they weren’t as afraid of death as they were happy to be right.



BRIAN WAITED A MOMENT FOR QUESTIONS, BUT WHEN NO ONE spoke he announced they had thus far found nothing else revelatory. “We are eager to learn about this *special contingent of men* and what made them worthy of dealing with the King of the Fae. Perhaps the Grandfather—the former Grandfather—knew who they were. It might explain why he knew of The Covenant in the first place, so it might.”

Both brothers looked at Wickham, their brows high and hopeful.

Wickham growled and wrenched himself from his perch to face us all. “I have no knowledge of it. I can see ye expect that all his secrets magically passed to me, but they did not.”

“But what about the white—”

Wickham cut off Lorraine’s words with a slash of his hand. “I ken only what the man told me, so ye can cease wonderin’.” He faced the brothers and offered a little bow. “I thank ye for yer time and attention, sirs. Stay as long as ye like. We’ll be eager to hear of anything else ye might find.” To the room at large, he said, “We’ll meet here in the morning to discuss our next moves. We’ll split up in twos. One pair to Corsica, and another to Tunisia.”

Persi raised her hand. “And the other two?”

Wickham strode for the door and didn’t look back. “To Oxford.”

THE STINK OF YOUTH

*P*ersi and Kitch headed for the liquor cabinet. The overly-pleased sisters said their goodnights and retired to their room, as did the MacKenzies. I decided to raid the kitchen to see if the dessert I'd passed up might still be around. And it was. I snuck up the back stairwell with a bottle of water, a nice piece of cheesecake and dollop of lemon curd. When I stepped into my room, the sisters were waiting for me. I had no trouble telling them apart now.

Loretta sat in the chair by the bed. Lorraine stood at the window, looking out into the dark, but she spun on her heel when I closed my door. "So," she said. "You'll be going to Oxford."

"Will I?"

Loretta scoffed. "It's only logical, dear. He'll send the MacKenzies to the most likely place, which is—"

"Corsica." Her sister completed the sentence for her. "He'll send Kitchens and Persi to Tunisia. Both with fighting experience. That leaves—"

"You and Wickham to find The Covenant. He can read Irish, you see. None of the rest—"

"Excepting the brothers—"

“Could find their way to the right library—”

“Oxford’s full of them.”

“Libraries, that is, not brothers—”

“But of course, it must be in the—”

“Bodleian Library. They call it the Bod.”

Lorraine nodded enthusiastically. “As you must know, we’ve promised never to step foot—”

“Yes, sister. She knows why. And that’s why she’ll be happy to be our eyes and ears...”

I finally caught on. It was killing them not to go.

I perched on the bottom corner of the bed and dug into my cheesecake before they might try talking me out of it. They’d been eyeing it since I opened the door, and I knew it was the last piece.

After my fourth bite, I came up for air. “Wickham told me I should never trust a fairy, no matter what they say.”

They both nodded.

“And he advised I treat you two the same.”

I thought they might be offended, but they just rolled their eyes as if they’d heard that comparison before.

“Obviously, we can’t go with you. But if you report back everything you learn, we’ll be less tempted to go ourselves.”

“Yes, dear. She’s right. The *less* we learn, the more tempted we shall be, so really, you’ll be—”

“Doing Wickham a favor by keeping us away.”

I started to see why their brother had bothered to warn me. To torture them a little, I took my time with my next bite of

yellow bliss, chewed slowly, then took a long drink of water.
“Why not ask Wickham to report back?”

“We have.” “We will.”

“But he’ll hold back, worried anything more will tempt us
—”

“But he’s wrong.”

“Fine. I’ll do it.” They really were good at what they did,
bombarding someone in stereo. “But if he asks, I won’t lie.”

“Did we ask you to lie?”

“Certainly not.”

As soon as I was alone and could think in a straight line, I
knew that’s exactly what they hoped I would do.



THE NEXT MORNING, THE SISTERS WERE IN THEIR CUSHY SEATS
in the war room once again, smiling innocently, like they
hadn’t already arranged to send a spy along with their brother.
Wickham, standing in front of the maps again, sent a good
scowl their way about every thirty seconds, like an
exclamation mark at the end of every sentence.

An hour in, everyone had their assignments—his sisters
were to keep their hands off the Muir brothers and stay at the
house. “Consider yerselves on house arrest. If I find ye’ve
stepped off the property, I’ll feed ye to O’Ryan’s monsters
myself.”

They only laughed.

He never broke character.

So after lunch, we gathered in the landing room, closed the doors, and Wickham took the other four to their destinations. When he popped back for me, I was ready with a small bag of clothes and a purse. He grabbed the handle of his own bag and popped us back out again.

In the next breath, we stood in a narrow alley no more than six feet across. The only view from dozens of windows above was limited to the window across from it. There wasn't a chance anyone could see us unless they leaned out.

A young couple came running around the corner and stopped, breathless, when they saw us. One glance at our joined hands and they turned and ran off again.

“We must have popped into Lover’s Lane,” Wickham said, then dropped my hand. “Like I said, this might take days or weeks. So first off, we’ll be getting’ a room. Can ye ride a bicycle?”

I hadn't ridden a bike since I was a little kid, but I nodded. Then I prayed we'd find an apartment or hotel within walking distance to this famous library they called The Bod.

As I had at Trinity College, I studied the students we passed—hundreds of people in their twenties—and I realized two things. First, my clothes would blend in just fine. And second, I was getting old.

Hormones and the stress of impending tests dripped off them as they hurried down the cobblestones in all directions. I could almost see little trails of droplets crisscrossing the ground. And they smelled...like cheap beer.

Wickham seemed tense. I realized he was thinking of his sisters, worried they'd be sneaking into town and tempting fate.

“They’re not coming,” I told him. “They said as long as I feed their curiosity, they have no reason to.”

He stopped short and blinked at me. “Ye cannae read minds, perchance?”

I laughed. “No. Of course not. You just have that same expression on your face as you do when anyone says *Oxford*. I assumed you were thinking of Lorraine and Loretta.”

“Aye. I was. They’ll be the death of me.” He started walking again. “They pressed ye into spyin’, did they?”

“Yeah. They said what little you told them would drive them crazy, so...”

“So ye’re to provide the juicy bits.”

“I am. So, you know, be sure to find some juicy bits, or I’ll be forced to make them up.”

“Auch, nay. Dinnae do that, for those two definitely can read minds.”

We found a cute little house with a *For Let* sign in the front yard. When the landlady showed us the room, though, it smelled like a dozen sweaty basketball players had just moved out. So we passed.

The next two places we checked out were barely large enough to turn around and go back out the door, including one with a tiny kitchen in the corner. I suggested a hotel might be better. Wickham insisted we try three more, but eventually, we ended up at a real estate office.

In the two hours of daylight we had left, we saw four properties. Wickham seemed to know just by walking through the door whether or not something was suitable, so we didn’t linger in the first three houses they showed us. The fourth was

a freaking estate, two or three times the size of the Edinburgh house. We had only seen the living room and the large kitchen before Wickham announced we'd take it.

After the wide-eyed agent stepped outside, I asked, "Isn't this a little large for just two people?"

"Aye. But it doesnae smell like sweaty lads, and that's good enough for me."



WHILE WE WERE AT DINNER, WICKHAM MADE HALF A DOZEN calls and sent a slew of texts. "We'll stay in a hotel tonight," he said. "But tomorrow, we'll at least have beds. And we'll get a vehicle. Too far to bicycle, and we cannae pop back and forth on the regular, or we're sure to be caught."

"If the other house is Headquarters, what will we call this one? The Oxford House?"

"Nay. Never that. We shall call it...Hope House."

"Because you hope your sisters never come?"

He choked on his drink, then gestured all around. "Because we hope many things from this place." He pointed to my abdomen, where Hank lay heavy in my money belt. "For example, I hope to find out more about your star stone. It's too bad there wasnae a mention of it in the Trinity books."

"Yeah. Too bad," I said, but if I were honest, I was relieved. If Wickham knew just what I carried around with me, he wouldn't want me within miles of himself or the people he cared about.

If I were lucky, very lucky, I could have my answers and keep my secrets too.



CONTRARY TO OUR ORIGINAL PLAN, WE STAYED IN THE HOTEL for three days while a couple of Wickham's acquaintances came down from the Scottish Highlands to get the house furnished. Sophie Ogilvy was a merchandiser, whatever that was, and Dezi McHenish was an event planner and interior designer. They were both married to a couple of "Soni's Highlanders," had attended the wedding, and knew all about O'Ryan's monsters, so we didn't have to guard what we said around them. And every once in a while, I'd catch sight of a knife hilt sticking out of their clothes.

Wickham never asked for my opinion, so I figured my ability to decorate anything at all was judged by my Hazelton apartment. The fact that he'd seen it only after Andy Weaver had tossed the place hadn't helped.

I hoped he didn't think I was the one to drape my underwear from the TV antennae.

Two days after the women arrived, our rooms were ready for us, thankfully, on the first floor. If I ever had to run for the door, I wouldn't be risking my neck on the stairs along the way. There were two wings projecting off the back of the house. They put Wickham in one and me in the other, near the rooms they'd claimed for themselves for as long as they were in town.

So we had a girl's wing and a boy's wing, with a master bedroom in the center section for the MacKenzies, if they ever came to stay. I estimated we could house everyone we knew without needing the second floor.

While Sophie and Dezi were busy directing deliverymen at the house, Wickham and I spent the first two weeks at the libraries of various colleges, studying campus maps, and learning where the oldest manuscripts could be found.

On our master map, Wickham outlined in red any library that might prove helpful, including Faculty libraries we couldn't just walk into. Any restricted areas that would require us popping in afterhours would be saved as our last resorts. He was confident we would find what we were looking for without magic—though we had yet to find out if actual fairies might be guarding the Fae books inside the Bod.

One Friday afternoon, my optimism was seriously lagging. “If they guarded the Fae books, why wouldn't they be guarding The Covenant?”

“Most certainly they are,” he said quietly. “But we mustnae stroll ‘round the information desks asking which of the librarians might be bribed by a shiny gem or two. And the very last thing we want to do is ask point blank where we might find *that document*. What fairies are here—and there may be many—might have as strong a reaction to our interest as the last one, the one who came after ye.”

He stared me down, made sure I'd gotten the point.

“We must find our own answers...and pray we succeed before we draw the wrong attention.”

The memory of the last time I looked into the purple eyes of a particular librarian took me back to the floor of that car. Naked and shivering from both cold and pain, dreading the next touch of those hands, wishing they would finish me off already. I tried to shake it out of my mind, detach it somehow as the reason for the bandage on my arm. But suddenly those

bandages were screaming at me, demanding I acknowledge why they were there in the first place.

I watched, crazed, as my left hand found the hooks that held the elastic fabric together. I lifted my arm, unwound the fabric, caught the heavy bottom half as it fell away. There was a black mesh trash can on the floor at the corner of the table, so I leaned over and dropped the whole mess inside, picked the last bits of cotton off my skin, and tossed them in after.

I might have imagined my arm complaining, but I didn't care. I couldn't have stood it another second!

Wickham hovered over me, searching for a way to help me, to keep me from falling apart. And suddenly, I remembered him doing the same inside the car, carefully covering me with his dark coat, his face pinched and frustrated by his powerlessness.

“Easy, Lennon. Easy now. Dinnae hurt yerself. We'll call it a day, aye? Take a break from it tomorrow.”

Take a break? Yes, please. I nodded.

He held up my coat and I slipped my arms in. So much easier without the cast. He didn't mention doctor's orders or try to retrieve the bandages from the trash can, just gathered our stuff and led me to the back of one of the large stacks.

“I'll come back to collect the car. For now, let's pop home. To Hope House.”

Hope sounded foreign at the moment, but I nodded and took his hand.



ONE MORNING, I FOUND A MAN NAMED ALWYN IN THE kitchen cooking breakfast for me, Sophie and Desi. Wickham had popped to the Mediterranean to check on the MacKenzies, Kitch, and Persi. I wondered if the break he had suggested the day before meant a nice break from each other. We had been together for weeks, and I was tired of his voice, tired of his sober, pretty face. And I realized how much I missed having Persi and Everly around.

Persi, I suspected, was having some long-awaited time alone with Kitchens. The way they avoided each other had to mean something.

As for furnishing the house, I wasn't any help lifting things or assembling things, but I was happy to lend moral support as Sophie and Dezi turned our hollow Hope House into a home. Even with my arm out of a cast, I didn't dare use it much. However, in the middle of the night, I realized I could have swung a sword if I needed to...

When we learned that monsters had arrived in Corsica.

FRESH HELL, TODAY ONLY

A shout woke me, and I ran out into the hallway to find Sophie and Dezi had heard it too. Together, we headed for the heart of the house.

Wickham had returned, along with Dr. McAvoy, Everly, and a barely conscious Urban whom the men struggled to hold up. Everly was a warrior woman possessed. With both hands full of silver, she guarded her husband while he was hauled to the bedroom, limping slightly. She refused to believe they were safe, growling at anyone who came close, refusing to leave Urban's side. With her ponytail removed, she looked like a dark-maned lion, her tense muscles rippling beneath her dark tan clothes half-covered in blood. One pant leg had been sliced open, her thigh covered by a thick bandage.

Finally, it was Sophie who got her attention. "Everly, Urban needs water. Can you get that for him? I've got my silver blade, and I'll stand right here until you come back. I won't let anyone near him."

Everly blinked at her, then nodded. She completely missed the carafe and glass of water sitting on a tray at the side of the bed and limped from the room, as if hypnotized.

The doctor thanked Sophie and checked Urban's bandages, blood pressure, then showed us how his leg must be propped

so the wound would remain higher than his heart. “Otherwise, the pain will be unbearable, aye?” He gave Sophie instructions for pain meds because he didn’t trust Everly to remember them, then he handed over his phone number. “I’ll be back in the mornin’.” He glanced at Wickham. “Strike that. I’ll be stayin’. I’ll check on him first thing, but if he starts a fever, ring me immediately.” At the door, he paused and glanced pointedly at my arm. “We’ll talk about this in the mornin’ as well.”

Everly returned with a new tray filled with a water carafe, three glasses, and her two silver weapons, the cake server and a small knife that matched the one in Sophie’s hand. Dezi caught my attention and gestured to the bedside table. I hurried over to get the first tray out of sight.

Everly placed her tray on the other side of the bed and never noticed, then was finally persuaded to lie on the bed too. Wickham followed the doctor out the door. Dezi and I slipped out as well.

Urban and I hadn’t grown terribly close in the weeks since we’d met. But until I saw him vulnerable, I hadn’t realized I’d do anything for either MacKenzie. Dezi helped me move a chair from down the hall to just outside the master bedroom where I took up watch. If those monsters came to finish off the big Highlander or his brave defender, they wouldn’t get past me. I could at least sound the alarm.

Ten minutes later, Wickham was back. He gave me a funny look, then ducked inside to check on the patient. When he came out again, he showed me a little black knife with a silver blade, slid it into its sheath, and handed it over. “Ye’ll need one of yer own. I trust ye willnae harm yerself with it.”

“I won’t.”

“He’s all tucked up and medicated. Sophie is going to bed, but she’ll be back to dose him again in a few hours.”

“I’m worried about Everly.”

“Ah. So was I.” He patted my arm. “But the shock is fading, and she kens she’s surrounded by family.”

I almost believed I was included in that statement, but I didn’t dare hope.

Sophie slipped out the door and joined us. “Are you going to tell us what happened in Corsica? I don’t think we’ll get anything out of them for a while.”

He shrugged. “I don’t yet know. I found them in a pool of blood hours ago. Everly was bit by...whatever it was. Said the monsters were dead, but she barely had the strength to do that. I got them to the hospital in Edinburgh. MacAvoy stitched them up, then I got them out of there before we had to answer questions. But don’t let her fool ye. She’s terribly weak.”

Sophie sighed. “Got it.”

“McAvoy is ours until further notice.”

I worried about the others. “What about Persi and Kitch?”

“I’ll collect them tomorrow. Two of our best hunters is obviously not enough to face a pair of O’Ryan’s dogs. We’ll hunt in packs from now on, or not at all.”

“Maybe we just need a bigger pack.”

His eyes cut to mine, then crinkled at the corners. “Maybe we do at that.”



I FELL ASLEEP ON WATCH, BUT I WAS STILL HYPER ALERT, KNIFE at the ready. I jumped when I felt the air move around me, but it was only Sophie coming to bring Urban his next dose.

“Go back to sleep,” she whispered. “Wickham said the two attackers were killed. No one is coming, and the night is nearly over. If you want to get some sleep, I’ll take the chair.”

“I know I wasn’t protecting anyone, but I wanted to feel useful.”

Everly opened the bedroom door, her eyes clearer than they had been the last time I’d seen her. Thankfully, she’d changed out of the bloody clothes. “Urban’s burning up.”

The house came to life again. Sophie rang the doctor, who came quickly, with Wickham on his tail, carrying his boots. Sophie dropped into the chair. I went in to be with Everly.

“I have to open him up,” McAvoy said. “I need to take him back to the hospital. But Mrs. MacKenzie...”

Everly stared at her husband while tears leaked out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

I stepped closer. “I’ll take care of her.”

The doctor grabbed my good arm. “She’s had a transfusion, but if she doesn’t rest, she’ll need another one. She needs to stay here.”

“Got it. No problem. I think she’ll see reason.” At least I prayed she would.

Wickham popped out and came back with a gurney. As soon as they’d transferred the unconscious man onto it—which took the better part of the household and a single hand from me, he and the doctor grabbed the gurney and popped out

again. Everly stood still for a minute, waiting for Wickham to come back for her. It was left to me to explain.

“Honey, they’re not coming for you right now. McAvoy’s going to clean out the wound, but he’ll bring Urban back. Okay? And while he’s gone, you need to do something for him. Can you do that? For Urban?”

She looked like an abandoned puppy. “What?”

“You’re going to rest, and you’re going to build up your blood, do you hear me? Urban’s going to need you to take care of him, and you can’t do that if you have to go back in the hospital too. Do you understand?”

I thought she would fall apart when she took a quick deep breath, but she only nodded.



IT WAS NOON THE FOLLOWING DAY WHEN PERSI STUCK HER head in the door. She noticed Everly sleeping in the bed and gestured for me to join her in the hall.

I hugged her around the neck until she protested. “I’m so happy to see you,” I whispered.

“Same here. How’s she doing?”

“Fine as long as she’s asleep. When she’s awake, she’s either catatonic or crying out for Wickham.”

“Not Urban?”

“She wants Wickham to take her to him.” I sighed. “I’m almost glad I never fell in love if that’s what it does to you.”

“Oh, it does much worse, but it’s worth it.”

I stared her down, waiting for a confession, but she wasn't talking.

She nudged me. "And it's never too late."

"So...you and Kitch—"

She lifted her brows in a cryptic non-confession. "I was talking about Lorraine and Loretta and those Irishmen. We stopped by Headquarters so we could get the rest of our things, and I think they've all gotten cozy. Add in the Youngs and the place looks like a set for a reality show for twins. And those sisters weren't too pleased when Wickham invited Brian and Flann to come to Oxford. Now they're pouting like teenagers."

"The men?"

"No. Their...*girlfriends*." She laughed quietly. "Wickham blamed you, though. Said it was your idea."

"My idea?" I remembered our conversation about needing a bigger pack. "Oh, yeah. I guess it was."

"Tell me where this girl wing is. I can't believe this place. If he moves us to anything bigger, it will have to be a castle."

"Don't tempt him. He'd probably like to have a wall around this place, and a moat filled with alligators."

"Don't be silly." She started down the hall in the direction of the kitchen. "Alligators need a warmer climate. But poisonous snakes? Maybe."

The mention of snakes sent me scurrying back into the room to check on my patient. Wickham said Everly had been bit but hadn't mentioned where. I assumed it was the reason for Everly's limp, but no one had checked on her bandage. The next time she woke, I would ask to see it.

My biggest worry was much more obvious—if Urban didn't recover, I was afraid Everly wouldn't either. And it wouldn't be a snake bite that took her out.



“IT WASN'T A SNAKE,” EVERLY SAID, WHEN I ASKED IF I could check her snake bite. “A short little...I don't know what you'd call it. A fanged, fat-headed beaver on hind legs, losing its fur? Definitely more animal than anything.”

“Did it like to chat, like the other kind?”

“No. I don't even know if it understands speech. It just... attacks. As soon as it latched on and started sucking my blood, I sank my blade into its head. Urban got there and stabbed it with his long dagger, and the thing just...popped. Like a blowfish, all bloated with blood.” She shook her head. “No. More like a water balloon, considering how it exploded. And there I was, covered in blood. At least it was my own. Or at least, I hope it was.” She shuddered. “The emergency room nurses were horrified by the look of me.”

I sighed loudly.

She gave me a close look. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I'm just relieved you're...more yourself, that's all.”

She forced a smile, then her head dipped. Finally, she said, “I don't think I can handle it...if I lose Urban.”

“You won't have to,” Wickham said from the doorway. “He's out of the long grass, and we'll bring him back tonight.” Then he was gone.

Tears poured down her cheeks as they had the day before, but this time she was smiling. “I guess...I guess I'll be all

right, too.” She headed to the bathroom. “Eighteenth century Highlanders are such a pain in the ass.”

Not yet ready to leave her on her own, I stretched out on the bed for a minute and drifted off while Everly had a long shower. It seemed like only minutes had passed before she was there again, wrapped in a big fluffy towel. “Dezi and Sophie have great taste.”

“They do. I especially appreciate the bedding.” I yawned just thinking about it, then pointed to her legs. “No more stalling. Let me see that bite.”

She sat against the cushioned headboard covered in gold and pink-striped leather and flipped the edge of her towel away from her leg.

There, on the front of her thigh, were two sets of stitches about four inches apart, the blue threads looking like so many legs of a bright-colored bug. There were no red lines, no swelling. I reached for her forehead. No fever. Then I looked in her eyes, watching for her own reaction to the wound.

“The bite didn’t hurt as much as I expected,” she said quietly. “What really freaked me out was when one of its teeth hit my bone.”

I backed to the edge of the bed and sat very still, telling myself that if Everly survived such an attack, there was a chance I could too.

At least a chance. I didn’t bother figuring the odds.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We know what to look for now, and it’s not a snake. And I don’t think silver is necessary. They seem susceptible to any blade. The one I put through its skull had already killed it by the time Urban got to it.”

“Maybe I just need to carry a sharp little pin...”

“No, no. We want to kill them *before* they get a chance to balloon up.”



URBAN WAS ON HIS FEET BUT GROGGY WHEN WICKHAM delivered him home after dinner that night. We all stood by shamelessly and watched Everly clutch at him, weeping. Then, in the span of a few seconds, she turned into a mother hen and started barking orders. A few minutes later, he was tucked in bed and off to sleep whether he wanted to be or not.

“The doctor will be back in the mornin’,” Wickham said, then headed for the kitchens. I followed and leaned against the doorway while he sat up to the bar and snarfed down the meal Alwyn had saved for him.

“I think I’ll sleep deeply tonight,” I said. “What about you? Did you sit up with Urban the whole time?”

“Nay,” he said, around a mouthful. “I spent some time with my family...”

I was instantly flooded with guilt for being privy to exactly where his family was and what fun they might have had. I was also a little jealous that he had family to go to when events got overwhelming.

“Wickham?”

“Aye?”

“There’s something I’d like you to do for me.”

“Anythin’.”

“You said you could alter memories. I’d like you to alter mine.”

He put down his knife and fork, wiped his mouth, and tossed his napkin aside. “Perhaps ye’d best come take a seat.” He pulled out the barstool beside him, waited for me to sit. “If ye’ve decided ye want no more part—”

“No! No, it’s not that at all. I don’t want to leave. But...it doesn’t feel right that I know where your family is, when you don’t want anyone to know...”

His sudden laugh cut me off. He patted my hand and winked, then picked up his utensils again. “No need to alter yer memory,” he said. “What I showed ye was...illusion. I vowed I would tell no one where I’ve tucked Ivy and my boys, and I havenae. The only truth to what ye saw were their sleeping faces. All else was smoke and mirrors. If someone were to read yer mind—and in our world, that tends to happen from time to time—they would see that memory and believe it. I do apologize, though, for placing a red herring in yer head, but I am grateful ye thought to protect them. Ye’re a good lass.”

I was relieved he wouldn’t need to poke around my memories and possibly stumble on Hank’s secret, but I was bothered by his lie, even though he had a perfectly good reason for it. I thought of his warning to believe his sisters no more than I would believe a fairy and figured the same applied to him. And as I headed for my room, I wondered...

Can anyone be trusted?

PET ROCK TRICKS

With the Muir brothers in Oxford, Lorraine and Loretta decided to move back to their own home in Edinburgh. I called them every evening to give them an update, then bored them with the minutia of our everyday life in the house. They always liked to hear what Kitch and Persi were up to and how they were managing to stay away from each other. I let Wickham know that, as far as I could tell, the sisters seemed content to stay away.

Since none of us were left at Edinburgh Headquarters, Headquarters was relocated to Oxford along with the Youngs. The two couples thought it was a fair trade-off to take care of a bigger house but without the cooking responsibilities. After their first meal from Alwyn, they were even happier about it.

Two sous chefs were added to our company, though they came in the morning and left after dinner. Alwyn lived on site, bringing our total to fifteen. There were now 2 MacKenzies, 4 Youngs, 2 designers, myself, Kitchens, 1 chef, and 4 witches—Wickham, Persi, and the Irishmen—living in the mansion. Since seven out of the fifteen were staff, we hadn't increased our hunting pack, just consolidated it once again.

Wickham said he was working on it.

Dr. McAvoy finally pinned me down long enough to use his little x-ray machine on my arm. I could tell he'd prepared a spiel about removing my cast too soon, but instead of delivering it, he shook his head and pointed to the little screen about the size of a large iPad. "How did ye heal yer bones so quickly? Was it Wickham? Did he do this?"

"I...I honestly don't know."

The man smiled. "Maybe he's helping Urban as well."

I doubted it. I had the feeling Wickham wouldn't have done anything to me without discussing it first. If he wouldn't touch my memories without permission...

I found him in the war room and asked him straight out.

"Heal yer bones?" He shook his head, but he was intrigued. "And I cannae imagine any among us could have done it. No healers on the premises. Though I dinnae recall ye complaining about the pain after those first days."

"Maybe I just have a high threshold."

"Never suffered much as a child?"

"I think I was pretty normal."

"Odd, then, that this would happen now."

"Yeah. Odd. I'm trying to remember the last time my arm really hurt. Maybe that night Hank started hissing. I was surprised he hadn't complained before that. After all, I did leave him before I got on that bus, and I'd been back for days."

"Perhaps ye couldnae hear him through the pain and drugs." He frowned and tapped his lips. "Persi never laid her hands on ye then? I met a witch, once, who'd been gifted with a powerful wish."

“No. Nothing like that.”

“What about Hank?”

I laughed. “I can honestly say he’s never touched me. But I do remember the morning after we dug him up, I felt awesome when I brought him down to breakfast. I had him tucked in my cast while the rest of you were waiting to see him...” I leaned against a table to keep my legs under me. “I had him tucked inside my cast...all that night.”

Wickham and I stared at each other, stunned for a minute. Then a lightbulb went on in my brain and I ran for the door.

“Lennon?”

I shouted over my shoulder. “Hank! And Urban!”



WICKHAM STOOD OUTSIDE THE MACKENZIE’S BEDROOM DOOR and stopped me from going in. “Lass,” he said, “I dinnae think we should get Everly’s hopes up. If I distract her, do ye suppose ye could slip Hank inside his bandages?”

“Good idea.”

Everly allowed me to sit with her sleeping husband while she went to the kitchen for a bite to eat. Wickham went along to cheer her up, then waited for me in the hallway once they returned. “Any difference?”

I shook my head. “Not that I could tell.”

“No hissing?”

I shook my head. “That’s only happened when he thought I’d abandoned him.”

“Let’s give it the day, then.”

We did a lot of pacing that afternoon, like we were waiting for Urban to get out of surgery. We drew a little too much suspicion from Persi and Kitch and finally had to confess what we'd done so they could stop imagining there was something going on between us.

At least, when there were four of us pacing and distracted, it looked more like cabin fever.

I knocked on Everly's door again, asked her if she needed a break before I went off to bed.

"I'm good," she said, then closed her door.

My three conspirators were waiting down the hall. "Well?"

"Says she's good."

Persi huffed. "Then I'll go—"

"We'll just have to get it in the morning."

"Um, McAvoy's coming in the morning."



THE FOUR OF US SCARFED DOWN OUR BREAKFAST AND HEADED back to the MacKenzie's bedroom. I raised my hand to knock just as the door opened. A smiling doctor McAvoy pulled the door wide so we could see the alert patient and his very happy wife.

"Mornin'," he said. "Seems our patient has passed a... miraculous night." He glanced at Wickham, then winked at me before stepping out and pulling the door shut. "We'll just give them a moment alone, shall we?" He reached into the pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a wad of gauze. "Is one of ye missing...a rock?"

I grabbed the gauze with both hands, relieved to find it the exact weight of Hank. “Thank you,” I said quietly. “In case it didn’t work, we didn’t tell Everly.”

“She didn’t see it.” He chewed his lip for a second. “And I rather wish I hadnae either. A miracle for any ailment? I don’t suppose ye’d part with this one?”

“Afraid not,” Wickham said for me. “It cannae be parted from the owner for long. Painful consequences, I’m told.”

McAvoy looked at all of us in turn, then shook his head. “It’s best I dinnae ken.”



THAT DAY, WICKHAM SENT ME OFF TO CAMPUS WITH BRIAN and Flann. Kitch came along for protection. Since I already had my library pass, I left the three of them doing paperwork and told them where they’d find me in the Bod. I planned to collect a pile of Fae books for Brian and Flann, who could then spend their time scanning as Wickham usually did. Then I could start searching for books on healing stones.

The last time we’d been on campus, I’d found a dozen books in the same section, but we’d had no time for a good look. I went immediately to that shelf and found them all waiting for me. One look at their faded, beaten corners and I wished I could protect them in little fiberglass boxes. And I wished, for the dozenth time, that I had a box of magical bookmarks waiting to help me in exchange for a gentle stroke of my hand...

“Hello again,” I said softly, and ran my hand along the spines.

“Hello,” said a deep voice, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Chills pinged up and down my spine like a pinball.

In the aisle just behind me, a handsome man sat at a desk that butted up against an overstuffed leather chair with a wool sportscoat draped over one arm. He wore a plaid collared shirt and rich brown sweater, looking just as preppy as a body could. A large book lay open on the desk, but he had turned to face me with his brows pinched together, expectant.

I laughed. “Sorry. Wasn’t talking to you.” I grimaced. “Sorry to disturb.” He smiled and closed his book and I thought, *Oh, crap. Sending wrong signals. Stop talking!* I turned my back to him, hoping I could just get my books and go without further conversation. I started tipping them off the shelves to stack on my left arm.

“Let me help you with that.” That same deep voice spoke at my shoulder, and when I took a step back, he stepped into the void to pull the rest of the books down. Instead of adding them to my stack, he piled them on the lower shelf, then took what I had and added them to the others. “Is this all of them?”

“Yes, but—”

“Lead the way.”

Since I no longer wore a bandage, I had no idea what had brought this knight in shining armor to attention. “I can take them from here—”

“You shan’t rob me of the pleasure. Now, where are you working?”

I stepped out of the stacks and looked over the railing to the tables below, then pointed to an empty one. “There.”

He followed my finger and nodded, then took for the stairs. I followed like a worried bird whose eggs were being

carted away. My heart and I were relieved when he placed the heavy pile on the table. Then he winked and started away. "If I can help again, you know where I'll be."

Three tables down, Kitch and the brothers were watching, mouths open, eyebrows raised.

I rolled my eyes and waved my fingers. They scooped up their things and moved down to join me.

Flann pulled out a chair. "Nice lookin' fella."

"I hadn't noticed," I said, but I could feel myself blushing. The truth was the man had been ten degrees better than nice looking. He'd been clean shaven, well dressed, with slightly golden brown hair that reached just below his collar, combed back from his face and still wet from a shower. And best of all, he in no way resembled a Highlander from the 18th century. "He smelled like old leather and fresh air, probably the literal name of his deodorant."

While my companions laughed quietly, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand. I looked up at the railing above us, and though I saw nothing, I was sure someone was watching. But after a few minutes, the paranoia faded, and I helped sort through the books I'd gathered. Since some were in English, I did some skimming of my own and decided to research healing stones another day.

We decided to split up to get lunch. The brothers stayed with the books while Kitch and I went for a quick bite. Then the two of us stayed while the brothers took their turn, all so the books wouldn't get tied up on a trolley somewhere.

"These are grand, Lennon," Brian said at the end of the day. "But tomorrow, I think we should search for mentions of Moire, with an e. As opposed to Moira with an a, which

involves the Greeks. If she did the naming, we should find out what she named. Perhaps yer star stone was among them.”

A gentle reminder that the man could read my mind easily.

When we reached the car, alarms clanged in my head. Kitch slipped behind the wheel and I waited until we were all buckled in before I told the others. “I don’t think we should drive straight home. I’m sure we’re being watched. And Wickham said—”

“We’ll head south.” Kitch sounded calm, like he’d been followed was old hat for him. “There’s a chance it’s just yer admirer, but we’ll take no chances.” He dialed his phone. “Wickham? We’re being tailed.” He told the brothers to make some space between them, and a few seconds later, Wickham joined us.

“Everyone, grab a handle if ye please.”

I gripped the door handle as if my life depended on it, and a second later, we were rolling up the drive headed for the dormant fountain in front of the mansion. Kitch hit the brakes a little hard and apologized.

I turned in my seat. “But Wickham, didn’t we just give away one of our weapons? If it was a fairy following us, won’t he know now that we can disappear?”

“Nay. No matter who was following, they’ll keep on following, for I sent ghosts of ourselves and the car on toward London, to fade into the fog. A little trick I learned from my niece. She used to leave the specter of herself in her bed when she needed to leave the house in the middle of the night. I’ve found it quite useful.”



TWO WEEKS PASSED WITH NO REPORTS OF SLAUGHTERED TWINS anywhere along the Ninth Meridian East, but that might have been due to the fact that Wickham brought home a pair of witches from Tunisia to add to the house staff. Meral and Reem Bahri were young and energetic, he reasoned, and could save the not-so-young Youngs from overdoing.

He avoided me after he brought them home. He disliked being thanked almost as much as he hated me pointing out that he wasn't the heartless man he thought he was.

I saw that "nice lookin' fella" in the libraries now and then. We smiled from a distance but never spoke, and I never again had that sense I was being watched.

As a team, we came up with a route home that took us out of town in the opposite direction, across stretches of road where stalkers would be exposed, then around the outskirts and home again. It was tedious, but we didn't have to rely on Wickham to save us every day.

One morning, Brian asked me to find a book for him that he'd skimmed before. It was one from the section of fairy books on the upper floor, where I'd first met "Nice Lookin' Fella." I was both relieved and disappointed to find the desk and the leather chair empty.

"Why is it," a familiar voice asked from the end of the shelf, "you are with a different man every time I see you?"

I looked up and smiled into rich brown eyes, crinkled at the corners. Nice Lookin' Fella's smile made the high planes of his cheeks rounder than I remembered. "Hello."

“I can either be disturbed by it or encouraged. Either ye fancy a lot of men—bad news, or you haven’t landed on one in particular—good news. That means I have a chance.” An Irish accent, but slight. If he was trying to hide it or had simply lost it, there was no telling. “Come to dinner with me so we can have a proper conversation, one we won’t have to whisper.”

I shook my head but couldn’t shake my smile. “You don’t want to have dinner with me.”

“I don’t?”

“No. I’m a package deal. I’d have to bring a chaperone.”

“Ah. I see. You must be some sort of princess, then?”

“Hardly.”

“Excellent. I have a policy against wooin’ princesses. I’ll pick you up at six?”

I pulled the book from the shelf and faced him. “You really want to have dinner with a chaperone?”

“I happen to adore package deals.”

“All right. Six o’clock. I’ll meet you outside, in the square
—”

“By the Pembroke statue?”

“Perfect.”

NO PISSING ALLOWED

I went back downstairs to the table where Wickham and the brothers pored over their own projects. I tried to hide my smile when I delivered the book and my news about dinner with that “nice lookin’ fella.”

Wickham only glanced at me, then turned back to the page in his hand. “Out of the question.”

Flann pulled out a chair for me, but I didn’t move. “We suspect he’s a fairy, love.”

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously.”

I had Wickham’s attention again. “And yet ye’d still go off with him?”

“*We’d* go off with him. I told him I have to take a chaperone.”

“And he agreed?”

“I’ll ignore the insinuation that dating me isn’t worth a little trouble.”

Wickham’s gaze cut to Brian. “Tell her.”

Suddenly, taking a seat seemed like a good idea. I gripped the edge of the table and nodded to Brian.

“Flann and I...” He was embarrassed. “We cannae read the man’s thoughts.”

I waited for more, but he was finished. “That’s it?”

“Aye.”

“Does that never happen?”

“Auch, aye. It happens.”

“Only with fairies?”

Brian sighed. “I suppose some might have been fairies...”

“So it happens with regular people?”

“It can, aye.”

I deliberately turned my head to Wickham and lifted my chin. “We’re meeting him at the Pembroke statue at six. Brace yourself, Effie.”



IT WAS THE MOST AWKWARD DATE OF MY LIFE...AND TOTALLY worth it—of the three of us, Wickham was the most uncomfortable.

When he and I stepped out of the old Bod, “Nice Lookin’ Fella” was already there. He closed the distance and reached for my hand. “High time for names, I think. I’m Griffon Carew. Professor Griffon Carew. Department of Theology.”

I was already out of my league, but there was no turning back now.

“Lennon Todd,” I said, pitifully simple. When he let go of my hand, I waved to my chaperone. “Wickham...” Suddenly I wondered if he wanted a possible fairy to know he was a Muir.

“Just Wickham?”

Wickham’s smile was tight. “Wickham Muir.”

“I’m pleased you could join us.”

They shook hands briefly. No pissing contest. No staring anyone down. And hopefully, no mindreading.

Griffon led us down a few blocks to a small café, giving us a history lesson of the architecture along the way. A table was reserved in the corner, and he insisted Wickham sit with us, and not at the high table by the door. After asking our permission, he ordered for us—the tomato soup of the day, a braided loaf of fresh bread, and a plate of sliced fruit for each of us.

“So,” he said, “tell me about these twins. I’ve heard them speak enough to know they’re Irish. But my imagination fails. Are they uncles? Or your employers?”

Wickham didn’t approve of the conversation, but he kept quiet.

“Not uncles, but I’d call them family. They’ve made a bet. One thinks he can convince me fairies are real. His brother is confident he can prove there is no such thing.”

The professor’s smile dropped. “Ah, such a pity. I was hoping *you* were a fairy.”

“Me?”

“Out of curiosity, I went back to see what books you were reading. The notions of a fairy heaven and hell? Dry stuff, that, unless ye happen to be Fae. So aye, I had hoped.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. I’m just a boring old American.”

“Never boring. I was starting to think Oxford was the dullest place on earth, what with all the children running back and forth between classes and pubs day and night. But then you came along and brightened it all up. Gave me a mystery to solve.”

War raged in my chest. Elation lit and burned like a fire, but worry doused it with cold water. I definitely had to nip that mystery business in the bud.

I kept my thoughts from showing and shrugged. “I’m an open book. Ask me anything. No mystery here.”

“Where are you from?”

“Idaho. No, I mean...that is, I came here from Idaho, but I was born and raised in Wyoming. Boring place. All the cowboys are real, and they smell like animals most of the time.”

“Cowboys? How fascinating.”

“Really? Have you spent much time on a farm?”

He shook his head. “Not a moment.”

“Then you go ahead and be fascinated. I used to be fascinated with the ocean, but when I saw it...”

“You obviously haven’t seen a good one.”

I laughed. “Isn’t it basically just the one?”

“Nonsense. There are loads. Every beach has its own, you know.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes and we reached for the pile of napkins at the same time. His fingers brushed mine, then he slowly pulled his hand away.

“Go head.”

I took a napkin and nudged the pile in his direction.

“Do you have plans with all your menfolk this weekend? Or can I spirit you away from this place and show you my favorite slip of beach?”

The chance to see the actual ocean—in motion this time—overwhelmed me. It must have shown on my face because he looked terribly pleased with himself. And it looked like nothing displeased Wickham as much as the professor looking pleased. But the last thing I wanted was to piss him off and ensure I never got to socialize again.

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t tell me you have to study. I never asked if you were a student—”

“It’s not that. We’ve got—I’ve got family coming into town. Lots of cooking and cleaning to do to get ready. Then entertaining them, yada yada.”

He laughed. “You actually used *yada yada*.”

I pulled my lips between my teeth and held them tight. He reached over and ran his finger along the side of my jaw and made me smile again.

“I wasn’t laughing at you, Lennon. I was relieved I’m not the only one who says it. I worried my age was showing.”

“Well, if you’re going to talk about age, I think our evening is over.”

He laughed with me, then sighed. “I do like spending time with you, fairy or not. I hope, when your visitors are gone, you’ll come find me again.”

“Maybe.”

I resisted the urge to give him hope. Besides, he really was out of my league. Maybe one day, if I survived my semi-dangerous life, I would look for him again. With a job like his, he couldn't be that hard to find.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK, I WORE A LITTLE MORE MAKEUP AND my favorite outfits. Like a schoolgirl, I watched out the corner of my eye, every day, hoping to accidentally run into Professor Carew despite my decision to keep my distance. I even returned to the stacks where we'd first met. The nearby desk seemed abandoned.

The brothers were hoping for another shot at reading the professor's mind, but I made them promise not to try. If the man thought about me, I didn't want to know. And if he wasn't thinking about me at all...I didn't want to know.

Flann's curiosity led us to the Theology section of the Bod, but there was no sign of the professor. We followed some threads of thought comparing Fae Mythology to the Christian religion and found a few books on the subject. These were in English, so I was able to do my part, skimming through them, looking for a mention of The Covenant or star stones, or even healing stones, but found nothing.

I felt like I was in detention.

The weather in Oxford was overcast but couldn't seem to rain. Even the clouds were frustrated. Every night I told myself he wasn't coming back, that I shouldn't get my hopes up. And every morning, I reached for something besides jeans.

"Come find me," he'd said. Too bad he didn't tell me where to look.

I plotted ways to avoid the others that weekend, to pretend I might wind up on the beach somewhere with them. Outwardly, I tried to appear as normal as possible. But on the inside, I was moody as hell.

Saturday morning dawned and we woke to a sparkling blue sky. Over breakfast, Everly announced we were all going to the coast for the day whether we wanted to or not. I knew she'd directed the last part to me. And though I suspected someone had been reading my mind, I didn't think it was her.

All fifteen of us packed into three cars. The Youngs came in a minivan with the Bahri sisters and half a dozen coolers full of food and drinks. Wickham drove Urban, Everly, Brian and Flann. I rode with Kitch, Persi, and Alwyn, for which I was grateful. The last thing I wanted to hear was an Irish accent. Besides I'd spent far too much study time with the Muir brothers, and we all needed a break from each other.

Lymington, in Hampshire, was only an hour and a half away. Even though it was cold, the beaches were covered with people and blankets. Brightly colored houses, maybe 15 feet deep, lined up above the beaches. I thought maybe they were places to change your clothes. It turned out people rented them for short "holidays."

Mini beach houses...

The beach itself was more rocks than the sand I expected, but they made walking much easier. At one point, I did take off my shoes and roll up the legs of my jeans so I could step into the surf. If I never got to see the ocean again, I wanted to be able to say that I'd gotten in.

We lingered for hours. Persi and I adventured down the beach like children, only coming back when we felt we'd gone too far. We gathered shells in buckets only to fling them back

into the waves again. Stared out into the water and imagined the pirate ships that might have come along on a bright blue-sky day.

After our massive blanket picnic on a stretch of grass, we put the coolers back in the van and ventured into a town full of pastel-painted houses and pastel pennants hanging between rooftops and bannisters. Their triangle flags flapping in the breeze, a visual representation of the carefree day.

We wandered into little shops, looking at souvenirs...for family we didn't have.

I stopped to look at a bunch of hand-painted doors the size of pop cans. The wood was thin and light, like driftwood. Some arched, some square. All different colors with painted ladybugs and flowers, rainboots and garden tools to add interest. One had a tiny, polished rock as a doorknob.

The saleswoman joined us at the display. "Fairy doors," she said, rolling every r. "Ye place them at the base of the wall...to invite the fairies and their magic into yer life."

I'd been charmed by a little gray and purple one, but Persi snatched it out of my hand and put it back with the others. "Absolutely not." After the saleswoman walked away, she hissed, "Think of them as vampires. Never invite them inside."

Next was a toffee shop. Nothing dangerous about those, so I bought three tins. Wickham had given me a credit card, which I tried to refuse until he explained that everyone in the house was in his employ, and they all had credit cards to cover their expenses. My reservations had faded slowly and were all but gone. Unless something was both expensive and frivolous, I could whip it out and buy what I liked without the guilt.

When we stepped out into the afternoon sunshine, my chest tightened. Those hairs rose on the back of my neck and I knew, for sure, we were being watched. Without saying a word, Persi and I turned to the left, back toward the cars. Heavy footsteps fell into rhythm behind us. She gave me a nod, and together, we turned and faced our stalkers.

Two older men stopped short, caught by surprise. Then they hemmed and hawed and asked us if we'd like to join them for dinner.

The Persi who sweetly declined for us both was a Persi I hadn't seen before. Her Wyoming was showing. And when the men walked away, toward the dock, I knew they didn't feel the least bit slighted.

We made it back to the cars, and I still hadn't shaken off that feeling of being watched. While we waited for the rest of our party to finish shopping, I tried to convince myself it was nothing, that Persi's red curls fascinated a lot of people, and that Everly drew attention, even if she was leaning back on a car with her eyes closed, absorbing the warmth of the sun.

Finally, when Wickham had counted noses and made sure everyone was accounted for, I was out of time. I had to decide. I thought of his wife and children, of how they might just cease to exist, if something happened to him. And I figured it might cause a lot of trouble for nothing, but...

"Sorry. I have that feeling again. I think we're being watched."

He nodded, then turned and asked Urban a banal question, as if he'd already forgotten what I'd said. But then I noticed him gesture to the dock, then up the road toward the city square. Urban followed his lead and the two of them scanned the entire horizon as they pretended to discuss Lymington.

I had Hank on me and wished I hadn't snatched him up at the last second. If there were fairies watching, following... I shuddered at the thought and had to remind myself that the female from Trinity hadn't sensed him, even though she'd been standing less than five feet away.

Maybe it was simply pickpockets watching a handful of people too well dressed for a casual day at the beach...

We loaded up and started home without any instructions from Wickham. But whatever he had planned, I supposed I didn't need to know the details.

The traffic died down to nothing as we made our way through rural Hampshire. I was given a seat up front to avoid motion sickness, which meant I had the luxury of a side mirror. And as I watched other cars turn off the main road, one car remained, ostensibly headed in the same direction.

Small, orange, and old. Three passengers at least.

It would get close, then back off. Our three cars spread out along the road, offering plenty of space for passing, but it never passed. When Wickham and the brothers were in the lead once more, he suddenly pulled off to the left, down a narrow lane that disappeared beyond an ancient grove of trees.

The minivan followed, and Kitch turned after. I watched my mirror. The car came up to the turnoff, slowed, then came our way just as we passed beneath the trees.

Kitch turned off to the right, parking beside Wickham's car, the minivan parked further on. Wickham, Urban, and the brothers were already out of their car, standing like a welcoming party in the clearing. All holding small knives with bright silver blades. Everly stood next to the minivan, her

hands in the pockets of her wide-legged pants, her feet braced apart.

I jumped out but stayed between the cars, not wanting to be in the way. The Youngs and the Bahri sisters stayed in the van. Persi joined Everly. Alwyn, and Kitch joined the semi-circle of men.

The orange car came through the trees, slowed, and stopped. It looked like an antique toy that had been abused for decades. Faced with such a formidable welcoming party, I expected the driver to throw it into reverse and burn rubber, praying he'd get away. Instead, all four doors opened, and four skinny goons got out. Only the driver seemed confident.

Probably because he held a gun.

“Look you,” he said to Urban, assuming the biggest man was in charge. “We’ll be takin’ a set of these twins with us. We’ll even let ye chose which.” He grinned at his accomplices who hesitantly grinned back.

“Those girls might fit better in the car, as a point of fact,” said his friend from the passenger side.

Persi caught my attention and gave me a nod. I sensed she wanted a distraction so she could disappear, so I shouted, to draw our stalkers’ attention. “Is there some reason you want a set of twins?”

One of the backseat boys got bold. “Ye’ve got four sets, now. Why would anyone need four sets?”

“Seriously,” I said, coming around the front of the car to lean against the hood. “Maybe if you tell us why you want them, we can give you a good deal.”

The four exchanged looks and nods, then the driver shook his head. “This here gun says I don’t need to negotiate. Just

pass them over and we'll be on our way."

"Fine." I shrugged like it didn't make much of a difference to me. "You can have the girls, but you have to explain first." Persi had disappeared, so I bought her as much time as I could. The others stood back, weapons at the ready, but willing to wait for Persi to make a move.

The driver stumbled, like he was drunk, but quickly recovered.

"We don't want them for ourselves," the other backseater said, then was smacked by his friend.

"Then what do you want them for?"

The driver realized no one was budging until he explained. "A bloke'll pay good money for 'em. Any age, male or female. In fact," he lifted his chin, "I reckon we'll take two."

I laughed again. "That's going to be a problem."

"Why's that?"

"First, not enough room in the car. Maybe...hey, maybe you should leave two of your friends with us, so you can fit them in."

He turned and looked his friends over, then shook his head. "Or maybe I'll just put two in the boot."

"Naw." I shook my head. "Not possible now."

"Aye? And why not?"

"You said you had a gun."

He raised his hand to look at the fat stick in his hand. Confused, he danced around, searching the ground, while his friends scrambled back into the car and closed the doors, having noticed the danger closing in...

I learned a lot about Highland men that day, both contemporary and the 18th century kind. First and foremost, they liked to fight.

No. Maybe “like” was too mild.

These men *enjoyed* fighting like most women enjoyed trying on clothes. They smiled when they landed a blow. They smiled even bigger when someone hit back. It was like watching killer whales play with seals before they devoured them. But unlike those videos, I didn’t have to look away. When I thought about what those men had planned to do with whatever set of twins they got a hold of—and what fate I suspected they’d be in for—I figured the Orange Car Gang deserved every ounce of pain the team dished out.

And if they planned to go hunting twins again, they would be physically incapable for a long, long time.

LUCK AND PROFITEROLES

The next morning, looking around the breakfast table, I got a good inventory of the injuries sustained by the home team. There'd been no need to bring in Dr. McAvoy, but Wickham had a black eye, Kitchens worried at a loose tooth with his tongue, and Urban held an ice pack on his jaw when he wasn't chewing. All their big fists were beaten and scratched. Alwyn and Irish twins had gotten in some blows themselves, but other than a few red knuckles, they showed no signs of wear and tear.

No one asked for one-on-one time with Hank.

Wickham could barely sit still while he shoveled food into his mouth like a starving man. It turned out he was just anxious to get to the war room where we could discuss business.

“Obviously, what happened last evening is dire news,” he said, once we were assembled before the maps. “O’Ryan is relying on more than just his dogs to find witches. But I’m encouraged by the fact we’re dealing with the dregs of society—mortals willing to sell other human beings. And though it isn’t a new concept by any means, they are easily thwarted.”

I waved a hand. “How?”

“By not going out in public in pairs. From this moment on, none of our twins are to be out of the house at the same time.” Before I could argue, he leaned toward me and held up his hand. “And I’ll find a way to alert as many witches—and other twins—as I can. There is an entire village of them on the Black Isle, and they’ll need to be separated. A small army, you might say, half of which would be free to go from city to city to warn others.”

Brian smiled. “Ye’re goin’ to play the Grandfather card, then.”

Wickham nodded. “I am going to play the Grandfather card.”



APRIL IN A COLLEGE TOWN WAS NOTHING NEW TO ME, THOUGH Oxford and Laramie had little in common. The perfume of spring hormones mixed with the fear of failing exams wasn’t just an imaginary thing, and I wondered if that was why God forced the bulb flowers to bloom in April—to cover up the smell.

Though...maybe the smell was stronger that year because some of it was coming from me.

When I thought of Griffon, I was heartbroken, worried I would never see him again. Since my luck had run out, I tempted my own bad luck. I stopped wearing makeup, hoping that might be enough to bring him back into my path. I’d imagined all kinds of reasons why he might have left Oxford completely and prayed he hadn’t gone home...to visit the wife and kids.

In the Bod, we found nothing at all about Moire with an e. Plenty of stuff on the Moira, the Greek version of her, and the later Greek version of the plural, Moirai. Usually, those referred to Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, the chicks who measure out your life like a piece of thread, decide when it ends, then cut it. But those three also morphed into the Nine Fates.

We were only interested in the original, single individual. If we could locate the fairy version of Moire, who had named every living thing, maybe we could learn more about O’Ryan and his dogs.

The key phrase was *living*, and if she knew the fate of every *living* thing, that included fairies, whereas the Greek version seemed to suggest Moirai only knew the fates of humans, or mortals, and none of the immortals. Of course, that depended upon which book you referenced.

We’d been searching the libraries for well over a month and I was feeling entitled to my own degree in fairy studies, but that wasn’t offered, even at Oxford.

I stood in the stacks one morning, thumbing along the spines of Greek histories when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned, but no one was there. “Persi?”

“Guess again.”

I spun around to face the deep voice and found Griffon smiling down at me. A blush flooded my face with heat.

“Forgive me?”

I played dumb. “For what?”

“I had to leave town with no notice. Family drama. I had no way to call you...to explain.”

“No need to explain to me.”

“Still...” He ran the side of his finger along my jawline. “I missed this face.”

Remembering my lack of makeup, I turned aside. “This ragged old thing? I doubt it.”

“Lennon. You really can’t take a compliment, can you?”

I shrugged. “Not enough practice, I guess.”

“All right, then. What about tonight? We can practice over dinner. There is an excellent restaurant called The Ivy. And best of all, none of these youngsters can afford it.”

I followed his gaze to a row of tables packed with students who couldn’t possibly be old enough for college. I’d been getting tired of them myself. “Sounds like just what I need.”

“Bring a chaperone if you must. Just tell me where I can collect you.” He pulled out his phone.

“I’ll meet you there. You pick the time.”

He worried at his lip. “I don’t know. You do need a *lot* of practice. How does seven sound? I promise to have you home by midnight.”

Five hours. With my favorite theology professor? “Seven is fine.”



“I DON’T FEEL RIGHT ABOUT YOU GOING ALONE.” WICKHAM stood just outside my bathroom while Everly applied my makeup. I wanted it to be right this time. If I didn’t look fantastic, I wouldn’t believe a single compliment, and Griffon

wouldn't want to ask me out again if I called him a liar all night.

"Then come," I said. "He said I was welcome to bring a chaperone...again."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not ready to trust him. If the brothers can't read—"

"I know. I know. There is still every chance he's a fairy."

"Aye. So—"

"So you'd better have something nice you can wear!"

Wickham was able to make reservations for himself and Persi so they wouldn't have to sit at the same table with my date and me. When the three of us showed up, however, Griffon insisted they join us. He'd changed his clothes, looked the same as he had earlier that day, but somehow managed to look...dapper.

Though we were all roughly the same age, I felt like we'd reached the very awkward phase of *Meet the Parents*. And though I was nervous for everyone involved, I couldn't help but be moved when Griffon went out of his way to put Wickham at ease.

"Lennon says you left town to take care of family business?"

Griffon nodded. "I did. Rather suddenly, for which I am sorry."

"And yer family is from..."

"Yarmouth these days. Many of them. Though my siblings and I have left the island roost."

Wickham warmed up slightly. “Yarmouth? We were just across the channel a pair of weeks ago. Spent the day in Lymington.”

“Oh yes. I know it well.” He turned to me and squeezed my hand. “You could have called me from the lighthouse. I could have waved at you from the wall of Yarmouth Castle.”

We waved our fingers at each other to make up for our lost opportunity, like a couple of students.

Persi sighed. Wickham rolled his eyes. We all laughed.

The Ivy’s menu was as fancy as their wait staff. For starters, Griffon ordered something called Duck Liver Parfait, with caramelized hazelnuts, apple and apricot chutney, and toasted brioche.

Persi and I shared a horrified grimace.

She ordered the Goat’s Curd Salad with courgette ribbons, golden raisins, white endive, fennel pollen and Black Bee honey. Wickham chose the Steak Tartare with Tabasco mustard dressing, cornichons, shallot, parsley, egg yolk, Himalayan salt and toasted granary. I ordered the cheese souffle. Considering all the ingredients, I was surprised when my souffle was more substantial than anything they’d ordered.

Dinner conversation proved tame and non-threatening until Wickham asked my date what he was doing at Oxford.

“Studying, like everyone else. In the fall, I’ll be teaching again. A course on the similarities between the Fae histories and Christianity.”

“How many credits can you earn these days, studying basic heresy?”

Griffon grinned. “Just the three.”

For the next course, Eggs Benedict for Persi and me. Lobster and Tomato Linguine for the men. No one at The Ivy was in a hurry to eat or leave. Apparently, the table was reserved for the evening.

By the time my Ribeye arrived, I was almost hungry again. And for dessert, Griffon ordered for all of us—a pyramid of profiteroles. When they carried it to our table, my jaw fell on the floor.

“Don’t worry, love,” Griffon said. “We’ll all help.”

The eighteen-inch-tall pyramid of cream puffs was drizzled with chocolate down one side, caramel down the other, both of which helped the crushed hazelnuts adhere to the mountain. Wound around the pyramid like a delicate ribbon, a length of hardened sugar hovered just off the surface—an edible mesh of fine gold.

It even impressed Wickham.

Griffon suggested Persi do the honors. Without hesitation, she whacked at the mesh in a few places, then picked off the half a dozen rolls attached to it, making a miniature pile on her plate. We all followed suit, drawing the attention of other diners. A small parade of girls passed the table, gawked, then stopped and stared at my date.

“Professor Carew?”

He pasted on a patient smile, winked at me, then turned to the girls. “Good evening, ladies.”

They stepped up to the table like they’d been invited. The short blonde spoke. “We took his class on Fae lore last fall. We’re all Arch and Anth majors.”

Griffon noticed my confusion and explained. “Archeology and Anthropology.” He gestured to me. “Miss Todd and her

friends are just getting started in the Fae field. Maybe you have some suggestions.”

The girl beamed. “Well, the professor’s class is a must. But if you intend to start at the very beginning, you should read *The Covenant*.” She turned to her friends to discuss where to find it. All the while, Wickham’s boot was pressing down on my soft Italian leather-clad toes as if he worried I’d start jumping up and down.

On the inside, I already was.

SCREW THE PROFITEROLES

While we waited for the girl's attention, I glanced at Griffon to see how he was handling things, and found him squirming, probably trying to find a polite way to get the young trio to leave us in peace. But I couldn't just let them walk away.

"That sounds intriguing, ladies. Where do I find it?"

"It's in the Faculty Library of the Theology Department. Only members of faculty can remove it. A professor had to host us and read it with us." Then, as if the thought just occurred to her. "But that means Professor Carew can get you in!"

One of the girls was still eyeing the damaged pyramid. Since we were desperate to hear any tidbits of information that might fall from the girls' mouths, I invited the three of them to help us finish our dessert, despite Griffon's discomfort.

I stroked the side of his hand and grinned. "I've discovered I really like to watch you squirm."

His smile came back. He covered my hand and squeezed.

The waiter wasn't terribly pleased our party had grown, but it didn't take long for him and another man to find three more chairs. We all dug into the gold and chocolate messes on

our plates. As soon as I could clear my mouth again, I asked, “So what is in this covenant? It’s like a contract, right? So there have to be two parties?”

A brunette pushed her glasses up her nose and answered for the rest. “A contract between the God of the Fae and the race of man.”

The blonde gasped. “He’s not the God of the Fae. He’s the king. And not the entire race of man. A select line of the race of man.”

“Sounds like you’ve memorized it.”

“Oh no. Just the important bits. It’s in my thesis.”

“Oh? I’d love to read your thesis too.”

She paled, like it was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. “Of cour...of course. It’s not complete, but...”

“Persi, can you take down her number? We can meet up sometime.”

My hands were shaking too hard to handle a phone and enter a number correctly. Besides, if I pulled out my phone, Griffon would start getting ideas.

The topic of conversation turned to Archeology, and I couldn’t steer it back to The Covenant without being obvious, so I let it ride. Griffon was content to smile at me and twist our fingers together. I ignored the fact that Persi and Wickham were watching our hands closely.

Finally, the girls had their fill of adult conversation and profiteroles and begged off.

“It’s far from midnight,” I said, “but I don’t think I can last much longer.”

Wickham and Persi said nothing. I thought they'd take the hint and leave us alone, but they didn't, so I pretended they weren't there.

"How about I buy you breakfast?" I aimed the question directly at Griffon. No one else invited.

His caramel eyes lowered. "Or I could *make* you breakfast..."

My body found enough blood to heat my face. "Daddy won't let me out of his sight." I pointed my thumb at Wickham.

Griffon's smile faltered but recovered quickly. "May I at least see you home?" He looked at Wickham for his answer.

"Tell you what," the Highlander said. "Persi and I will take a stroll and meet ye at the car in say...half an hour?"

I nodded, grateful I was allowed even that.

He left a hundred-pound note on the table near Griffon's elbow, and he and Persi navigated their way to the front door. He turned to give me a warning look, then was gone.

Griffon lifted my hand and kissed the backs of my fingers which were still caught in his. "I take it there will be no sleeping with the enemy?"

"Are you the enemy?"

"Wickham seems to think so. But then again, he seems like the type to see enemies everywhere." He chuckled. "And at this point, I feel obligated to ask if maybe you are being held prisoner or something. He's not forcing you to marry against your will or some such nonsense? That sort of stuff goes on where you least expect it, you know."

I rolled my eyes. "I am here of my own choice."

“And if I invited you to follow me out the back door...and play hookie all night?”

“I would obviously be tempted—”

“Then let me tempt you beyond what you can resist.” He pulled on my fingers and brought me close, then captured my mouth with his. I worried that everyone in the dining room was staring, but the kiss was short. Much too short.

Kissing professors was highly underrated.

The waiter showed up to ruin things. He handed Griffon the check while eyeing Wickham’s hundred-pound note laying forgotten on the table. As a recent coffee-pourer myself, I couldn’t have touched it to save my life.

Griffon noticed us both staring and laughed, then scooped it up and added it to the pile of money he’d pulled from his wallet, then handed it all over. “Come on,” he said, and pushed away from the table. He took my hand, and we rushed outside like we were late for a train. When he turned toward the back of the building, I didn’t think, just followed. So eager for that next kiss, I thought of nothing else.

As we passed the corner, he twirled me around. He was humming—no words, no tempo—as he spun me toward a short stretch of brick wall, nudged me into it, then pinned me against it with our entwined hands above my head.

“Where were we?”

I struggled to catch my breath. “Can’t remember. It was so long ago—”

His kiss cut me off. His free hand wrapped around my hip and pulled me closer. When we repositioned, our noses bumped, and we laughed.

He dropped his head, embarrassed. “Jeez, I’m making a muck of things. Ye’ll think I haven’t kissed a girl since primary school.”

I made him look up. “Shut up and kiss me.”

His shoulders sagged, his smile came back, and he did as he was told. It didn’t take long for my neglected hormones to wake up, and a minute or two later, we were breathing heavy.

“I could stand here for days,” he said, against my mouth, then kissed along my jaw, headed for my neck.

Knowing what that would do to me, I sighed and pushed him away. “In this cold?”

“My flat isn’t far. A brisk walk would warm us—”

“I can’t piss off Wickham. I just...can’t.”

He pulled back and lifted my chin so he could see my face. “And maybe you don’t want to?”

“Right. That too.”

“Are the pair of you...”

“No. Nothing like that. He’s just... I’m sorry. I can’t explain. We are all just...watching out for each other. Like a family.” I shrugged. “It’s been a long time since I had any family, so I’m...eating it up right now.”

He sighed and stepped back, tugged me away from the wall. “I could have argued with you about anything else. But family is a weakness I understand all too well.” He pulled my arm under his and entwined his around it, capturing me against his side. Then he started for the parking lot. “We’re pitiful, you know.”

“Yeah. I know.”

I couldn't remember feeling less pitiful in my life. I had two things I hadn't had in a really long time—a family and a guy who actually liked me.



WHEN WE REACHED THE CAR, ALL THE DOORS WERE LOCKED and Wickham and Persi were nowhere in sight. Griffon leaned back against the trunk, turned me away from him, then pulled me back against him before wrapping his arms around me.

“This way we won't be tempted,” he said.

“Won't we?”

He shook me a little. “Stop that. I'm no knight in shining armor.”

“Just an Irish gentleman.”

He stilled. “Irish?”

“Yeah. Your accent slips out every now and then. I've spent enough time with the brothers that I hear it now. Or do the Welsh and Irish sound similar and I've just assumed—”

“No. They don't. My family insists I've lost my accent. I was surprised you noticed it is all.”

His voice sounded odd. I wanted to see his face, to find out why, but he wouldn't let me turn. He gave me another little shake. “Hold still, lass. I'm tryin' to keep ye warm.”

I laughed. “Now you're Scottish.”

Wickham and Persi headed our way and we stepped apart. Griffon bent over and kissed the back of my hand, then gave Wickham a little bow. “Home before midnight, as promised.” Like the perfect gentleman, he wished us all goodnight, and

winked at me. “I’ll see you in the Theology Department tomorrow, say ten o’clock? Bring all the chaperones you like.”

“Ten’s perfect.” And even if it wasn’t, it gave me an excuse to say the word *perfect*.

He stepped backward and watched my face until our fingers pulled apart. The look that followed melted me all the way to my toes. Then he turned up the street and walked away.

“Holy shit.” Persi watched him go. Like me, she took in every step, every swing of his coat. It was like watching Urban walking down the street in his kilt. “If that man’s a fairy, I don’t know that I’d even care.”

I was thinking the same thing.

Wickham clicked his fingers in front of my face. “Shall we find a brisk car wash?” He clicked at Persi too. “And roll the windows down?”



THOUGH IT WAS CRUEL TO GIVE THEM A REASON TO LOSE sleep, Wickham called everyone into the living room to tell them about our dinner conversation with the *Arch and Anth* students. Looking back at that moment, I realized it was Wickham who was the most excited, though he tried not to show it.

It was understandable, though. He and his sisters had been searching for it for over five years.

Everly bounced in her chair. Urban was in no shape to celebrate wildly, but he enjoyed Everly’s excitement. They, too, had been searching for Wickham’s answers for a while now, besides just hunting monsters. Though I was still buzzing

from a good snogging—Kitch’s term for kissing—I was thrilled that finding *The Covenant* might mean we were close to stopping O’Ryan, and we could soon stop sitting on our hands while more witches were murdered.

Of course, it didn’t guarantee anything, but there was hope. Buckets and buckets of hope.

It was impossible to sleep with all those buckets sitting around, waiting for morning. Alwyn offered to make crepes, and though my stomach was still full from our fancy dinner, I thought I could probably slip one in sideways.

“Wickham popped out to check on his family,” Persi said, taking the kitchen barstool next to mine, both of us waiting with empty plates. “You should know that we were watching at the back of the restaurant...”

It took no effort to recall exactly what they would have seen. I closed my eyes and groaned quietly.

“It’s a good thing,” she insisted. “Now we know that your hot professor wasn’t waiting for a chance to toss you in a car and drive away, right? Now Wickham knows he wasn’t after Hank or anything else. Now that we gave him a chance to—”

“You left us alone on purpose,” I said as I realized what she was confessing. “Trying to trap him.”

“We had to be sure, didn’t we? And if he’d tried to take you, Wickham would have popped you out of his car in a second, even if it revealed too much.”

“Griffon could still be a fairy,” I pointed out. “You didn’t prove anything.”

“Yeah, well, even so, the next time you want to be alone with him... Wickham might just let you.”

The idea of spending serious private time with Griffon should have made me happy. And it would have if I hadn't learned something about myself that night—I'd been relieved to have Wickham as an excuse *not* to go home with my hot professor. I liked having a valid reason not to get close, so we would never need to have *that* conversation—the one I'd had four times before.

I love you.

And I love you. Let's get married.

You should know I can't have kids.

Oh. Well, I was just kidding.

Would Griffon react that way? Of course he would. He'd already admitted that family meant a great deal to him.

MUST BE OILED OFTEN

*A*bout four in the morning, I finally got to sleep. Thankfully, no one bothered to wake me until eight, probably because no one else was awake either. Persi agreed to stay behind at Hope House, though she wanted to go watch over our shoulders without being seen. Wickham thought it was far too dangerous. If she got distracted and suddenly appeared, she'd be showing her hand to any Fae who might be watching over The Covenant itself.

Urban and Everly would stay behind as well, though they'd more than earned the right to see the fairy contract firsthand. Wickham came ostensibly as protection, confident the Fae would be there, whether or not they would reveal themselves. And of course, we took Brian and Flann so they could interpret what they could.

I'd already described the brothers as uncle-type characters who were obsessed with Fae documents. After he'd invited me to bring as many chaperones as I wanted, I was sure Griffon wouldn't mind, but worried I might be assuming too much.

It was a long walk to the Theology Faculty Library from where we'd parked the car, but luckily, we'd left early. And the brothers' enthusiasm ate up the distance in no time. We arrived twenty minutes early.

The library was much more modern and much less ornate than the public sections of the Bod. All business. More like the libraries I was used to. Less like a millennium-old cathedral.

We made our way to the restricted area. Through the door window, I saw Griffon sitting at a conference table surrounded by chairs. A document half the size of a poster lay in front of him. He wore the same white cotton gloves we'd used at Trinity with more piled to one side. He glared, unhappy about something. But whether he was unhappy with the document or the table, or some private thought, there was no telling.

Maybe he wasn't a morning person.

The man at the information desk glanced up, then smiled. "You'll be Professor Carew's friends." His gaze rested on me and his smile turned to a grin. "He's all ready for you. Go on through." He pressed a button and the door buzzed until Wickham pushed it open.

Griffon glanced up, saw me, and his expression changed completely, like he'd been away for weeks all over again. "Just four of you?" He ducked around Wickham, pulled me close, and pecked me on the lips, then gestured to the chairs. "Plenty of room. Make yourselves comfortable." He guided me around the table to the chair next to his. "We're not allowed to remove it, but we can stay as long as you like."

Wickham sat across the table beside the brothers, alternately scanning the room for danger and staring at the document. It might as well have been the Holy Grail, but to Wickham Muir, our safety came first.

None of the other staff paid us any attention. I wondered if no fairies had been able to get on the faculty.

Griffon passed out gloves. “The document might be the oldest thing in the Bod, but it is well preserved. I assure you it will not disintegrate if you touch it.” There were more gloves left.

He noticed me noticing. “I expected Persi and Kitchens to come. Maybe another time.”

“They might like that.” I felt like I was shopping for a car, trying not to seem too eager to the sharp-eyed salesman who was mentally calculating how much to charge me.

He put his hand over mine, then leaned close to whisper in my ear. “I fear I’ll do nearly anything to please you, Lennon.” Then he lifted my hand and kissed my fingers quickly before letting go. “Gloves on.”

I looked at the faces across the table, their eyes lit with excitement, their white-clad fingers wiggling like they were about to perform their first surgery.

“You don’t read Irish, do you?”

“I don’t.”

“Then we’ll turn this around and let the lads have a look.” He turned the giant page carefully, then let it rest again. Brian looked tickled to have been called a lad. Flann had no attention to spare for anything other than the thick, pale page in front of him.

“Looks like the Declaration of Independence to me,” I said, “but that’s not parchment.”

“No. Not parchment. This is skin. And every few years or so, the skin lightens and the writing begins to fade. It must be oiled and treated to bring it back. The last time was only a few months ago, so you’ve come at a good time.”

Flann moved his right hand to the top of the page but let his fingers hover half an inch above it as he moved over the letters. “*The Covenant*,” he read, then moved to the next line, “*between the King of the Fae and a...race of man...set aside?*” He looked up at Griffon.

Griffon shrugged. “That’s a literal translation, yes.”

Flann looked to Brian. “Set aside? By whom? And for what purpose?”

Griffon grinned. “I believe you’ll find that within *The Covenant*.”

Brian’s eyes danced. Flann’s watered. He pulled a white cotton handkerchief out of his back pocket and applied it to his cheeks and eyes. “Can’t be drippin’ on it, so I can’t.”

Griffon laughed, obviously tickled to see the men enjoying themselves so much.

Flann skimmed a line, then translated. “*For the purpose of safety...of both Fae and Man...we enter this covenant...willingly...no, that’s not right. Willing...to bind our people...by our names?*” He looked up. “I think this means we’re making this deal whether our people agree or not.”

“*Binding their will* is what I surmised.” Griffon shrugged. “But then again, I’ve read it so many times, I’ve imbued it with my own ideas. It is refreshing to see it through new eyes once more.”

“Against their will?” I sighed. “Seems a little autocratic, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what a king is. And you said it yourself, this isn’t the Declaration of Independence. This is a king choosing what’s best for his people, or what he wants for them, whether or not it’s best.”

Flann continued. *“Because, or a result of...the Naming Powers—both words capitalized, though that means nothing this long ago—Naming Powers must stay...dally, linger perhaps?...in the Realm of Man. Seven...is that seven?”* Griffon nodded. Flann continued. *“Seven of the eight Powers, capitalized, are...entrusted to that race set apart. The eighth Power shall remain with the King, who by...need, necessity... must stay or dally as well.”*

“Those of the worthy race...maybe...Covenant to never... surrender...their powers but in death, those powers then... passing to a newborn...of their race, set apart? That these powers can never be reunited...to the destruction...and sorrow of all.”

Griffon pointed to a word. *“You missed this one.”*

Flann squinted. *“Possible?”*

“Probable.”

“Probable destruction and sorrow of all. In exchange for...the blessing or bliss of those powers...the King of the Fae shall keep...Ambition contained, incarcerated? Contained in the Hell of Man’s Realm. And none may...release him...unless the covenant be broken, damaged?”

“In addition, the God of the Fae will arrange... You see, he’s called God here. Will arrange for the destruction of all the Denoy, therein protecting, preventing...any element from bridging the distance? Or is that road? ...between the realms of Fae and Man, that those...who were sent back...cannot be pursued? Followed maybe.”

“In order to prevent those set apart...from breaching this contract...despite what Moire has seen...the head or chief...of

the 'set apart' is herein granted...life everlasting? Spring everlasting? No! The spring of life!

"If this pact be broken...Ambition shall walk free again. If he is allowed...to gather and unite...The Naming Powers, he will be thereby...God of All. Capitalized.

"May all parties...abide by the terms herein...so that all races and all realms may be...safe from Ambition."

The men across from me sat in stunned silence, staring at the signatures at the bottom of the page, where Flann's pointer finger hovered.

"What does it say?"

Wickham's gaze cut to me for a second, then dropped back to the document. It was a warning to hide my excitement. He pointed to the signatures. "*Ghloir, Head of the Fae, and Afi Cean More*, both signed in red."

Flann choked. Brian patted him on the back and laughed. "Afi, in Norse, is grandfather—"

Wickham shook his head. "Fire, I think."

"And More..."

Wickham cut him off again. "Means Head. Chieftain. The Fire Chieftain perhaps. Remember *Canmore*—of King Malcolm Canmore—translated to Big Head or Big Chief." Wickham chuckled. "If this fella thought of himself as the leader of a race set apart, perhaps he did have a big head, aye?"

The men laughed. I was still distracted by the pigments. "If this is so old, isn't it odd they had different colors of ink?"

"Signed in blood." Griffon nudged me and grinned. "Do you believe in fairies now, Lennon?" He then nodded to the

brothers. “Which of these two wagered he could get you to believe?”

I hadn’t given Brian or Flann the heads up on that little lie. “It’s been so long…”

“I did,” Brian said, smiling. “Seems only fair I should share my winnings with you, so it does.”

Flann tapped the table. “Any problem with takin’ a photograph? For my own use, of course.”

Griffon blinked a few times, thinking. “I suppose not. Though you mustn’t use a flash.”

Wickham pulled out his phone and took half a dozen shots from different angles and promised Flann he got it all.

I couldn’t believe Griffon couldn’t feel the tension in the air. I felt like my hair was crackling with static. But I played it as cool as I could. My companions wanted to get out of there fast, but we couldn’t exactly run for the door. However, since they were already standing from taking pictures, I stood up too.

Griffon jumped up to pull my chair out further, then put his arm around my waist. “Too early for lunch?”

“I’m sorry. We’ve all made promises for the afternoon.”

He leaned closer. “Even you?”

I grimaced. “Sorry. I’m getting my arm X-rayed. Broke it not too long ago.”

Griffon scowled. “You must have dangerous hobbies. I worry—”

“Not me. Total fluke. Won’t happen again. Don’t worry. I’ll…see you in the stacks…tomorrow.”

He sighed, nodded, and let me go. “The Bod? Say ten?”

“Perfect.”

“You promised.” He kissed me quick and released me.

After the others set their gloves on the table, Griffon nodded and waved. “Glad you enjoyed yourselves.”

“Oh, we did!” Flann’s voice cracked. There was not hiding *his* excitement, and everyone laughed as we stepped out the security door. Not a word was said as we made our way outside. Halfway to the parking lot, however, Flann couldn’t contain himself any longer...and raced his brother to the car.



WE RODE IN SILENCE UNTIL WICKHAM PULLED OUT HIS PHONE to dictate a message to the team. “Drop everything. Meet in the war room. Kitch, get my sisters on. And locate Soni. I’ll need to see her.”

Soni was the niece. I thought she was out of the picture, but I must have been wrong.

“Brian. Flann. I’m giving you a choice. You might not want to—”

“We’re all in, laddie. Just try to send us home.”

“But—”

“Just try.”

JUST A WEE MAN

The ride back to the house was the longest I could remember. Every block, every building, every tree seemed to slow us. The traffic lights were turtle-slow.

Wickham might have tried to hide his excitement, but when he pulled up close to the back entrance instead of the garage, he gave himself away. The three of us held back and let him go ahead. I went to the kitchen and asked Alwyn and the Youngs to set up lunch in the study, buffet style, for a meeting that might last all afternoon.

By the time I had changed into sweats and hurried to the new and larger war room, all Fairy Hunters were present and accounted for except Wickham. His sisters waved from the large monitor on the wall. I waved back and got in the buffet line along one side of the room.

As in Edinburgh, three conference tables were set in a u-shape, though they were longer and accommodated the Muir brothers as well as the original six. Dezi and Sophie fixed plates and hurried out. I got the impression from the first that they didn't want to know what was going on, probably because they didn't want their husbands to join our merry-but-bruised band.

There was no sign of the Youngs or Meral and Reem. Alwyn sat in a tufted chair in the corner enjoying the meal he'd prepared.

Once we'd finished eating and were roughly seated in our usual order, Wickham came in, took a quick inventory of faces, then closed the doors behind him. It wasn't the first time the chef had been included in our discussions. Persi explained that the man had been present at Soni's wedding and knew as much as anyone did about our fairy hunting project.

Wickham greeted his sisters, fixed a plate, then perched on a stool at the small bar. "We'll start with Flann and Brian's interpretation of The Covenant and go from there. They did a grand job of it earlier." He nodded to the brothers. "Whenever ye're ready. The photographs are on that computer now. Ye can zoom in close."

Flann took a few minutes to get ready, then projected one of the photographs onto the wall as he had before. He followed along with his cursor.

"The Covenant."

Wickham's sisters clapped, then tucked their hands between their knees. The rest of us chuckled because we felt the same way. Other than a few words changed here and there, Flann's second read was verbatim to the first.

The sisters gasped at the mention of power being passed to a newborn. Wickham shook his head. "We'll discuss it all in a moment. But we'll get through it first."

They bit their lips and clasped hands. I couldn't wait to find out why. They gasped again at the mention of everlasting life. They came out of their chairs, on screen, when Flann

showed the picture of the signatures at the bottom of the document.

“That bastard!” Lorraine was the one who cursed.

Her sister tried to get her to sit down again. “All they can see are your bosoms, dear.”

Lorraine sat on the edge of her seat, fuming. “He knew everything! And he took the answers with him!”

I leaned over to Kitch. “Who is she talking about?”

Wickham heard me. “The Grandfather. The duty hasn’t been passed down through the ages, as we were led to believe. It was only one man who ever held it. The Grandfather was there when Fae and Man were learning how to rub along together.” He cursed. “All our questions could have been answered.”

Wickham poured himself a drink and threw it back. I couldn’t ever remember him acting so...amused about bad news.

“But ye ken what this means, sisters. Where Soni is concerned?”

Lorraine was still spitting mad, but Loretta was calm. “It means he knew what would happen if Soni gave her powers to Walter,” she said. “He knew it would break the covenant. And he helped make it happen.”

Wickham nodded. “Which means O’Ryan, or Ambition, as he’s called in the contract, has been free for six years, since the night of The Reckoning.”

“And,” I said, drawing his attention, “we know what he’s looking for.”

Wickham poured another drink. “That’s right. He wants the Naming Powers. If he gets them all, it’s game over.”

“Yeah, but he *has* to get all of them. Which means he needs the one the Fae King kept for himself.”

“If he doesn’t already have it,” Kitch said.

I kept on thinking out loud. “We just have to figure out who these people are that were set apart. So we’ve traded one mystery for another one.”

Urban shook his head. “Nay, Lennon. We already ken who they are.”

“We do?”

He gestured to the monitor, to Persi, Wickham, and the brothers.

“The Muirs witches?”

“Aye,” Wickham said. “And I’m fair to certain we ken who holds the Naming Powers.”

No one dared breathe.

“The *Thirids*. I wondered why there have always been only a handful of them at one time. Always monumental powers. Soni was one of them, but no longer. And Persi...”

Persi was up on her feet, shaking her head. “I’m not one of those. I’m not!”

Wickham shrugged. “Perhaps not. But we must be certain.”

“Wait a minute,” Kitchens stood too. “If O’Ryan was looking for these powers and Persi was at the wedding, why didn’t he know he’d found one? Why didn’t his dogs...smell all the Muir witches in attendance?”

Wickham waved a hand encouraging us all to calm down. “After O’Ryan’s dogs found the Muirs in Oxford, simply by using their sense of smell, I gave Persi, Soni, my sisters and myself, and some extended family, that shoulder tattoo that ye’ve surely seen by now. And recently, our Irish brothers and our staff. It’s a ward against unworldly senses. I believe the rest of you should have one as well, witches or not.

“The protection apparently didn’t apply to Soni’s blood once it left her body to drip on the ground in her handfasting ceremony. And it’s likely the reason O’Ryan didn’t believe her at first, when she told him she was the one he was looking for. As for the monsters, they were poised to attack everyone. No need to sniff around.” He frowned. “I wondered at the coincidence. Wondered why the Grandfather taught me those tattoo wards.”

Persi and Kitch resumed their seats. I wondered how Wickham would take the news that I was terrified of needles and couldn’t possibly handle a tattoo. I also couldn’t keep my mouth shut. “Then you can protect any Muirs in O’Ryan’s path.”

Wickham shifted uncomfortably on his stool. “Perhaps. Or perhaps, since we have this information, we can discover O’Ryan’s weaknesses before he finds any others.”

“There’s no time for any of that,” Lorraine said. Her sister nodded beside her. “You have to find the Naming Powers before he does. It’s a race, Wickham. Whether or not the Grandfather planned it from the start—”

Wickham muttered to himself. “From the moment he signed his name—”

“You will have to play, brother.”

“And if you lose...”

“Destruction and sorrow for all. Aye, I heard.” Wickham poured another drink, but no one so much as coughed. “We have the advantage.” He saluted us with his glass. “Clearly, O’Ryan doesn’t know he’s looking for *Thirds*. He only knows the Muir witches have the Naming Powers.”



THE STUDY FILLED WITH MURMURED CONVERSATIONS THAT, AS A WHOLE, sounded very much like ice clinking in a glass. Loretta and Lorraine had their heads together. The Irish brothers picked out words in the contract and debated different meanings. Persi helped Wickham assemble an easel for a large whiteboard, though the only communication they exchanged was hostile looks. And the MacKenzies simply sat and stared at their tangled fingers. If I had to guess which two in the room were reading each other’s minds, I would have chosen the latter.

I, of course, was alone with no hand to hold but Kitchens’, and he wasn’t any more interested than I was.

“If we’ve set off the end of the world,” he said, rising from his chair, “then I’ll need another éclair and a whisky. Or two.” He lifted an eyebrow, but I shook my head. My preferred form of puff pastry was round and piled into a pyramid. And I never drank much for fear of spilling my guts about Hank.

There were still many questions, and I couldn’t help but think that my favorite professor might know the answers to a lot of them. Hell, he might even know what O’Ryan’s weaknesses were, and if he was, in fact, this character they called Ambition.

It seemed like the purple-eyed fairy knew all about things witches wouldn't understand. Would knowledge of O'Ryan peg Griffon as one of the Fae?

I groaned quietly, frustrated that there was a handsome, kind, and loveable man out there who wanted to be with me—at least until he knew I was broken—trusting him was forbidden.

Someone much larger than Kitch plonked down in the chair beside me. A knee covered with blue tartan nudged mine and I looked up into Urban's worried face.

“Large or small?”

I shook my head. “Large or small what?”

“This problem ye're mulling. Life or death, business? Or just...a wee man?”

I laughed. “Maybe to you he might seem wee. But you and he could probably share a wardrobe.”

“Heaven forefend! A Welshman in my kilt?” He made a face and I laughed.

“He's Irish, originally. So...the chances of him being the enemy have gone up a little.”

“Auch, dinnae believe it. Wales is thick with them as well. Cannae swing a dead cat in the British Isles and not knock a fairy on his arse.” He nudged me again. “Ye're keen on him then? This professor?”

“I am.”

“And ye think this tiny thing is enough to stop ye?”

“Tiny thing? You mean the little problem of him possibly being the enemy?”

He gestured to The Covenant projected on the wall. “Considering the grand war to come, having a friend on the other side might prove helpful.”

“War?”

“Aye. Conflicts like this always tend to end that way.”

I remembered he’d fought and died in a big war already. And considering, he seemed nonchalant about doing so again.

“Ye see that woman over there,” he said, pointing slyly at his wife sitting six feet away and listening to every word.

“The pretty one?”

“Isn’t she just?” I’d never heard him sound wistful before. “Aye, the pretty one. I’ll tell ye, after knowing that woman a day—a day, mind—I was willing to do anything for her. Even fight O’Ryan’s beasties, and I’ll be honest, they’re much more frightening than Kitchen’s drawing. The point is, ye never ken. One of these days, yer professor might be willing to do anything for you. And if that happens, well, God help Wickham if he tries to keep ye apart.”

He grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me over, then pressed a kiss on the top of my head before returning to his wife. Everly seemed surprised at what he’d done, and she turned away from him to blink back tears.

I didn’t understand. Two men had just talked about the end of the world. I’d heard the same translation they had, and I hadn’t seen it that way. If O’Ryan collects all the Fae King’s powers, it only means he’ll be in charge. And if we could stop him from getting just one of the seven, that wouldn’t happen.

The only people for which the covenant spelled doom was the Denoy, whoever they were. And if that contract was as old

as I thought it was, they'd already been eliminated. But if not, I realized we'd probably end up hunting them too...



PERSI AND KITCH RETURNED TO THE ROOM LOOKING A little...flushed. I hadn't noticed them leave. When they took their seats, they were both careful not to look at each other.

Loretta seemed to be watching as closely as I was. She covered her mouth and said something to Lorraine, who then leaned closer to the camera, but it was unclear where she was looking.

Wickham cleared his throat and tapped a lidded marker on the board. "Lots to keep track of. We'll list our imperatives here, then decide their priorities. Everyone chime in. No standin' on ceremony."

"Well," said Brian, "it seems we must discover who Moire is and what she saw. Was it she who did the naming? Were the Naming Powers hers and then given to the king? Or were they always parts of his power, his crown, as it were."

Wickham wrote *Moire/Sight/Naming/Powers*.

Next line, *7 Naming Powers what are they?* Then he crossed out 7 and wrote 8.

Locate Thirds.

Loretta raised her hand. "We need to know more about Hank, dear."

Wickham nodded and wrote *Cloch Realta/Power?/Uncast*. If they found out Hank's function, it wasn't going to come from me.

Kitch spoke next. “I’d like to know how old The Covenant is. Then we’ll know how old the Grandfather was. Might be helpful to know, is all I’m sayin’.”

Everly asked who the Denoy were.

Urban made a noise. “And I would like to ken who Griffon Carew is. Can he be trusted?”

Wickham wrote *Year of Contract*, *Denoy*, *Carew*, then *Separate Twins*, each on their own line. Then he drew a line through the latter, letting us know he’d already taken care of matters.

“What if...” I stopped, wondering if I should ask this question in front of everyone or if I should wait and ask Wickham in private.

“Go on, Lennon,” he said.

“What if a certain professor who teaches Fae studies at a prestigious college might know the answers to all of them?”

“Same problem we had at Trinity. We’d be revealing ourselves—”

“To whom? O’Ryan? What if all fairies aren’t in cahoots with him? What if we...didn’t let Griffon get away until we knew for sure?”

“Capture him? Like the purple fairy did to you?”

I sighed. “It was just a thought.”

“Jeez, Lennon,” Kitch said dramatically. “If you want to tie up your boyfriend, we don’t need to get involved.”



BY CONSENSUS, *LOCATE THIRDS* WAS DESIGNATED OUR FIRST priority. The other concerns just hung there on the whiteboard, waiting for their turn. With so many of us searching we were bound to cross a few things off our list as we went along.

Wickham left to go visit his niece, Soni. If she was no longer a witch, I thought it might be kinder *not* to tell her she was partly responsible for breaking a contract between Fae and Man. But then I realized I wouldn't like being left in the dark.

The rest of us googled, we ate, we skimmed the books Brian and Flann had brought from home and a few they'd been allowed to check out of the Bod. After a long discussion, with Wickham joining us at the end, it was deemed safe for me to ask Griffon two questions only, which were essentially the same question in two ways.

How old is the Covenant? And has anyone carbon-dated it?

We hauled the mess to the kitchen, signaling the end of our meeting for the day. Left with an open evening, I regretted not making plans to see Griffon, but my chaperones were worn out.

Excitement takes a lot out of a body.

BUSTED

I bundled up and went for a walk. Unlike Edinburgh, I could get away from the house without leaving the property. I just walked along the outer wall for a while. Bright green grass was winning the battle for space against the dead yellow blades that hadn't survived the winter. Here and there, patches of daffodils were proving they had.

It was nice to be alone for a change. Out in the fresh air. Hearing my own breathing, my own footsteps, and no one else's.

I had been both disappointed and relieved when The Covenant had no mention of *cloch realtas*. I would have liked to know my purpose in Wickham's scheme of things, but it was a relief Hank's secrets hadn't been revealed, and nicer still to hear that I wasn't really necessary. Maybe my usefulness was over.

And maybe I had saved a life or two with my whining. Maybe Meral and Reem might have been the next victims along the Ninth Meridian East.

I thought back to that version of me in an ugly orange dress and barely recognized myself. If I met Andy Weaver in a dark parking lot now, I would fight first, ask questions later. And I didn't know any moves yet.

Of course, I still felt an irrational need to refill coffee cups, but that was fading.

Wickham had changed a little too. In Ireland, he'd been adamant that he would never take the job of Grandfather. I wondered if him playing the Grandfather card was the same thing as accepting the gig, or if he was just taking the first bite out of that elephant.

The independence I had once waved like a flag meant nothing to me now. Even when all this was over, if we did thwart O'Ryan and avoid the war Urban saw coming, I didn't want to go back to being alone. If I did, there would be no one I could tell my fantastical stories to. Like meeting enchanted pages in the restricted area of the Trinity College Library...

Even now, I wished I had taken one of them with me, to carry around Oxford to see if it could ferret out answers there.

I patted Hank, hanging around my waist. "Too bad you can't do that. I'd ask you if Griffon is Fae."



THE NEXT DAY I WORE MY FAVORITE ALEXANDER MCQUEEN slacks, a gray turtleneck, and the loosely woven cardigan that hung open to my navel. Since my little knife would set off the metal detectors, I silenced my phone and slipped it through the slit inside my pocket, then strapped it into the little holster instead. As far as Griffon knew, I didn't have one, and for the time being, I had to keep it that way.

I put on the olive leaf jewelry along with the red *fleur de lis* necklace to remind me of the red underwear hidden beneath it all. At the last second, I decided to take Hank and slipped the money belt under the waist of my pants.

I was anxious to meet up with Griffon, and thankfully, the Irish lads kept up as I hurried to the quad. Kitch lagged behind, in no hurry to start his boring day of guarding people while they read.

Instead of waiting for me at our favorite spot on the second floor, however, Griffon stood in a small crowd of people just beyond the check in desk. He looked intense, and when he saw me, he closed his eyes and cursed.

That's when I noticed the police officers pouring toward the door. But they weren't headed outside, they were headed for us. They surrounded me, Brian, and Flann and ordered us to our knees. I didn't look back. If they hadn't noticed Kitch, I wasn't going to draw attention to him.

My heart thudded in my bones like a bass drum. I'd never been arrested before. And without a passport, I was in trouble. But they couldn't know about that...

While my wrists were strapped together, I swung my hair to the side and looked for Griffon. The tormented look on his face told me he was heartbroken *for* me, not *by* me. I tried to stall when an officer helped me to my feet. "What's going on?"

Griffon edged to the front of the crowd. "The Covenant has been stolen. And dozens of books and documents, all on the Fae."

And we'd been there for a month, hoarding them.

"Give me your phone," he shouted. "I'll call Wickham."

I couldn't do that. My photos included tight shots of four enchanted pages I shouldn't have been able to access. If he was Fae, he might just recognize them. And now was not the time to test him.

I didn't have to deny him, though. The police took away my bag, and he'd assume it was inside.

"Find Kitch," I said, as they rushed me toward the door. "Find him fast!" *Before the police did.* Wickham and the others might walk into a trap too, if they weren't warned, and Kitch was the only one who could do that.

I just hoped the local bobbies wouldn't know an enchanted bookmark from a hole in the ground.



FOUR POLICE CARS WAITED. THEY PUT BRIAN, FLANN, AND ME in separate cars. I guessed the fourth was intended for Kitch or whomever escorted us to the library that day. If they knew there were always four of us, had they been watching? Or had they just reviewed the footage of us coming and going?

I cursed myself for not paying closer attention to closed circuit cameras.

They would have a record of who was checking out Fae research. And there had been a camera in the Faculty Theology Library. They would know we'd seen the contract and would know the general area of where it was stored.

With my hands behind me, I was helped into the back seat of the police car. Out the window, I looked for the brothers and saw Brian in the car beside me. He winked and smiled, so I knew he wasn't traumatized. I couldn't say the same for me.

When the officers looked through my bag, they wouldn't find a used airline ticket or a passport, and they'd want to know just how Lennon Todd from Wyoming got into their perfectly proper country.

What could I possibly say? A witch transported me in the blink of an eye? I was kidnapped and forced to come play student and study fairies at the Bod?

The safest plan was to say nothing at all.

I bounced along on the barely cushioned seat and wished my hands were free so I could cover my ears. The earsplitting sirens just went on and on and on.

“How can you stand it?”

The female officer in the passenger seat turned slightly. “Be there shortly.”

The driver scoffed. “Why ye givin’ comfort to a thief, then?”

The woman scowled. “She’s bein’ polite. So I’ll be polite, got it?” She shot me a smile before turning her back again.

Allies. Allies were good.



THE ST. ALDATES POLICE STATION MIGHT HAVE BEEN FIVE minutes away, but by the time we arrived and the sirens ceased, they were inscribed on my brain and left on repeat. I could barely hear what was going on around me.

The same woman helped me from the car. I thanked her, then thanked her again when she swung my coat over my shoulders. The wind was blowing just enough to remind me that England was a hundred times as humid as Southern Idaho. As soon as I was inside, though, the coat came off again. Someone took it and my bag away as others ushered me through offices and into an interrogation room.

An officer told me where to sit and rewarded my compliance by cutting the ties off my hands. The female officer was back again. This time with a yellow envelope and a large plastic bag that held my purse. “All jewelry or other valuables in the bag. We’ll add the inventory and seal it. When you’re allowed to leave, you’ll have them all back, along with your coat, of course.”

All valuables. Shit! I had Hank on me!

Please, God, don't let them take it!

I nodded, my entire body shaking like it was on vibrate. My hands were so cold the ring came off easily, as did the cuff bracelet. The earrings took a little more time, and I couldn’t get a hold of the clasp on my necklace. “I’m sorry,” I said, my voice trembling just as badly as the rest of me. “Just give me a minute.”

She was patient. I finally caught the clasp with the edge of my fingernail and opened it.

“Is that all? Nothing in your pockets?”

I shook my head. If they found out I was lying, I’d deal with it then. If they booked me, though, they’d definitely search me. I blushed when I remembered my unfortunate choice of underwear...

She started writing down the items. I helpfully supplied the exact name of each piece, stalling for more time. After I mentioned Tiffany’s, she wrote carefully, while the other officer snorted from behind me. Then each piece was added to the envelope, which was added to the large one.

“Right then.” She put the inventory list into the sack, sealed it, then gave me a pen so I could sign across the seal. She signed her name below mine.

“Hands out,” the other one barked, then handcuffed me to a metal rod in the center of the table, which was also metal and very cold, despite my long gray sleeves. I was then left alone.

Wickham wouldn't be popping in to save me. He couldn't even pop in to save Hank since he wouldn't know where I was or the layout of the room.

“Lennon, don't be alarmed,” a voice said clearly in my head. *“This is Brian. We need to get our stories straight...”*

THE FELLOW IN THE PICTURE

The great thing about a stainless-steel table is that the metal can be warmed by body heat. The sad thing about it is any little shift lets it grow cold again.

I had just found a comfortable position with my head on my arms when the door opened, and I was forced to abandon the little strip of warmth I'd created.

The two officers reentered the room, stepped to either side of the door, and a third person stepped through. Tall, disturbingly handsome, with golden blond hair and sparkling green eyes. His suit was a dozen shades darker, but the same color pallet, and a faint checked pattern, like a watermark, came and went as he moved. His scarf of cream silk wasn't made for warmth.

I got the impression he smiled just to show off his dimples.

I didn't mind smiling back. "Please tell me you're my lawyer."

He laughed, looked at the officers, and nodded his permission for them to laugh too. The man did. The woman did not.

"This is Special Inspector O'Ryan," she said. "Scotland Yard."

I ordered my heart to stay where it was and joked, “Aren’t we a long way from Scotland?”

“Ah,” he said. “I do love that Yankee sense of humor.” He jerked his head toward the door, a silent order for the officers to leave.

“Aren’t I supposed to have a woman officer with me, just in case?”

“Not here, you’re not.” His tight, perfect curls shook from side to side, but I wasn’t sure his head had moved. “Besides, this officer can watch from the next room.” He nodded more emphatically at the door and the woman finally left. Once the door closed completely, he whispered. “Of course, they won’t be able to hear anything we say. But you’ll be perfectly safe, even though you’re trapped there.”

He glanced at the handcuffs and his bright green eyes flashed. If I had any doubts that this was the Big Bad Fairy Wickham was after, those doubts were gone. But I had to play dumb.

“That was cool,” I said. “Are those contacts?”

He laughed again, strolled around the table, and gently sniffed the air, like he was following a trail of perfume. This was it. This was the test to see if a henna tattoo would work against the Fae. Maybe I should have asked Wickham to tattoo the plastic around Hank.

For the first time in my life, I wish I’d sucked it up and accepted the real version!

I couldn’t go on ignoring what the fairy was doing, so I asked, “Is there a fire somewhere?”

He kept on sniffing, coming nearer and nearer. He sniffed at my hair, my shoulder above the spot where my money belt

sat, then moved to my other side. I prayed rocks had no smell and forced myself to breathe steadily through it all. This was a Fae version of a lie detector test, and if I failed to pass it, I was dead.

“Where is it?” His voice snaked over my shoulder and sent chills down my neck.

“My gosh, you even smell good.” *Breathe. Breathe.*
“Where is what?”

“The Covenant, of course.”

I shook my head. “I *do* know what you’re talking about, but I don’t have it. I got to see it yesterday, so why would I steal it?”

He perched on the corner of the table and leaned toward me. “Why indeed?” His hair swayed again. “Perhaps you have something more interesting to confess.”

“I wish. So far, my European vacation has been...mild.”

He just stared and blinked for a minute, like he was hoping that pretty face might somehow break me. When it didn’t, he got off the table and sat in the chair, facing me. I had the immediate impression he belonged on something...bigger.

“Maybe you should let me go before I bore you to death.”

“I’m happy to negotiate. If you answer my questions truthfully, I can see you walking freely out the door.”

Never trust a fairy.

“I don’t suppose I can get that in writing?”

He smirked and managed to look charming doing it. “I’m afraid not.” He produced a folder out of the folds of his beautiful suitcoat, opened it, and tossed a picture toward me.

Since my hands were otherwise occupied, he turned it right side up so I could take a good look.

It was the check-in desk at the Trinity College Library. The Muir twins, then Wickham, then me, though Wickham's head was turned away and I couldn't see his features.

"Why is it you and those brothers seem to be in the wrong place at almost the wrong time?" He tapped on Wickham's picture. "And this fellow...tell me all about him."

"Almost the wrong time? What does that mean?"

We had a staring contest. Again, I won and he blinked. "You and your friends were at Trinity College just before a member of their staff disappeared."

"Really?"

"And here you are again, yesterday, with The Covenant, just before *it* disappeared. You see how guilty you look? It would be a simple thing to build a case against you and your friends...should I choose to remove you from the board."

I laughed. "Remove us from what board? Are we playing chess?"

"Oh, yes. And this game started long before you became a pawn." He tapped on Wickham's form leaning over the document, his face obscured yet again. Then the fairy pulled out another picture of myself and Griffon in the Bod. Kitchens and the brothers were at a table in the background. It was the first time I'd met Griffon, when he'd carried my books downstairs for me.

"Here he is again," the fairy said, mistaking Kitch for Wickham. Both wore black. In both the pictures of Wickham, there wasn't much difference between Kitch's shorter hair and Wickham's, with his long hair tied behind his head. If these

were the only pictures O’Ryan had, it was no wonder he had the two men mixed up.

I couldn’t be that lucky.

“Quite entertaining,” he said, “watching the wheels turn. But it’s time now to make a move.” His smooth voice slid over me again, wrapping around me like a warm scarf—or a python.

I lifted my shoulders to shake off the feeling. “Sorry. No move to make. I’m just a simple gal from the States. I don’t know anything about playing chess.”

His smile broadened, his dimples deepened, as if I’d played right into his hands. “*Aw shucks* won’t work with me, Lennon. Tell me where I can find your other friend so I can speak to him directly. Just a pleasant conversation.”

“I promise you, he didn’t steal *The Covenant* either. And he’s not a friend, he’s my half-brother. The two men they brought in with me are his Irish great-uncles. This is their idea of showing us Europe.”

He reached to the middle of the table and ran his fingers along my wrists. “Tell me what they’re looking for, love. Lines are being drawn, even as we speak, and I promise you life will be much more pleasant on my side.”

“Look. I really, honestly, don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His blink was slow, seductive, as he drew an imaginary line toward my elbow. “You don’t have to be a pawn, you know. By my side, you could be a queen.”

I rolled my eyes. “Once a pawn, always a pawn?”

He chuckled, finally pulled his hands away, and dropped the seductive tone altogether. “You really don’t know how to play chess, do you?”

“No. But I can pour a mean cup of coffee.”

His laughter wasn’t an act, and he gave me a genuine smile that might have weakened my knees had I been standing. He stuck the pictures back into his file, then pulled out another. It was a shot of Griffon Carew, sitting at the table, scowling at *The Covenant*. Only the men and I hadn’t arrived yet.

“Professor Carew vouched for you and your friends. Interesting...fellow.” He waited for my reaction, then seemed pleased by what he saw. If I blushed, I couldn’t tell. “What do you know about him?”

“Not much. I’ve only seen him a few times. Some of his students told us about *The Covenant* and said we’d need his help to see it. They kind of bullied him into it.” I wasn’t going to give him an excuse to arrest my favorite professor.

O’Ryan studied me for another minute, then got to his feet. “Time to bargain. I won’t charge you or your friends right now if you promise you’ll keep an eye out, and an ear out, for that matter, for whatever your friends learn about Fae matters. And the next time we meet...*and we will*...you’ll gladly tell me everything.” He chewed his pretty lips for a second. “I realize it’s unfair to expect your brother and his uncles to discover much—what with all the Fae lore missing from the libraries—but if they got in to see *The Covenant*, they’re resourceful.”

I laughed. “You’re asking me to be a spy?”

His hair shook back and forth. “I’m not asking...love. Think on it.”

After he stepped out of the room, the tension eased, like someone had removed a sizzling pan from a hot stove. After giving my heart permission to go nuts if it needed to, my next instinct was to pray and thank God I wouldn't be booked into jail. My secrets and my underwear were safe. And as I waited for someone to remember I was handcuffed to a table, I stared at my reflection in the mirror and wondered...just what made me look like spy material?

PAPA PAPARAZZI

In England, one isn't assigned a lawyer, but a solicitor. Our solicitor looked like a rat, with a pointy nose and a mustache of a few long dark hairs. The minute he walked in, I started craving ratatouille.

"Brooks," he said, nodded, but remained standing. "Mr. Muir sent me."

"That inspector might not be charging me!"

"Indeed, he has decided not to do so." He straightened his tie, tried and failed to summon a smile, then shook his head. "Luckily, there have been similar burglaries in other cities. I'm sure he's very busy."

Inside, I was jumping up and down, shouting, *No cavity searches! No cavity searches!* But if I did it for real, Brooks might run away, and I needed him.

"The man insinuated there may be charges to come, so I've promised you'll surrender to him if he asks for you. For now, you're all free to go." He stepped back and knocked on the door.

The two officers returned. The male unlocked my handcuffs and managed to look put out about it. The woman laid the clear bag with my belongings on the table, along with

my coat. “If you’ll just break the seal and check the contents, please. Then you can sign that everything was in order. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

The male officer snorted, then stalked out.

“I was careful not to clank them about,” she said, as I pulled out the envelope with my jewelry. “Lovely things. I reckon my man’s going to need to step up his game.”

I looked through my purse. Nothing missing. Hank and my phone were where they needed to be. I really had nothing to complain about, but I felt a serious cry coming on.



“THE PRESS IS OUT FRONT,” BROOKS EXPLAINED AS HE LED US out the back of the building. “Not every day there’s a heist at the Bodleian.”

He put us in a big black Bentley with darkened windows, then drove us out of town. My fellow criminals looked none the worse for wear. Brian, who sat on my left, gave me a friendly nudge. “Are ye all right?”

“Probably. Eventually. Yes.” For a few minutes, I savored the heat coming from both sides. “I take it you met the same inspector from Scotland Yard?”

“Wheesht.” Flann put a finger to his lips. “Not until we’re...home.”

We searched my coat for tracking devices, and I took out my wallet and ditched my purse, to be safe. I put my jewelry back on only after the brothers had given it a good once-over, despite the fact that the seal on the property bag hadn’t been tampered with.

We changed cars three times, ending up in London before Wickham joined the party. From there, he let our nervous solicitor go, then popped us to three other cities before we finally found ourselves in *Engineering II*, the second-floor room at Hope House devoid of most furniture and now designated for popping home.

I was disoriented and out of breath.

Everly jumped up from the corner chair and hurried to me, inspecting me from head to toe. “You all right?”

I nodded to keep from crying out loud.

She saw my tears but ignored them. “Come on. Everyone’s in the dining room. Alwyn’s fixed a welcome home dinner. Can’t disappoint him.”

“What would he have done if we hadn’t been released?”

She shrugged. “He would have forced Wickham to pop you out of jail...at least long enough to eat.”

I resisted when she tried to lead me out the door. “I need to talk to Wickham for a sec, then I’ll be down.”

Flann offered Everly his arm. Brian followed them out and closed the door, leaving Wickham and me alone.

“How am I going to let Griffon know I’m out and I’m okay?”

“Already done. I had Brooks call him.”

“I need to see him. He’ll be upset—”

“We’ll figure something out. Just not the now. We dinnae ken who is watchin’—”

“O’Ryan. O’Ryan is watching.”

Which meant I wouldn’t be seeing Griffon anytime soon.



THE BROTHERS WERE HAPPY TO PLAY THE PART OF CONQUERING heroes, though Alwyn was the true star considering the meal he prepared. I ate the bare minimum, my stomach churning with the emotions of the day, and I had a little piece of the cake topped with fondant handcuffs. But I doubted the crew would be enjoying themselves if they knew the enemy was behind us getting arrested—Wickham insisted we share that detail after supper. Our “no business at the table” rule was getting ridiculous.

However, the longer I watched Wickham, lost in thought at the end of the table, the more I believed he needed time to digest the news himself.

Eventually, the team paraded down to the study. After the past few days, calling it the war room seemed too...prophetic. I'd been willing to turn my life upside down because I'd had no legitimate reason to refuse Wickham. But I sometimes wished I was back in Idaho, serving pancakes and avoiding the Weavers, oblivious to the possibility of a coming war between Man and Fae. I wasn't looking forward to fighting monsters and I certainly wasn't prepared to play chess with a fairy so ancient he was mentioned in The Covenant.

Persi had the TV on but clicked it off when she saw me. “Looks like you won't have to ask your professor after all.”

“Ask him what?”

“How old The Covenant is. It's on the news. Oldest document in the world stolen from The Bod. Carbon dating and all. Fifteen thousand years. Written on...*human* skin. I wonder if Carew knew that.”

I was suddenly desperate to wash my hands and did. When I returned to the study, Brian, Flann, and I debriefed everyone on the events at the precinct. O’Ryan had apparently given the same routine to both brothers, trying to get them to slip up and give something away. It seriously concerned him that we’d been looking at Fae lore.

“I think O’Ryan took The Covenant,” I said. “And the books. And he’s been removing material from libraries everywhere, trying to keep us—to keep anyone—from figuring out what he’s after.”

“I agree.” Wickham rubbed his chin with two fingers, frowning. “I think our access to The Covenant set off an alarm, or maybe alarmed some fairy assigned to watch over it. O’Ryan should have thought to take such precautions on his own. I’m just glad we got to see it before that could happen.”

“We do have plenty to work with,” Urban said, pointing to our giant list. “So what if the libraries have nothin’ more for us? We’ve an entire network of witches. Surely, their collected wisdom can yield somethin’.”

Wickham lowered his brow. “Ye’re thinkin’ of my sisters.”

“I am. And that village. The *Seanathair* might be gone, but there are surely elders left.”

Wickham nodded. “Aye. We’ll reverse engineer this. Start at the source. I’ll go to Muirsglen tomorrow. And I dinnae like the idea of leavin’ Lennon with O’Ryan about, so I’ll take her with me.”

“No you won’t.” It was time to put my big-girl foot down. “I’m not going anywhere until I see Griffon.”



IT WAS ALL STUPIDLY COMPLICATED, BUT I COULDN'T ARGUE with the reason for it.

Wickham contacted Brooks who then contacted Griffon. We met the next morning at the little café where he'd taken me—and Wickham—on our first date. I was nervous being on campus again, with news crews stalking the place. So, against Everly's objections, I wore jeans and a sweatshirt as a half-hearted disguise, with the hood over my hair. Urban insisted on coming along. He and Wickham promised not to hover.

Griffon was there, seated at the same table at the back. He wore more casual layers than usual, probably to keep students from instantly pegging him as a professor. He stood when we entered. My guards took a table beside the door and acknowledged the professor with a quick nod before turning their backs and angling themselves to watch out the windows.

I pulled off my hood and stalled with five feet between us, suddenly awkward. But Griffon shook his head and in two steps, pulled me into his arms and lifted me off the floor while he squeezed me tight.

"I'm sorry I made such a fuss," I said, when I was earthbound again.

He cut me off with a kiss. A quick one. But it was enough to know he'd wanted it as much as I had. He released me and stepped back to look me over. "You seem to have weathered your ordeal. Or have you donned a brave face on my account?" No mention of the way I was dressed.

I shook my head and smiled. "I'm all right now...now that I'm with you." Inwardly I groaned. I'd never said such cheesy

things before Griffon.

“Ditto,” he said, and moved a chair close to his before we sat. There was already a plate of pastries on the table, and the waiter brought me a cup of coffee. “So, you must have convinced the police you had nothing to do with the robberies.”

I nodded. “That fff...” I nearly said fairy!

He smirked. “Feekin’ might be the word you’re looking for.”

“Yes. That feekin’ inspector tried to get a confession out of me, but there was nothing to confess. He said you’d vouched for us, so thank you.”

“He threatened to arrest me as well if I tried to warn you away. But I certainly would have if I’d had a phone number. And for once, I hoped you wouldn’t come.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“No more apologies. We’ll just be grateful your *dad* let you out of the house.”

I picked at a chocolate croissant while we sat in comfortable silence, and I pretended we were alone. I asked where he lived and what it was like, and he told me about the woman who lives above him and plays the cello, that the sound turns his ceiling into a speaker but he doesn’t mind. He pretends she’s playing just for him.

“Lucky for me, she’s immensely talented.”

“Sounds lovely,” I said. “I’m glad she doesn’t play the trumpet.”

He smiled and toyed with his coffee cup. He was either distracted or building up courage to tell me our Dating with

Chaperones thing wasn't going to work for him. I forced myself to breathe while I waited to see which it was.

Finally, he looked me in the eye again. "So...one of these days...I am determined to make you breakfast." He paused to be sure I knew what he meant. I knew what he meant. "What is your favorite? I'll practice making it in the meantime."

So he wasn't breaking it off!

"Oh, I like everything."

He cocked his lovely head. "That's not an answer."

"All right. I...I like pancakes. Fluffy, *tasty*...and too big to fit in your pocket."

"Pancakes in pockets? There has to be a story to that."

I considered lying for only a second, then told him how I got stuck in Idaho, got stuck with a pile of debt from Neal using my social security number, and how I scraped to get those bills paid down. I didn't mention Wickham bailing me out. I still felt like I'd cheated and *was* cheated of the chance to completely dig myself out on my own.

Then I told him about Charlotte, my brave, stubborn friend, and how resourceful we'd been finding insulation for her little shack. I didn't tell him how Wickham had rescued her, but I did end with the fact that she was now safe and cared for, in a home.

"She's probably gained three sizes already."

Griffon was watching me, so I smiled and shook off the old memories. "Lennon."

Oh my gosh. He had that horrible pity-tone to his voice, like maybe he'd never see me the same way again. In just a

few minutes, I'd totally ruined our relationship. I should have never worn the hoodie!

My smile was gone. "Please don't. I was just explaining why I like big pancakes, that's all. I shared too much. Now you think I'm some...welfare case."

He closed his eyes.

"See? You can't even look at me now. I've seen that reaction before." I scooted my chair back, prepared to go. "Just...just please, don't remember me that w—"

He lunged for me, stood and lifted me at the same time. Those big arms wrapped around me, cut off my air, refused to let me go. He said nothing, just held me, shook me once—was he just sad for the lonely, starving girl I hardly remembered anymore?

Suddenly, I was sad for her too. For the first time since I'd left Idaho behind, I wept for her.

For me.

I couldn't say how long we stood there like that. If we made other customers uncomfortable, I wouldn't know. And I didn't care. Thankfully, we were allowed our little bubble and I didn't hear any complaints or rude noises from the peanut gallery by the door.

Eventually, I pushed a little and he let me go. I needed more air than I was getting. Otherwise, we might have been there until the owners kicked us out.

I opened my mouth to say something clever, but Griffon's fingers pressed against my lips.

"Don't," he said. "Don't imagine what I'm thinking. You already know how I'm feeling. And today, that needs to be

enough.” He held his right hand against my neck, then bent to kiss my temple. “I need to speak with Wickham for a moment.”

I grabbed at him. “Don’t—”

He shushed me with a quick shake of his head. I sat down again, and watched, horrified, while Griffon and Wickham stepped outside to discuss me, like some woman who needs to be managed by men who know what’s best for me.

Had anyone else done that, I would have been insulted.

Urban caught my gaze and held it. He swallowed hard, then nodded. He was giving his official opinion of my professor. That was all it took to send me over the edge again. But I bit my lips together and fought the tears stinging the backs of my eyes, then let the pastry counter distract me so I could keep it together.

Griffon came back alone. Wickham waited outside the windows. Urban joined him.

“Time to say goodbye, love.”

I got to my feet, and he pretended to be cheerful while holding out my leather jacket. He lifted my hair and the hood over the back and turned me to face him. The fake smile wasn’t working, and he dropped it.

I had to be cheerful for both of us. “So, see you later.”

“Yes. You will. I made Wickham promise not to take you away from me.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said you’ll be staying...for now.” He looked into my eyes, then winked. “We’ll just have to work on him, that’s all.”

“I can live with that.”

“So can I. For now. I just worry...”

“About?”

“Who’s going to eat all those practice pancakes in the meantime?”

“Give them to the woman upstairs. They’ll keep her hands busy.”

I TOLD YOU THAT TO TELL YOU THIS

Griffon left me at the café without a last kiss. I think he did it on purpose, so I'd be more eager for the next time.

Because of the news crews, we hadn't bothered with a car and used Lover's Lane Alley instead. We went back there to pop home again, and if anyone followed us, I didn't really care.

Just after noon, Wickham ordered everyone to remain on the estate while he and I were gone, for his own peace of mind. "The crime at the Bod hasn't been solved and might never be if we're right about O'Ryan taking it all. I would move us all back to Edinburgh, but I don't want to lose any time, and I don't want some among us to become fugitives, if the police expect you to remain in Oxford for a while."

I followed him to the living room where he handed me an umbrella and told me to open it.

"I thought Scots were superstitious," I said, but opened it anyway.

He grinned with only one side of his mouth. "*I* am what superstitions are about, love."

We popped out of the bright living room into a gloomy alley in the middle of a rainstorm. It smelled perfectly divine.

“Welcome to Inverness,” he said, then stepped close. Together we hurried to the end of the lane and up the street to a storage facility. He produced a key that unlocked a large unit and lifted the door. Inside, there was a beat up old pickup truck with blue paint.

For a man to whom money had no meaning, I would have expected something...newer.

Once we were inside, he turned the engine over and patted the dashboard. “Like coming home.”

The only part of Scotland I’d seen thus far had been the city of Edinburgh. Now, out in the country, I started to understand what all the fuss was about. Everywhere I looked was covered with greenery. Everything lush and healthy and alive—and dripping. Yellow daffodils swayed together in clusters along the road. Fields full of sheep and lambs, busy living their lives, ignored us as we passed.

I hoped Urban wasn’t right about war coming. But if he was, I hoped it wouldn’t come here...

“Have ye any idea how old I am?”

I took a deep breath and brought my attention back inside the truck. “No idea. Thirty? Thirty-five?” I hadn’t wanted to know if I was older than him.

“I was born in 1935.”

I did the math, then laughed. “You’re eighty-eight?” In comparison to everything I’d been through, believing him didn’t require much of a stretch. “I can’t imagine how old your sisters are. I thought maybe seventy.”

“Over a hundred now.”

“Wow.”

“We grew up in Muirsglen. Although our parents had been born of witches, they couldn’t quite handle my brother and me, so they left us to our sisters and never came back. I don’t blame them. We were...trouble.

“I met my wife when I was nineteen. She came from Wyoming to stay with family. We fell in love immediately. But Walter fell for her too, and when she chose me, he...didn’t take it well. To make a long story short, he lured me into an enchanted tunnel and sealed me inside. They searched the tunnel but couldn’t find me. Eventually, Ivy went home...and had our daughter alone.

“Sixty years later, Walter came back and tried to extract my power from the tunnel. In point of fact, if anyone were to be given the nickname of Ambition, it would have been him. But to Walter’s surprise, I’d grown more powerful than he could have ever imagined. When he opened that tunnel, I escaped, and he fled. Faked his death, which was quite a trick, considering the connection between us. Six years ago, he came back, looking for his granddaughter, Soni. She was a *Third*, so her power was substantial—”

“And she gave him her power, which then broke the contract, right?”

“Correct. Though she was compelled to do it. We went to the Grandfather, who helped us make the transfer. He never hinted at the consequences, and I’m sure he set it all up from the beginning. I just can’t imagine why.”

“So...when you escaped the tunnel, you found Ivy again?”

“I did. She was on death’s door. Cancer. Alone in a hospital. Because of what happened to me and the powers I took from the tunnel, I was able to make her young again... and adjust her memory. We literally started over, at the beginning, in our twenties.”

“What about your daughter?”

“By then, she’d gotten along in years herself, had no contact with her mother. I saw no need to complicate matters there. The life Ivy had led was not a happy one. I am determined to make up for that with her current one.” He shrugged. “I put a dead woman in Ivy’s place, at the hospital. No one was the wiser.” He stared at the road for a bit. “In any case, I told you that to tell you something else...”

“What’s that?”

“Before we get to Muirsglen, I want you to understand the source of my powers. It didn’t come from the Grandfather. It came from that tunnel. And when I tell you where the tunnel came from, maybe you’ll understand why I am not...a fan...of the Grandfather, or the Muir witches of the past. It does make it a little harder to care about the current ones. My family excluded, of course.”

“Do I want to know?”

“I need you to know. I want you on your guard when we get there.”

I inhaled deeply and braced myself. “Okay. Tell me.”



“AT THE END OF THE NINTH CENTURY, THE WITCHES FOUND themselves relegated to the Black Isle with Picts to the south

and east, Scots to the south and west, and Norse to the north. The tunnel was created between them and Scots to the west—the clan’s great secret. They tended to turn up unexpectedly, which added to their mystique and kept other clans from underestimating them.

“It worked for half a century, until a vicious chieftain to the west tortured that secret out of a man.

“One day the guard posted at the far end of the tunnel came running out to report that an army had gathered outside the entrance, that they planned to take the clan by surprise in the morning and feed them all to the fishes of the firth.

“The chieftain—our Seanathair—gathered every witch in the village and combined their power to curse the tunnel itself. Any man that entered the far end and exited in Muirsglen would lose ten years of age...and the memories of those years. Any man going the opposite path will gain ten years, but not regain his memories.

“That army forgot ten years of training, lost ten years of muscle, wisdom...age. What foe couldn’t be bested as a child? And what better punishment for a fleeing enemy than to age him quickly without benefit of wisdom? Enemies that couldn’t explain what was done to them?

“There was a chant we learned as children. Takes the years, dries the tears, quiets laughter, lulls the fears. They were lambs to the slaughter.”

“That’s...barbaric!”

“Isn’t it? Granted, it did save the clan. But now, knowing the Grandfather who instigated it was the Grandfather I knew, I am certain he could have devised an alternative. Could have sealed that army inside the tunnel and let them die as men.”

“I may be sick.”

“Deep breaths, lass. We’ve arrived at the crux of my story.”

I rolled down the window a little, let the cold air wake me up and remind me I was still alive, that I hadn’t been murdered as a child, emerging into the sun...from the Tunnel from Hell. And I hadn’t been standing there at the exit with young blood dripping off my sword.

“When a hundred witches—and the Grandfather—used their powers to curse that tunnel, their power became part of it. Imagine, even without the help of that old man, all the power caught in those stones, in that soil. Now, imagine a young man, eleven centuries later, sealed inside those same stones, that same soil.”

“You soaked up their power.”

“Aye. The tunnel and I were one. I am, for all intents and purposes, the tunnel itself. The tunnel is *Time*. I...am *Time*.”

“But you can’t read minds.”

“We’ve been through that. Telepathy is a gift of twins. It is more rare than it may seem, considering the company we keep.”

“So you have a little of everyone’s power? You can do what any of those witches can do?”

“Nay. Other than stepping out of *Time* and *Place*, the rest is more of a...boost. The volume of my own power has been —”

“Amplified?”

He nodded.

“It’s why you could pop an entire carload of people, and the car, back to the house?”

“Aye. But I am no God.”

“At least, not yet,” I said, teasing.

“What do ye mean?”

“I mean, if you find all the Naming Powers before O’Ryan does...”

He shook his head. “I have worried what we shall do once they are found. But I have no such ambition. I simply want my family back.” His face paled, fell. He was suddenly hoarse. “My biggest fear is that I have robbed Fate by claiming a second life for Ivy and me...and that Fate will make me pay.”

A THIEF NAMED FINGAL

Getting to Muirsglen seemed fairly straightforward. There were signs for The Black Isle, which was the promontory upon which the village would be found. “I don’t understand how O’Ryan hasn’t heard of this place. If he’s looking for twin witches, wouldn’t he have started here?”

“Nay. The isle has been enchanted since before William conquered England in 1066. The outside world is like vampires. One cannot find it unless one has been invited, or a Muir witch, of course. Except by way of the tunnel. And I sealed that avenue years ago.”

“Why can’t you hide all the Muir witches here until we get rid of O’Ryan?”

“They might all fit back into Scotland, but far too many for this wee isle.”

“If O’Ryan can’t find it, why did you warn all the twins here to separate?”

“Because he is an unknown entity. Never trust the Fae. Never trust that you truly know them.”

I knew he wasn’t just talking about O’Ryan, and I rolled the window down again and let the rush of air drown him out before he could speak Griffon’s name. We still didn’t know he

was Fae. And when we found out he wasn't, I was going to find a very large crow, have Alwyn cook it, then hand feed the whole team.



THE VILLAGE OF MUIRSGLEN WAS LARGER THAN I EXPECTED. Not a village at all, but a small town. I guess my idea of villages began and ended with that French provincial town in *Beauty and the Beast*. Of course, there were plenty of so-called cities in Wyoming and Idaho that weren't half as big, but we never used the term out west.

Village Inn, yeah.

Village People, okay.

Never just a village.

For all the buildings and houses, however, the streets were surprisingly empty. A few pedestrians hurried in the opposite direction when we drove by. A few cars with suspicious, frowning drivers. The place looked deserted, like those early days of the pandemic of 2020.

I stared down a woman getting into her car. "Looks like everyone skipped town."

"Aye. Quiet compared to my last visit. Glad they seemed to have heeded my warnin'. Usually, I see a parade of twins on the promenade."

Promenade? I laughed to myself. It was something an eighty-year-old would say.

"So...where is this tunnel?"

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. “Back against the hill.”

“And where does it come out again?”

“On Ross lands, other side of the mountain. My actual granddaughters...from my earlier life... and their husbands are custodians, ye might say. No one getting’ inside from their end either.”

“Is there a castle or something, where the Grandfather is supposed to live?”

“Just a house. A laird’s house is not always grand. Though now, I see how unbecoming it seems for a man old enough to know the King of the Fae.” He pointed to a pale house covered in dark slats. It looked like it had been transplanted from some Shakespeare play. “There ‘tis.”

The front yard was gravel, like a broad parking lot. The only thing living and green were the box hedges, though they were dark and might have been frozen from the winter. Snow still clung to the roots.

Wickham slowed as we passed. I imagined he saw memories playing out.

The massive front door swung open and two long-haired old women stumbled out and headed for the truck with their arms outstretched. We’d been dropped into the middle of a zombie movie!

Wickham watched them come, like a couple of friendly dogs. But when they got within ten feet, he hit the gas.

My adrenaline pumping, I swung my arm and whacked his shoulder. “Why did you do that? I almost peed my pants!”

He snickered.

I sat forward and caught my breath. “What were they?”

“Just a pair of mortals.”

“Shouldn’t they be separated?”

“I dinnae care what they do.”

“They’re not witches?”

“Not anymore.”

I didn’t like his sudden change in personality, so I changed the subject. “So where to?”

“The Sorenson Witch.”

“Not a Muir?”

“Nay. She’s the woman to whom the Muirs go when the Grandfather is no help. I reckon she’s been busy of late.”

“You talking about you, or the last guy?”

“Both.”

“So...a witch’s witch?”

“Exactly. She’ll turn us in the right direction.”



I LOVED HER IMMEDIATELY.

Of all the witches I’d met to that point, this woman was the first who really embodied my clichéd expectations. She wore lots of drapey, gauzy layers of skirts and scarves, a knee-length vest of fuzzy fuchsia, and a royal blue strip of cloth to keep her curly black hair out of her face. A pair of bifocals stuck on top of her head.

She was shorter than I was, but as soon as she opened her door and saw me, she reached out, pulled me into a powerful hug, and squealed. “We meet at last!”

“Jez,” Wickham said behind me. “Jez!”

She released me and scowled at him. “What?”

“This is not my wife.”

“Oh?” She looked sideways at me. “Well, welcome anyway. Ye give a solid hug.”

“Thank you,” I laughed. “So do you.”

She gave me a genuine smile then. “I like you.”

“I think I like you too.”

“Give me your hand,” she said, though she’d already taken hold of it. Then she rubbed her thumb and knuckle over my palm like she was scrubbing out a spot. She bobbed her brow and the bifocals fell perfectly into place on the end of her nose without her touching them. “Oy, now. Oy...” She threw my hand back at me, then stepped closer, to look into my eyes. “What’s this?”

Wickham grabbed her shoulder and pulled her away. “Please dinnae spook my friend. We haven’t come for yer prognostications.”

She peered into his eyes then. “Are ye verra sure about that?”

“Aye. I am. And if ye’ve taken anything from the lass, give it back.”

She dropped the dramatic flare and stuck her tongue out at him. Then she dug into her skirt and lifted her finger toward

me and turned her head away. My ring with the open heart sat at the end. I hadn't felt a thing.

My mouth fell open. "Oh, you are good!"

She beamed. "Thank you. Hard to get much practice with half the town gone and the other half hidin'." She linked her arm in mine and led me into her house. One wall was completely covered in purple and blue tartan, not so different from the pattern Urban wore. Her couch was cherry red, her carpet green. Through a doorway, I saw her fridge was bubblegum pink.

"Don't ye love it?"

The voice hadn't been hers.

She laughed and sat in an orange chair, leaving the couch to Wickham and me.

"Don't ye love it?" Something stirred in her hair, and I jumped a little. It was a small white bird with yellow on its face, peeking out of the black curls. It turned its head to get a good look at me. "Don't ye love it?"

"I do. I love a pretty bird with a Scottish accent."

"Dinnae mind Fingal," she said, "unless ye value yer earrings." She offered us tea, but Wickham declined. "Then tell me why ye've come. Obviously, ye're only here to visit, else ye would have brought that wife."

"Leave off, Jez. We'll not be movin' in. Ever."

She clicked her tongue. "Pity." Then her eyes widened. "At the house, the Crum sisters would like an audience."

"Nay."

“They’ve got a proposition. Seem to think they have somethin’ ye’ll want.”

“I am quite familiar with their routine. They never have anythin’ I want.”

“Still...”

“Jez. Please. Now that the old man is gone, I need to find others...who have been with us a long time, who will remember things about the *Thirds*, the powerful ones.”

“Like Rowena? The Rowena dolls? I remember them. And I remember there was a *Third* who could raise the tide and swamp the enemy’s ships. My grandmother told me that one. What was her name? What was her name? Oh! Pearl. She lived in a lighthouse, near a lighthouse, and drowned herself? And when her power was passed to the next generation, that woman drowned herself in the same place, and so on. The moral of the story was to not let yerself wallow, to not follow in the steps of wallowers, somethin’ like that.”

“Do you know which lighthouse?”

She shrugged. “On the North Sea. That’s as specific as the auld woman got.”

Sounded like a pretty impressive power, like Soni’s had been, if she’d been able to raise the dead. I had so many questions about Wickham’s niece, but they would have to wait.

“Any others? No rush,” he told the witch. “Take yer time.”

“*Thirds*,” she muttered, over and over again, then she shook her head. “Would ye like me to call ye if I think of another?”

“I’ll check back in a day or two.”

“Ye ken what I think? I think ye should ask the Grandfather yerself.” She laughed and pushed his shoulder. “Dinnae act so surprised, laddie. I ken about yer power of *Time* and *Place*. So why is it ye dinnae go back and ask him to his face?”

Wickham didn't seem happy with her question. “There's no one here? No elders?”

“Most cleared out, rickety bones and all, after yer last visit. Had a nice line at the door with folks wonderin' if it was the End of Times. Those who couldn't be placated lit out fast.”

Lit out fast? Just like a certain fairy with galaxies on her fingernails! And suddenly Urban's fairy war was back on the front burner.

Jez clicked her tongue. “Frightened to face him? After what ye did?”

Wickham's laugh had a nasty edge to it. “If I met him again in the past, I reckon he'd ken nothing of it.” He stood up and she held up her hands.

“Wait, love. Give me another try at her hand, will ye?”

“Jez. Believe me when I say ye dinnae want to look into that future.”

“Aw, now. I'm not so timid as that.”

I held out my hand and she took it, scooted closer, ran her finger along all the lines, then looked at the back of my hand too. I'd never seen anyone do that before. Then she grabbed my head with both hands and stared into my eyes. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Women would kill to have your love life, pet. And for all I can see, yer progeny will go on...forever.”

Fingal popped his head out again. “Don’t ye love it? Don’t ye love it?”

That’s when I knew Jez might be a sweet, loveable pickpocket...but she was full of shit.

FAIRIES UNDER THE BED

Jez Sorenson told us how to find one old woman who hadn't left town, but she warned she might not come to the door. "Sarah would have left town as well, had she the means."

We found her house at the end of a very long driveway that wound through massive budding plants that were twice the size of a van. Anything that large in Idaho was called a tree. Wickham swore it was a rhododendron.

The roof on the small white cottage came all the way down to my shoulders. Wickham bent to knock on the door, then straightened while we waited for someone to answer. Though I hadn't touched a thing, I got an electric shock that buzzed my toes and made me jump backward. The last thing I wanted was to step back on that patch of wet mud again.

Wickham laughed quietly. "That," he said, "was discouragement personified." He bent again and shouted at the door. "Impressive!" He rested his hands on his knees and stayed that way, grinning at the little window.

I counted to twenty before the door swung open with a snap. An old woman in a long white dress, with pinched lips and a scarf over her hair, stood in the opening and made a frightening face that lifted with each blink. As she stared at

Wickham, however, those puckered lips relaxed, the face cleared, and her eyes lit with appreciation.

“Sarah?”

“Aye?”

“I am...Wickham.”

She strained to see around him, puckered her lips at me, but opened the door and stepped back. “My home, sir.” She neither welcomed me nor shut the door in my face, so I stepped inside too.

“A great talent,” he told her. “Are ye just as good with encouragement? For this lass and I could use some today.”

The old woman nodded at her stove where a single iron teapot sat steaming from its spout. “I can try. Not so good with my sister gone now. But for discouragement, there’s no one better.”

“I ken what ye mean. I cannae read a thought now without Walter.”

She snorted as she moved to a side cupboard and reached for teacups. “I remember Walter. That boy needed more discouraging than I could foist on ‘im. Had a talent for spaces. Once made this place feel like a palace. Though, after the spell wore away, felt a bit cramped.” She looked expectantly at Wickham, like he might be able to fix that problem for her.

He shook his head, his hair skimming the rafters. “No talent for it myself. Though I have a sister that can make any space cozy, much like ye’ve done here.”

She fluttered her eyelashes and moved back to the stove for the pot. Her table was barely two-feet square, but we all sat around it. Wickham straddled a corner, his face animated like a

child being served ice cream, though it was only a cup of tea with little bits of lavender floating on the top.

Sarah grinned like she'd just served him that ice cream along with a big slice of three-layer cake and waited for his reaction.

"A cuppa is always encouraging," he told me, "but this will be something special." He took a sip and nodded for me to do the same. "Won't ye be joinin' us, Sarah?"

She smiled coyly and poured a third cup. Soon, all three of us were grinning like idiots. I felt practically invincible. If O'Ryan showed up at the door with a couple of monsters, I thought I could probably handle them all by myself.

"Sarah, love," Wickham said with a sigh. "Powerful stuff ye have here, sister or no." Then he got down to brass tacks. "We're hopin' ye might remember a thing or two about *Thirds*. My sisters, bless their hearts, spent most of their lives in the States, so they are as well informed as someone like yerself."

"*Thirds*?" The woman grew wistful. "My sister and I were both *Thirds*. They thought I might have inherited one of the major powers, ye ken? One of the grand ones? But our timin' was aff." She frowned. "But are ye lookin' for *Thirds*? Or for the *Sedaparts*? The ones with the grand powers?"

Wickham's excitement only showed in his eyes. "That's just what we're here for. The grand powers. What did you call them? The *Set Apart*s?"

"Nay, the *Sed-a-parts*."

He nodded. "Right. Do ye ken what they were? What they are? And even better, do ye ken where we might find them, any of them who wield those grand powers?"

“Why, they’re here!” Sarah laughed, rocked back on her chair, then forward onto her feet. At one side of the room, there was a doorway covered with a blanket where she disappeared.

I hissed at Wickham. “Shouldn’t we be writing stuff down?”

He tapped on his jacket pocket, where his phone stuck out just over the top. He was recording.

When Sarah came out, her arms were full of little dolls, which she carefully sat out on the table, naming each one. They all had little round heads made of wood, a post for a body. Their arms and dresses were a combination of dried husks and the gray stuff that covered the cottage roof. A closer look proved they were flowers or weeds—delicate stems covered in fine, dried blossoms.

“Neia, Thessa, Gilliam.” She tapped the fourth one. “This is Mercail, Palida, Deona, and Rowena, of course. Nearly worn her out, haven’t I. And this one. Always forgettin’ her name.”

I remembered what Jez had said. “Maybe it’s Pearl?”

Sarah scowled, clearly unhappy that she’d been reminded of my presence, the one thing keeping her from being alone with the handsome Wickham. She tapped on the fourth doll again. “Mercail means pearl.” She peeked at the bottom of the mystery doll, then plunked it down again. “Lori,” she said, punctuated with a snort in my direction.

“So eight dolls,” Wickham murmured. “Interesting. How can you tell them apart?”

Sarah lifted the Rowena doll to show an R carved in the base under the skirt.

“And do you remember their powers?”

“Sure. Sure.” She picked them up out of order, starting with Lori. “To make me bonny. To make me happy. To make me grow. To keep me kind. To make me helpful. To help me see. To keep me young. To keep me here,” she said, ending with Rowena. “It’s Palida who frightens the fairies out from under the bed.”

“Do ye remember any stories about them? Fairytales? Parables?”

She shook her head. “They’ll always be here to protect us. If one dies, she’ll come back again. I remember that.”

Wickham reached out and patted the woman’s hand. “One last thing, love. Do ye remember the Grandfather talkin’ about them?”

“Oh, aye. He was the one who gave us the dolls. Every lassie, on her fifth birthday, got a doll. Back then there werenae so many of us, aye? These belonged to myself and my seven sisters. They’ve all passed to me. Grandfather said I should keep mine always. And so I have.”

Wickham bit his lip, hard, and shook his head, like he was fighting his own thoughts.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to draw Sarah’s attention away from him.

The woman pursed her lips at me again but nodded. A begrudging acknowledgement that she’d heard me, at least.

The effects of the tea were waning. I no longer felt bulletproof, or monsterproof. But a little encouragement lingered.

“We must be going now,” Wickham said. “Bless ye, Sarah, for keepin’ the dolls all this time. Ye’ve been a great help.”

“That’s it then,” she said. “He said they’d be a great help to someone someday. And here they have!”

Wickham bit his lip again and led me out the door. He turned to wave, but the woman had already shut her door. If she would have had a welcome mat, I was sure she would have pulled it back in the house.

Reminded of the zap we’d gotten when we’d arrived, I lunged away from the wet mud and hustled to the truck. Wickham chuckled.

“You laugh,” I said, “but I noticed a little hustle in your giddyap too.”

“Auch, aye. Her discouragement might last a mite longer than her tea did.”

Once we were on the road, I asked what he’d been holding back, when she talked about the Grandfather.

“The bastard knew we’d be comin’. Knew we’d want those names. But we’re no closer to kennin’ the powers. And I suspect he was taunting us.”

“He knew—”

“Aye. He knew. He’s still toyin’ with me from the grave.” He cursed and struck the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. “Bastard!”

“Toying with you—teasing? Or was he trying to prove he’s cleverer than you?”

He shook his head. “He’s trying to give me no choice—yet again!”

“No choice about what?”

“No choice but to go back to the past...and face him.”

“I don’t understand. You told the Sorenson witch that it wouldn’t matter, that he wouldn’t know what you did to him.”

“Ah, no. He’ll ken it. If he knew we’d be visitin’ Sarah, asking about the *Thirids*, he’ll know...”

“You mean the Sedaparts?” We laughed, then I pushed my luck. “Dare I ask what you did? Or is this one of those cryptic secrets you don’t plan to share?”

His exhaled, then nodded. “If you must know...I cut off his head.”

“So, you’ll go back in time?”

“Probably.”

“When?”

“After I’ve exhausted all other options.”

FALLING INTO PLACE

*W*e returned home after reversing our path, which included walking back through rainy streets to the same alley. By the time we popped into Engineering, I was freezing, and headed to the kitchen to find something hot to drink, even if it had lavender blossoms floating in it.

I snagged a throw from the living room and headed to the study, following the sound of voices. Before I ever got to the door, I could tell something was terribly wrong. No one noticed when I slipped into the room and took a chair next to Persi, at the bar. She was hunched forward with her arms wrapped around her head like she was afraid her hair might blow away.

“What’s going on,” I whispered, not wanting to interrupt the heated discussion between Kitch, Urban, and Wickham on the other side of the room.

“We lost a set,” she said, without looking up. “Friends of Meral and Reem. They’re huddled in one of the rooms, blaming themselves.”

I sucked air deep into my lungs and thanked God I was still alive to do so. I couldn’t believe I’d been so cocky a couple of hours before, thinking I could face a couple of monsters all by myself.

“So no one is going to Tunisia?”

“Nope. Too dangerous unless we all go.”

I watched the men for a minute, but I couldn't tell who was arguing to go. “Don't tell me. Wickham says no.”

“You guessed it. He says we can't just doggy paddle if we expect to win the race. He's got plenty of other reasons, though. For one, Urban isn't up to full capacity yet. Everly isn't either, for that matter. And my confidence is a little shaky these days. I mean, if O'Ryan can get you arrested and taken off the board, and remove The Covenant and all the Fae research from the biggest libraries in the world, what will he do to us when he learns we've killed some of his dogs? That we're a step ahead of him?”

“But we're not a step ahead, are we, if people are still dying?”

“I don't know. I'm just so...discouraged. Don't listen to me.”

I looked up as Wickham headed our way, and I hoped he was only coming to get a drink. But I was wrong.

“Do ye ken what I think?”

“What?”

“I think we didnae drink enough of Sarah's tea.”

“No kidding. We should have asked for an order to go.”



THOUGH THE ARGUMENTS SEEMED TO BE OVER—AT LEAST THE fighters had retreated to their own corners of the room—the tension remained palpable. Thankfully, Wickham decided we

should all take the evening for ourselves and meet back in the morning, after he had time to go through the recordings and information we'd collected at Muirsglen.

I hurried out of the room before he could suggest I help him. All the way to the girls wing, I expected to hear my name, but I was spared. A few minutes later, dressed in my blue nightgown ensemble and slippers, I ducked out again, headed to the little library at the end of the wing, where I grabbed an old, green, hardback novel.

On the top floor of the mansion we called home, there were small cozy bedrooms once meant for servants. I had a favorite. The window faced west, and in the evening, if the light was right, I'd get an orange glow across the ceiling that allowed me to pretend I was back in Wyoming again, in a bedroom meant for mere mortals, watching the very normal sun go down on a very normal world.

The novel was called *Saraband for Two Sisters*, whatever that meant. In the first few pages, I realized it was a tale written about identical twin sisters, of all things. But I was already settled in, and the little library was two floors down, so I forged ahead.

The hero's name was Richard, but the more I read about him, the more I saw Griffon written on the pages. After an hour of reading about this tortured man, I closed the book and held it, wishing I could wrap my arms around my professor instead.

My poor, sweet professor who couldn't be trusted with a phone number. Who couldn't be allowed to know where I lived. With whom I couldn't be alone...

If it weren't for the fact that O'Ryan was out there somewhere, possibly still in Oxford, I might just rebel. But I

was a big girl. If I wanted to see Griffon badly enough, I could just walk out the front door...

If I read any more of that novel, I'd end up doing just that.

"Lennon!"

It was Urban's voice, calling from far off. I jumped off the bed and rushed out into the hall just as he barked into the room beside the back stairs. "Lennon?"

"Urban! What's wrong?"

He turned in surprise. Worry melted from his face. "Auch, praise God." He took a second to take in the sight of me, noticed the book in my hand. "Ye're alone?"

I laughed lightly. "Just who do you think I'd be with?" I read his face easily. "And just how is Griffon supposed to have gotten onto a property he shouldn't be able to see if he was staring right at it?"

He shrugged and turned away. "I'll tell the others ye're here."

"They thought I ran away?"

He didn't answer and disappeared. I felt bad I'd worried anyone, but I felt worse for badgering Urban. He'd been frantic, worried about me, and I'd teased him for it.

With my idyll shattered, I followed him down the stairs, caught up, and wrapped my arm around his until we reached the ground floor. "I'm sorry I worried you." I gave his arm a squeeze and was rewarded with a wink and a smile.

He put his hands to the side of his mouth and bellowed, "Found her!"

Wickham and Kitch arrived at the front hall just as we did. Kitch took one look at me and the book, leaned on his knees, and laughed with what little breath he had. “Told ye,” he said, presumably to Wickham. “She’s no gantin teenager.”

It wasn’t hard to guess what gantin’ meant. “I’m not a teenager, at least.”

He laughed again, then shook his head. “Maybe you need to get her...something.” He waved in the general direction of my crotch.

I couldn’t let him get away with it. “What? A chastity belt? A...male escort? Maybe...a Welsh professor? Or did *you* intend to volunteer?”

Urban stood beside me, his arms folded, his eyes shooting daggers at the shorter man. Kitch held up his hands and backed away. Wickham closed his eyes as if praying for patience.

I turned to go to my room, sent Urban a discreet wink, then called over my shoulder. “Someone want to bring me a tub of ice for my bath?”



HAVING GONE TO SLEEP EARLY THE NIGHT BEFORE, I WAS UP AT dawn and took my breakfast out to the veranda to eat in the sunshine. The chill was worth the solitude. Besides, when no one saw me at the breakfast table, I wanted them to worry I was still holding a grudge.

I wasn’t.

I sat at a table in the study, surfing the internet incognito, when my friends came through the door. Kitchens came to his

usual chair beside me and waited for a smile before taking his seat. I liked the way we communicated. No need to talk each other to death. A smile for an apology. A smile for forgiveness.

Everyone else did their little checks in the same way. A raised brow asking if I was okay. A nod from me and it was over.

Wickham was intense from the second he walked through the door, the previous night forgotten. “Everyone here?” He looked for his sisters smiling and waving on the TV screen. Brian had already set up the call. Wickham waved back. “Grand. Let’s get started.”

He hung a large white poster against the wall and pushed pins into the corners. “These are the eight Naming Powers and the names of those to whom they were given.” He turned to show us how pleased he was to be able to announce such a thing. I was impressed he could have figured all that out from our conversation with The Great Discourager.

He played a bit of the recording of Sarah putting names to her dolls and telling what they protected her from. “I believe these line up with a list Brian and Flann found in one of their books last night. A book called the Ethos of the Fae.

“These are the Eight Ideals, supposedly.” He pointed to the first of four columns and read the words aloud.

“Beauty

Hope

Fertility

Peace

Art

Light

Youth

Life”

“Now, if we look at what they found in another book, translated loosely as the Eight Corruptions, they line up perfectly. Opposites of the Ideals.” He read the last column.

“Vanity

Despair

Famine

War

Destruction

Darkness

Decay

Death”

“Two sides of the same coin. Beauty and Vanity, Hope and Despair, Fertility and Famine, Peace and War. Art and Destruction fit, if you think of Art as Creation—Creation and Destruction. Then we have Light and Darkness, Youth and Decay, Life and Death.” He looked at the circle of faces. “Everyone with me?”

We nodded.

“Now. Look at this. These are the words Sarah used when descrbin’ what her dolls were for.” He read the second column.

“To make me bonny.

To make me happy.

To make me grow.

To keep me kind.

To be helpful.

To help me see.

To keep me young.

To keep me here.”

“Now, these are the names she assigned to those prescriptions.” There was a blank on the first line. “We’ll come back to this,” he said. Then, starting with the second line, he pointed and read...

“Mercail

Thessa

Gilliam

Deona

Palida

Neia

Rowena.”

He tapped on the last and shook his head. “Rowena keeps me here.” He and Urban exchanged a look not meant for the rest of us. I’d been told before that it was Rowena’s power that had been passed to Soni. So it was that power that was responsible for Urban’s resurrection.

“Tell me,” Wickham continued. “If you were the King of the Fae and you had to give away most of your powers—could keep only one—which would you choose?” He used his pointer to circle Beauty. “Assuming he is immortal, why would he need the others?”

He took the lid off a marker and wrote a name in the blank space. *Ghloir*. The King's name, from the signature on The Covenant.

"A little girl might remember it as...Lori." He tapped the paper. "Eight powers. Eight holders of that power."

I pointed out the obvious. "But those original women are long gone, so we don't know the names of who holds them now."

"Aye, aye." He set aside his marker and brushed his hands together as if there was chalk on his fingers. "But it's a start."

Kitch had been sitting with his hands behind his head, leaning his chair back on two legs. Now, he lowered his arms and sat forward, his eyes wide. "Does that mean we go lookin' for the Fae King first?"

If it weren't for his blinking, I would have thought Wickham had frozen himself. But eventually, he shook his head. "I hadn't considered he might still be alive."

"And why not? If the Grandfather can live fifteen thousand years, why not the king?"

1. <u>Beauty</u>	1. <u>Ghloir (Lori)</u>	1. <u>To make me bonny</u>	1. <u>Vanity</u>
2. <u>Hope</u>	2. <u>Mercail (Pearl)</u>	2. <u>To make me happy</u>	2. <u>Despair</u>
3. <u>Fertility</u>	3. <u>Thessa</u>	3. <u>To make me grow</u>	3. <u>Famine</u>
4. <u>Peace</u>	4. <u>Gillian</u>	4. <u>To keep me kind</u>	4. <u>War</u>
5. <u>Art</u>	5. <u>Deona</u>	5. <u>To be helpful</u>	5. <u>Destruction</u>
6. <u>Light</u>	6. <u>Palida</u>	6. <u>To help me see</u>	6. <u>Darkness</u>
7. <u>Youth</u>	7. <u>Neia</u>	7. <u>To keep me young</u>	7. <u>Decay</u>
8. <u>Life</u>	8. <u>Rowena</u>	8. <u>To keep me here</u>	8. <u>Death</u>

TIME FOR A LITMUS TEST

*A*fter the devastating news of the deaths in Tunisia, it felt good to have new leads. Our little quest was coming into focus, and our progress no longer depended upon research at the library, which was a good thing, because mythology books and documents had disappeared from libraries all over the world.

According to the London news, the Oxford police were no longer looking at local people, which relieved my anxiety only slightly. The moment O’Ryan had introduced himself, I’d stopped worrying about the local bobbies and what they might do to me.

I’d come to think of The Bod as the office, a tedious place when Griffon wasn’t there. When I was arrested and Wickham had banned me from going onto campus, it felt like I’d been fired from my job. But now I had a new job. And I was hoping it might include contacting Griffon Carew.

We spent the lunch hour discussing how one might go about contacting or locating or communicating with the King of Fae. It was so fantastical a conversation that we pretended we weren’t talking business at all, just hypotheticals.

Kitchens had the wildest suggestion by far.

“We kill one of the monsters and grab onto his body. When he gets sucked into the next realm, we’ll get sucked in with him. We can figure it out on the other side.”

The next few minutes flew by as we ate our ice cream and tossed around our theories of what was on this “other side.” Heaven, hell, fairy paradise, outer space, or just oblivion. Percentage-wise, the chances of Kitchens’ plan having a happy outcome weren’t encouraging.

We had asked the same question in a dozen ways, and I asked it again. “How does a *mortal* get to the fairy realm?”

Urban leaned over his empty bowl to get my full attention, then narrowed his eyes. “She asks a fairy to escort her there.”

All heads turned to the opposite end of the table. Wickham exhaled audibly, slowly. “Absolutely not.”

A smile spread across my face just as slowly. “Really? You sound...tempted.”



IN THE BLUE AND GOLD LIVING ROOM, I SAT IN A CHAIR BY THE front window and spun the little bronze globe on my lap, wondering where in the world we might find the Fae king. Were other realms even on our planet? It was one of the things I planned to ask, if I ever got the chance.

I laughed to myself over the absurdity of the situation. It was like preparing to meet God. *Let me just consult my notebook and ask you a few questions...*

Wickham popped out to who knows where to call Brooks, who would then call Griffon. He stepped back in from the hallway five minutes later. “Ye’ll meet tomorrow, 2 pm, Rose

Garden at Christ Church Meadows. Public. Spacious. We'll spread out, so if O'Ryan or the police try to take us all, at least some can get away."

I bit my lips to keep from accusing him of being dramatic. After all, I couldn't guarantee nothing of the kind would happen. Instead, I asked, "Who's coming with me?"

"All of us."

"Great. Nice and intimate. All my friends eavesdropping. I'll be lucky if Griffon doesn't roll his eyes and walk away."



TIME SLOWED TO MOLASSES. I GOT SO TESTY EVERYONE stopped speaking to me. I even ate my dinner in my room just so I could stare at the clock on the wall and will it to move faster. It seemed days later when I finally walked through the entrance to the park from St. Aldates wearing jeans and tennis shoes, ready to run at the first sign of golden curls.

I was ten minutes early. Griffon was already waiting.

I had a dozen apologies practiced and sitting on the tip of my tongue, but with twenty feet between us, he opened his arms wide and I forgot every one of them. My cheeks were already wet when I finally crashed into him, wrapped my arms around his chest, and snuggled under his open coat.

It had become my favorite routine.

Eventually, he loosened his hold so I could look up. He kissed me before I could get a word out. A half a dozen kisses later, he finally stopped, but only because our chaperones started clearing their throats like they were choking to death.

The Rose Garden was part of the Memorial Garden, a small, enclosed space compared to the rest. A wide swath of flowers formed a circle with a path within it. Within the path was another ring of flowers, and within that ring, a tiny pond. Though it was called the Rose Garden, the start of a few thousand bulb flowers filled the space.

Thankfully, my friends numbered much fewer, though they were much more conspicuous, all within a hundred yards, their dark clothes like so many black polka dots on a spring-colored canvas.

Griffon and I walked the circular path, holding hands while I clung to his arm.

“You’re well?” he asked quietly, trying to keep our conversation from listening ears.

“I am. How about you?”

“Fine. Fine. Driven to distraction waiting to hear from you, but fine. Though I worry I will soon grow sick of pancakes.” We shared a smile. “No time limit this time?”

“No time limit.”

“Good. When we weary of walking this circle, I suggest we turn and try the other direction.”

“Perfect.”

He paused long enough to drop a kiss on my head, then started again. After a long silence, he said, “You got under my skin awfully fast, Lennon.”

“Same here.”

“Wickham made a mistake.”

“Oh?”

“Haven’t we all been warned about absence making the heart grow fonder? He should have allowed us to grow sick of one another.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he knew we wouldn’t.”

The look he gave me then was almost painful. I kept walking, pretending I hadn’t seen anything, but I knew something was wrong.

“What are you not telling me?”

He sighed loudly. “Due to all the resource material missing, the college board is postponing my fall class.”

“I’m sorry. Will you teach something else?”

“No. I believe I will go home for a bit. My family is still in a state.”

My heart took a punch and I had to force air in and out of my chest. I had to remind myself that I wasn’t going to be staying in Oxford forever either.

“I’m sorry. Any idea how long?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve explained, but my brother and my sister have gone missing.”

“Griffon!”

“We haven’t given up hope. My sister has gone off before, pursuing this or that. But this time, she took our brother along.” He wove his fingers through mine and picked up the pace. “I wish...I wish we could at least speak on the phone every day. Even if all you told me was the weather.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that.”

“Promise? I ken Wickham must have a good reason to keep you all to himself, but I’ll be damned if I can think of it.”

“He just has...enemies...who might use me to hurt him.” That was one of the practiced apologies. “It won’t always be like this.”

Griffon sighed. “That’s something, at least. A little hope to get me through another day without you.” He stopped. “I think it’s time.”

“What?” I could already feel my heart tearing away from my chest.

“Time to change directions, so we don’t end up with a limp.”



THE POINT TO OUR MEETING, OTHER THAN GIVING ME A HIT OF my Griffon addiction, was to passively discover if Griffon Carew was Fae. I wasn’t to ask, I wasn’t to hint. I wasn’t to bring up the subject at all. But if he did...

Privately, I was sure he was just a normal mortal whose only flaw was that he saw something in me. And I would have agreed to any litmus test if it meant I could spend time with him again.

The fact that O’Ryan had mentioned Griffon by name increased the probability of Fae-ness, at least in Wickham’s mind. Part of me was hoping it was true because...the union of a fairy and a human wouldn’t be expected to produce offspring, would it?

“Griffon?”

“Mm?”

“There’s something I need to tell you before...before we head in the other direction.”

He grinned. “And what’s that?”

“I...” I laughed, not believing I was going to spill my worst secret so early in a relationship. “I...can’t have children.”

“Does that make you sad?”

“It does. It always has.”

“Then I believe you mean you can’t bear children. It doesn’t mean you can’t raise one.” He took a step, then checked my face. “Can we carry on, then?”

“If you still want to...knowing...”

“Oh, Lennon. I hope this hasn’t been the reason for...” He gestured to all the onlookers. “All this.”

“It’s not. I mean, I’m glad it doesn’t make you run in the opposite direction. That’s the typical response.”

“Then I’m glad I’m not typical.” He stopped and pulled me into his arms again, kissed me again. Our silent conversation was much more interesting than the other one, but again, people started choking.

Griffon pulled back and whispered. “I feel like our love is endangering lives.”



THE WORD LOVE LIFTED ME OFF THE GROUND ABOUT THREE feet. It was a wonder I could still reach Griffon’s hand.

We finally left our floral sanctuary and walked—and floated—along the edge of the Thames. He wanted to know about my childhood home, pitied me for my lack of family, but was glad that I’d been well loved by my grandmother and my

well-meaning mother. He talked about his siblings, and I was jealous I hadn't had similar experiences.

"But I guess I sort of have them now. Kitchens and I tease each other quite a bit. Persi is always willing to get into trouble, and Urban's wife, Everly, is like a big sister. She likes to talk makeup and fashion, but she's badass. And Urban is definitely the big brother I never had."

"The terrifying man from the café?"

I grinned. "That's Urban." I nodded to the big shadow leaning against a tree a hundred yards away, his wife nearby.

We walked in silence for a bit. "And Wickham?" Griffon asked as if there had been no pause in the conversation.

"Wickham?" I rolled my eyes. "I guess he's the big moody older brother who thinks he needs to run the show."

"But still a brother?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely. I mean, he's married and..."

I wanted the sidewalk to open up and swallow me. I'd just given away valuable information to a possible fairy. And though I couldn't imagine Griffon using that information against Wickham, for my sake, it was a huge gaffe. I'd have to confess it.

"He's married *and*?"

I shook my head and forced a smile to my lips. "Sorry. Forgot what I was going to say. I just..."

He stopped again. "What is it? I apologize. I cannot help but be jealous of a man who controls your time and attention. But I confess I am relieved to hear he is married."

“Yeah, well. It wouldn’t matter either way. He’s like a brother to me. I’d...protect him with my life, but there’s nothing...there.”

He laughed. “Perhaps he’s cast a spell on you.”

I stopped, watched his face. “What?”

“Maybe he’s slipped you a reverse love potion. You know, so you don’t fall in love with him.”

I started breathing again. “Oh? You think all women are suckers for that hot Highlander look?”

He scowled, let go of my hand, and tapped his chin for a second. “I wonder if I might have a kilt in my closet.”

“Well. Let me tell you. A certain Welsh/Irish professor in a kilt is a *whole* different story.”

We saw a sign for Jubilee Bridge and decided to go watch the rowing teams practice, but two cars pulled up along the curb about fifty feet away. Persi sat in the driver’s seat of the first one, Brian in the second. She rolled down her window as a sign it was time for Cinderella to leave the ball.

Griffon and I turned toward the street and cut across the grass. I could feel my friends swarming behind us. At the curb, he bent to wave at Persi.

Persi grinned and waved her fingers. “Would you like a ride? I’m hell at staying on the right side of the road, but if you’re feeling lucky...”

Griffon shook his head. “I like my life—today at least.” He winked at me. “But I’ll keep you in mind for gloomy days.” He took my face in his hands and kissed me briefly, then chuckled. “Thus far, no one has choked to death. Wouldn’t want to push our luck.”

“Goodbye,” I said, and finally let go of him.

He shook his head. “Talk to you soon.”

No one spoke until we were away from the college and on our circuitous route home, through the countryside. Persi had been kicked to the backseat with Flann and Kitch so Wickham could drive. I rode shotgun but kept as much space between us as possible. I was grateful for the chance to see Griffon again, but I wanted to start my moody campaign right away so I could talk Wickham into allowing a phone call later.

Kitch broke the silence. “So? Did you get what you wanted?”

“No,” I said, at the same time Wickham said, “Yes.” He glanced sideways once, then again. “Yes, we did.”

I stuck my chin in the air. “You found out one way or another, that he is or is not Fae?”

“I did.”

TEST RESULTS

The world around me began to spin. Fuzzy blackness edged into my vision.

“Deep breath, lass.”

Air. Yes. A good idea. A couple of deep breaths chased the shadows away. I gripped the dashboard before I asked the question. “So? What did you see? Did he sprout wings while my eyes were shut?” I wasn’t going to say the word kissing.

“As good as.”

A physical pain in my heart made me gasp. “He’s not,” I whispered, and shook my head. It felt right to keep shaking it.

“Aye, lass. He is. Saw his eyes flicker when ye ran into his arms. Passion can make any man lose control, and he did. Ever so briefly. But more importantly, he didn’t notice he’d been caught. When ye’re ready, I’ll show ye the video.”

The world started shattering, and no one seemed to notice but me. The fields outside the car tilted forward. I tightened my grip on the dash like the rollercoaster was about to tip over the edge.

“You...you knew this from the first minute, but you just let me go on thinking...” I gaped at him. “Why didn’t you tell me right away? Why didn’t you warn me, somehow?” The

memory of what I'd done made me wish for that hole to open up again, to swallow me. "If you'd warned me, I would never..." Well, that wasn't true. I had known Griffon might be a fairy and I'd still let the words fly out of my mouth.

Wickham checked the mirrors, looked frantically in all directions, then suddenly popped our car back home, to the back of the house. He killed the engine and turned to face me. "It's all right, Lennon. Tell me."

I let go of the car and hid my face in my hands, but I had to tell him, warn him. "I'm such an idiot. He said he was jealous, worried there was more between you and me than..." I shrugged. "So I laughed, told him you were like a brother to me, and besides...you were married."

Okay, I told the universe. You can take me now.

I didn't hear him breathe. I couldn't hear anyone breathing. Persi sat in the back with Flann and Kitch, but the silence was deafening. Finally, I put my hands down to face the man I'd betrayed.

"That's it, then? Nothing more? Ye didn't confess I am the Seanathair of the Muir Witches?"

I didn't understand.

"It matters not if O'Ryan kens about my wife and children. We were surrounded by wives and children at the wedding, aye?" He reached out and ruffled my hair. "It only matters that he'll never find them." His hand dropped to my arm and he squeezed. "And it means the world that ye take their safety as a grave thing. For it is. And I'd trust ye with any secret I might have."

The fact that Griffon was a fairy—and I wouldn't doubt Wickham's eyesight—meant all our secrets were in danger—

from me. I just couldn't keep my guard up around that man. So I looked into Wickham's eyes and told him, "I'd rather you didn't."



ONE CONVERSATION IN PARTICULAR CAME BACK TO HAUNT ME that night, and I realized Griffon had been trying to tell me from the beginning...

"Ah, such a pity. I was hoping you were a fairy."

"Me?"

"Out of curiosity, I went back to see what books you were readin'. The notions of a fairy heaven and hell? Dry stuff, that, unless ye happen to be Fae. So aye, I had hoped."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I'm just a boring old American."

"Never boring. I was starting to think Oxford was the dullest place on earth, what with all the children running back and forth between classes and pubs day and night. But then you came along and brightened it all up. Gave me a mystery to solve."

A pity I wasn't a fairy—or we might have made the perfect pair.

A thought brought me out of bed. I grabbed my robe and ran to the boys wing, to Flann's room. I knocked softly on the door and prayed he was still awake.

He was.

"What is it, lass?"

"Do you still have any of those books you checked out of the Bod?"

He swung the door wide, then pointed to a pile of books on a desk against the wall.

“It’ll be faster if I don’t explain,” I said, to excuse my intrusion. “Just looking for one in particular...” I skimmed the spines, looking for a rust colored one. I found it in the second stack, and Flann was there to lift the other books away, so I could grab it. “Commonalities between Fae Lore and Christianity...by Griffon Carew.”

The notions of a fairy heaven and hell? Dry stuff, that, unless ye happen to be Fae.

He hadn’t been talking about me. He’d been talking about himself.

THERE, IN THE FINE PRINT

“*T*he problem is the same. Ye cannae acknowledge him as a fairy without explaining how ye know. And it’s not something a normal mortal would ever believe. Only an Uncast—”

“I know. I know.” I covered my ears to keep from hearing it again. “I’m just saying that we could probably think of a way through this if we take the time—”

“We’ve been trying for hours,” Wickham said. “We need food. We’ll work on something else when we come back. Maybe we’re tryin’ too hard and need to get out of our own way.”

His patient smile told me he saw through my argument. He knew I was just looking for an excuse to call Griffon. But if we were going to get to the Fae King, or even find out where he was, it would have to be through the only friendly fairy we knew. And the only one who matched that description was only reachable by phone.

“I’m pitiful,” I said, and plopped down next to Kitch on the veranda. Our lunch had been laid out for us in the sunshine. Persi was fixing her plate.

“Ye’re not pitiful. Ye’re in love. Nothin’ pitiful about that. What’s pitiful is what ye fail to do about it.”

I caught him watching Persi while he spoke. She sat on the far end of the fat stone steps with her face to the sun, her eyes shut, her red curls glistening with copper threads.

“You too, huh?”

“What?” He mocked surprise. “I dinnae ken what ye’re talkin’ about.” Then he winked.

I laughed. “You Scots are all alike. You communicate through winking. One wink, every time. There isn’t even a code to it.”

“Aye,” he said.

“Aye.” “Aye.” “Aye!” Urban, Wickham, and one of the Youngs sang out.

“Backing a brother in a fight?”

“Aye,” they all said again, then laughed.

“Well, I’m glad you at least have a syllable to use with your winks.”

The meal was a combination of fruit, vegetables, and ribbon sandwiches. The remainder of the conversation was restricted to winks, ayes, and a burp or two. Combined with the laughter and sunshine, it was as rejuvenating as a cup of Sarah’s tea.



THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE HAD ME READY FOR A NAP, AND I WAS looking forward to laying my head on the table and resting my eyes for the foreseeable future. But when I reached the study, the Muir brothers were excited about something and danced

around while they waited for everyone to show up for our afternoon brainstorm.

Brian practically dragged Wickham through the door, then joined his brother at the head of the room. They had The Covenant projected on the wall again. “We know where the king is!”

Flann rolled his eyes. “Rather, we know where he is not.”

Wickham raised his hand like a good student. “And where is he not?”

“The Fae Realm!”

I nudged Kitch. “Sorry, old man. Looks like your plan is out.”

“All right,” Wickham said. “Tell us.”

Brian threw out his arms. “Obviously, he’s here. In our realm. It’s in The Covenant.” He knocked a knuckle on the image. “Says the Naming Powers must remain in the Realm of Man. The eighth power shall remain with the King, who by necessity must remain as well!”

After a round of applause for our intrepid translators, I laid my head on the table and let the conversation progress without me. Wickham explained how the Grandfather had been living, and wondered if a man who was vain enough to keep the power of Beauty for himself might want to live somewhere more flamboyant than a modest Tudor house away from the general population.

The discussion spun out from there. Finally, I raised my head to add my two cents. “Since we can’t just drive around the neighborhoods of the rich and famous—or beautiful—it looks like our best plan is the original one. Ask a fairy who

dwells in this realm. Don't you think they'd know where their own king lives? Especially if the king is here too?"

"There's a problem," Everly said. "Brian and Flann might be wrong."

Neither man seemed offended. Brian asked, "How's that?"

"Well, the contract's been broken for about six years now. That means it would no longer keep him here."

Brian nodded. "Aye. Unless he doesn't know it was broken."

Lots of nodding. Lots of shrugging.

Then I remembered. "That female fairy from Trinity didn't know, and she was pretty upset about it. Maybe word is spreading. Or maybe she didn't tell anyone. Who knows? But there is a chance the king knows now, even if he didn't before. Which means..."

Wickham tipped his head back and sighed. "Which means if we're going to ask Griffon Carew if he knows where the Fae king is, it needs to be soon."

The thought of bringing up the subject over the phone made me sick to my stomach. The idea of confronting him about being a fairy wasn't the conversation I'd hoped to have. I'd wanted to hear more about our love...

Again, I wondered if the woman with the purple eyes had at least warned her family, if she had any family.

I jumped to my feet and backed away from the table, stumbling against my rolling chair, seeing nothing while I tried to flee from my own thoughts. I couldn't bear to finish the idea forming in my head.

“No!” I bumped into a bookcase, moved around it, held out my hands to catch myself. “No!”

Someone large and immovable stood in my way.

“Easy lass.” Urban held up his hands, waiting for me to see him.

“Urban?”

“Aye, lass. We’re all here. Ye’re not alone.”

“Urban,” I begged, *please don’t let it be true.*

“What is it, love?”

The room started back into focus. Everyone was on their feet, alarmed.

I shook my head and whispered, “We can’t ask Griffon anything.”

“Why is that?”

“Because we killed his family.”

HARD HEARTS DON'T BOUNCE WELL

The difference between the old me and the new me was that the old me was rarely emotional. I never cried at sappy movies—hell, I never bothered watching sappy stuff in the first place—and I rarely shed a tear unless I was damned mad. Even when Andy assaulted me, I told myself there was no changing something that already happened, so I wasn't going to waste time bawling about it.

Crying would have meant the monster won. And I wouldn't let that be true. Now, I suspected he'd won after all, thanks to my silence. It was ironic that horrible moments always brought the subject up again. I thought everything the new me had been through would have paled that memory by comparison. I guess not.

Everly sat close while the rest of the gang searched the internet for some mention of Griffon Carew's family, for mentions in police reports around the time I was found in that taxi. I tried to play a game on my phone, but my attention didn't last, and I'd die within a few seconds.

A picture in my head commanded all my attention. It was Griffon, the second he found out I was responsible for the death of his brother and sister.

“The brother I don’t get though,” I told Everly. “She had three men with her. Griffon’s only missing one brother.”

“He was the taxi driver,” Kitch said, and turned his laptop so I could see. He’d been calling his sources in Edinburgh. It turned out there was a reason Wickham had trusted him with his family’s security—Kitch knew some shady people. “Archer Carew’s taxi was found, but he’s missing. Someone had been using the car, so it wasn’t found...where we left it.”

“Daphne Carew,” Wickham said, as he scowled at his computer screen. “Antiquity Department at Trinity College Library has been replaced by...this other woman, Aurora O’Connor. Probably Fae as well.”

“Daphne,” I said, finally putting a name to the purple fingernails and flashing purple eyes.

“Daphne,” Brian said, reading his screen as well. “The name gets its meaning from Greek mythology, where Daphne was a nymph who was transformed into a laurel tree by her father to escape from an overly amorous Apollo.”

I winced. “Well, neither of them had happy endings, did they?”

“She took her own life,” Wickham said, reminding us both. “Ye cannae forget that.”

“I try to remember.” Then I addressed everyone at the tables. “Look. I’ve thought about this a lot. I don’t want any of you blaming yourselves for what happened to me or what you did to punish those people. It’s not like we could have gone to the police.”

My speech was wasted. None of them looked like they regretted anything.

“Just saying.”

Wickham closed his laptop. “We’ll take the rest of the day. Start again tomorrow. We’ve got to find another Fae we can approach. Griffon Carew is off the board for now.”

“We already know where to find one,” I said. “You said it yourself. Daphne’s replacement. Probably Fae as well.”



IF WE WERE GOING TO SEND SOMEONE INTO THE TRINITY College Library, Urban and Everly were our only options. The rest of us had been caught on film in either library, so the MacKenzie’s were the only members of our team that wouldn’t be identified—if someone were watching for us. And with international attention these days, the rest of us were essentially banned from entering any library...with the possible exception of Laramie, Wyoming.

Brian and Flann were happy to stay at Hope House. Wickham, Kitch, Persi and I were to accompany Urban and Everly. They would identify Ms. O’Connor, then follow her from the library. With so many variables, we planned to wing it from there.

It was agreed that, no matter what, no one would be kidnapping anyone.

“This librarian isnae our last resort,” Wickham admitted the next morning. “I know where other Fae can be found, at a place called Seelie Pause. But they arenae the sort that would be reasonable—much like O’Ryan’s monsters. I’d rather search for the other seven powers and worry about the king last, before I’ll turn to them.”

Two days passed while we prepared for Dublin. Brooks contacted the police department on our behalf and asked if we

were still expected to stay in Oxford. Brian, Flann, and I were given the all clear to leave town, as long as we kept in touch with our solicitor.

If Griffon tried to get in touch with me, through Brooks, Wickham didn't say, and I didn't ask. Griffon had been hoping I'd call him two nights ago, so I was sure he would have reached out. I was content to let the man believe it was Wickham's fault rejecting our request for phone calls. I hoped he might be too busy getting out of town himself to give me much thought.

But that was just me lying to myself.

The hammer was all lined up. His heart was going to take two blows. The first, from me ignoring him. The second, when he found out the truth about his family. Sadly, my heart was the hammer, and when it hit, Griffon wouldn't be the only one to suffer.

I wondered how powerful Wickham's enchantments were. Would they hold up if an angry Fae came sniffing down the street, hungry for revenge?

I hoped so.

The six of us checked into the Maldron Hotel in Dublin, removed from the main drag. The next morning, Urban and Everly went to Trinity Library and played tourists. The rest of us went to a small park and Kitch began teaching me how to defend myself.

"Offensive moves will come later," he said.

"I hope not much later."

Every time I took a blow, I tightened my gut...and hardened a little more of my heart. I needed to get back to my

old, non-emotional self. Ideally, if I ever had to face Griffon again, he wouldn't recognize me.

Everly brought back maps and pamphlets from their tours. We were able to show them where the antiquities were being stored, if they hadn't been stolen, and if they hadn't been moved into storage for the remodel. They weren't expected to look for the books, but they should be able to spot Aurora O'Connor if they moved in the same general area of her department.

The second day, after our Fairy Hunters headed off to do their work, we returned to the little park for practice. After lunch, we went back to our rooms, and once Persi and I were alone, she said she'd show me a couple of her favorite attack moves.

"You need to have something under your belt. Monsters won't work on our timeline. If they showed up at our door, you wouldn't stand much of a chance."

We practiced as quietly as possible, so Wickham and Kitch, next door, wouldn't know what we were doing. After twenty minutes, I cried uncle. I was worn out.

"You have good instincts," she said, surprised. "You're observant. You look for openings. For your first go round, you did very well. Your chances of survival are better than I expected."

I nodded, still sucking in air. "Not my first time being attacked, you know?"

"Right."

"And I really wish you'd stop using that word."

"What word?"

“Survival.”

I called for the bathroom first and took a nice tepid shower. Kept my mind clear. No tears.



AT FIVE O’CLOCK, WICKHAM KNOCKED ON THE DOOR. “THEY found her. Following now. Going to call when she stops, so we need to be ready to move.” He glanced over my outfit of black jeans, gray tee, and black leather jacket, then lifted his chin at Persi, standing at my shoulder. “Everyone has their silver and iron?”

We did.

Kitch was holding a cab at the curb. When Wickham’s phone buzzed, we climbed inside. Instead of an address, he gave the driver the name of two streets, Haddington Road and Percy Place. Stone-faced, we ignored the passing scenery and the Grand Canal while we psyched ourselves up. We had no plan because we didn’t know where we would find this woman. We just had to wing it and hope for the best.

“I ken how to stop a witch,” Wickham had confessed, “but I dinnae ken what will stop the Fae. There are just too many species. No two are alike. We can only try what we know and if that fails, we try the next thing.” Silver first. Iron as a last resort since it was thought to work only against lesser creatures.

Apparently.

The taxi stopped near the intersecting streets in a residential area. The streets were lined with townhouses and apartment buildings. We all got out and waited while

Wickham consulted his phone once again. “They’re at The 51, further up, toward St. Mary’s.”

We found the bar a block away, halfway to the gothic church tower in the distance. Everly and Urban waited on a bench across the street and down a little further. Without his pretty blue kilt, he was a little harder to pick out. Since O’Connor had seen them in the library, she’d know she was being followed if they happened to show up at the same bar.

They’d sent Wickham a picture of a woman in a mustard yellow jacket, which he showed to us.

I had Hank with me. Since the henna tattoo had worked with O’Ryan, I wasn’t worried this woman would sense my *cloch realta*. I’d asked Wickham, the night before, if he would make it permanent. He promised to do it once we were back at Hope House. “The road is no place to care for a new tattoo.”

The 51 had a glass sunroom on the front of the building. Inside was reasonably bright considering the long black bar along one side. Plenty of lighting in the dark corners, but enough shadows to hide a little bit of ugly. There were booths down the right side of the aisle. We side-stepped around a waitress taking an order and continued on, Wickham in the lead, me, Persi, then Kitch bringing up the rear.

The woman we were looking for was in the furthest booth, smiling at a man with his broad back to us. She laughed, then sobered when she gave Wickham a second look—a common occurrence. Then she smiled and said something to her date, who turned to look.

My heart stopped. My brain stopped.

It was Griffon Carew.

PIVOT! PIVOT!

“Wickham?” Griffon swung out of the booth and turned fully, looking for me. He seemed both relieved and elated to find me just over Wickham’s shoulder. I told myself that adrenaline dumping into my bloodstream was only fear. I was his enemy now. He just didn’t know it yet.

His perfect jaw was covered with a few days’ beard. Despite his date, he tried to plow past Wickham, but the aisle was too narrow, what with Persi now pushing forward, filling the space. He didn’t notice the maneuver was intentional and reached out his hand. “Lennon, love! I can’t believe you found me!”

Yeah. I couldn’t believe it either.

Kitch grabbed my arm for support and leaned close. “Easy, now. He kens nothin’. Ye have to act normal. Ye have to convince him ye’re still in love. Ye cannae be cold, Lennon. He thinks ye’ve come looking for him. Ye have to act the part, so he doesnae start looking for other reasons we might have followed a fairy into a bar. Got it?”

He was telling me I had to be emotional. “Got it.”

His hand fell away just before Wickham stepped aside to let Griffon through. I pasted a big smile on my face. Happy to

see him. Happy to see him.

Dammit. I was happy to see him.

“Griffon,” I whispered, then rose on my toes to push my arms around him. A quick squeeze and I let go like he was an electric fence, or a patch of wet mud in front of Sarah’s cottage. I glanced around like I was embarrassed to have embraced him in front of strangers.

He took my hand and pulled me toward the table. “I’m sorry. I’m being rude. Come with me.”

I followed dutifully, ignoring Wickham completely, knowing what he’d be trying to communicate if I would just look him in the eye.

“Aurora, this is my gal, Lennon. I wasn’t expecting her, so...”

“Not a worry,” the woman said, with a thick Irish accent. “We can do this another day if ye like, so we can.”

“No! No. I mean to say this is too important. I’m sure Lennon and her friends won’t mind waiting for a bit.” He caught me off guard with a kiss. “You all get a table and I’ll join you when I’m finished here. I have some questions for her, about my sister, you see.” He looked into my eyes, asking me to understand.

“Of course, we don’t mind. Take all the time you need. No hurry.”

He frowned. “Is something amiss?”

“No.” I forced that smile back into place. “Just a little motion sickness.” I couldn’t seem to do more than whisper.

He laughed. “I hope you didn’t let Persi drive!” He found Persi and winked.

My friend was a much better actress than I was and came forward to kiss Griffon on the cheek. "I'll remember that." She tugged on my arm. "Let's leave him alone with his date."

Griffon rolled his eyes and gave me one more concerned look before slipping back into the booth.

"I'm fine," I mouthed, then followed Persi away from him. I did one obligatory longing glance over my shoulder, then asked a waitress where I might find the loo. Of course Persi didn't let me go alone, so I rewarded her concern by letting her listen to me boke.

Loudly.

When I was done, I checked my face. The only tears in my eyes were from retching. I was fine. The money belt around my waist made me look fatter than it usually did, so I took it off, handed it to Persi. "Take this, would you? Just until...just take it."

She hooked it around her, tucked it under her pants. "I'm so sorry," she said, then reached for my arm, but I pulled away.

"I'm fine. I'm hungry. Let's eat." And I marched out the door like a good little soldier.

"I ordered ye whisky," Kitch said, and scooted a shot glass my way.

Wickham reached across the table to put a hand over it. "Hold on. Will this make ye less tense, or will it loosen yer tongue? We can't have ye—"

"Less tense," I lied, then picked up the drink and threw it back all at once. I'd never had much hard liquor before, for Hank's sake. I hoped I wouldn't regret it.

“He’s here looking for clues about his sister,” Persi told the others. “No idea what questions he’s asking.” She waited on Wickham.

“All right. Go on, then. But keep yer wits about ye. Not much room to maneuver in here.”

“No problem.” She wandered back into the restroom again. A second later, the door opened on its own, then shut again.

“Stop watchin’,” Kitch hissed, then pushed a cup of short, thin breadsticks my way. “Keep yerself busy with these.”

“I need more than this. Need...something salty. And a coke.”

Kitch waived the waitress back and we ordered fish and chips for six and a coke for me. He asked for more breadsticks while we waited.

“Uh oh.” Wickham said. “The woman is pointing this way. Let’s hope she hasn’t been looking at footage from the library.” He laughed like he’d said something funny, then shook his head. “Griffon is looking now. Shaking his head. Done looking.” He grabbed a breadstick and shoved it into his mouth.

“This is torture,” Kitch said cheerfully, then grinned at me.

“Really? Torture? For *you*?” I reached for his drink, but he pulled it out of reach.

“One per customer, lady.”

“Can’t we just leave?”

Wickham shook his head. “And we need to come up with a plausible reason for looking for him. And fast. Looks like they’re wrapping up over there.”

“He thinks it’s a miracle I found him. What’s the miracle?”

“Brooks,” Kitch said. “Wickham contacted Brooks, who thought he’d mentioned Dublin.”

“What if he never spoke to Brooks?”

“His phone. We tracked his phone.”

“We’re with the police now?”

Kitch shrugged. “I have friends.”

“True.” Wickham looked at me. “We stick with the truth as much as possible. The only thing we leave out...is the part about his family. Got it? After all, we came to Dublin looking for a Fae who might be able to point us in the direction of the Fae King. Right?”

My eyes tried to jump out of my head. “We’re not going to tell him that!”

“Not going to tell me what?”

I turned to face Griffon, standing at my shoulder, waiting for a proper greeting. Beyond him, I noticed the door to the loo open on its own. No one came out. “Not going to explain why Persi’s been in the restroom so long. We ordered you fish and chips.”

“Oh. Thank you.” He stepped to the next table and politely borrowed a chair. He was always too polite. He tucked the chair close to mine and sat. After a glance, he kept his hands to himself like he was afraid I might bite.

Kitch kicked me under the table.

I reached over and grabbed Griffon’s hand, pulled it onto my thigh, and held it there. When he rubbed this thumb along mine, I rubbed his back.

Persi settled on the empty chair next to him. All smiles. I assumed the eavesdropping went well and she'd heard nothing about Wickham and me visiting the library the day before Daphne was reported missing. But something was off with Griffon too, and it wasn't the fact that he hadn't shaved. Couldn't count on anything.

Wickham's phone vibrated. He read a text, then answered it.

Griffon took his hand back to wave for the waitress, then asked her for a Guinness. Then he turned to the table at large. "So. How did you find me?"

Kitch opened his mouth to speak, but Persi cut him off. "Kitch here has friends in low places. We tracked your phone."

Pretty impressive, considering she hadn't been around for that conversation. The two were more in sync than I realized.

"Is something wrong? Is that why you..." Griffon's eyes widened. "Did you learn something about my sister? My brother?"

"I'm sorry, nay." Wickham said, then took a deep breath. "Lennon doesnae want me to tell ye this, but...ye remember Brian and Flann? They've been studying those pictures of The Covenant and now they have a new...theory they'd like to pursue."

"Uh oh."

"Aye, well, now they're set on finding the Fae King himself. Since the document says he had to stay in the realm of Man, they think they can find him."

"The actual Fae King?"

“The actual Fae King. We were hopin’—some of us were hopin’—ye might have some insight, since ye’re the resident expert on Fae, and even if we were allowed back into the libraries, there are no books left on the subject.”

I wasn’t sure when I covered my face with my hands, but I was glad they were there. I felt Griffon’s eyes on me, and I was afraid of what he might read on my face. I was shocked Wickham had found a way to ask where to find the Fae King without accusing the man of being Fae himself.

For a long minute, no one spoke, and I lowered my hands.

“Resident expert.” Griffon made a noise in his throat. “I see now,” he said, scowling at the remaining breadsticks. “That explains...quite a lot, actually.” I waited for him to look at me, but he didn’t. He folded his hands on the table, then faced Wickham, like he’d forgotten I was there. “How long have you known?”

Wickham held his tongue. I wasn’t sure what Griffon was asking.

“When did you know...I was Fae?” He turned slightly toward me but stopped short, like there was a wall between us. “I assume it was a recent development. Since the park?” I barely recognized his voice. So cold.

“At the park,” Wickham said. “Yer eyes.”

“Ah.” Griffon smiled at Persi. I only knew because I watched him in my periphery while I stared straight ahead. “Lost my head, I guess. But you suspected sooner if you were watching that closely. It would explain why you didn’t trust me to know where you are staying—were staying. But unlike Kitch here, I have no friends in low places. I would have done you no harm, you know. I am no threat to...witches.”

Wickham barked out a laugh. “How long have ye known?”

“Muir’s? Twins? Who doesn’t know?” He shook his head. “You must know O’Ryan is hunting them.”

“Inspector O’Ryan? Aye, we do.”

Griffon shook his head. “Hunter, not Inspector. Orion the Hunter. A constellation was named for him, though he has many names.”

Wickham blinked, surprised. “And Ambition?”

The stranger beside me stilled. “You believe Orion is...” He gripped the edge of the table. “But Ambition won’t be loosed unless and until The Covenant is broken.”

Wickham nodded slowly. “It was. Six years ago.”

“Six!” Griffon’s butt lifted off the chair, but he sat again. The waitress was back with part of our order and a Guinness for him. He took a long drink, and after she was gone, he continued. “How do you know it was broken?”

“Because I unwittingly helped break it. I am tryin’ to make up for that.”

“So Orion is hunting witches because he believes they are the people set apart? That they hold the Naming Powers?”

Wickham shook his head. “I’ve said too much already. Ye’re a smooth man, Mr. Carew. I have no assurances—”

“You’ve earned no assurances.” Again, he almost glanced at me. “What do you want from me?”

For a long time, Wickham only breathed. Then he folded his arms, leaned on the table, and lowered his voice. “I want to ken which side ye’re on, sir.”

Griffon leaned his head back and chuckled. “You think I would side with The Hunter, to bring about...the end of our worlds?” He whispered the last. “Whose side? I am on the Carew side. My sister and brother are my...my only concern now. You go find the king and let him know The Covenant has been broken. Maybe he will help you.” He stood and scooted his chair under the table until it gently touched my knee. Finally, he glanced at me. “Goodbye, Miss Todd.”

Kitch kicked me again. I ignored him and turned in my seat and called his name. “Griffon?”

He ignored me.

“Mr. Carew?”

He stopped at the benches, listening.

“Can I talk to you a minute?”

Again, he ignored me and headed for the door. I jumped up and chased after. When I got to the sidewalk, he was almost to the corner, still carrying his coat. I ran to catch up and reached for him just as he spun back.

“What do you want?”

“Griff—” I gasped at the sight of his eyes. Bright rust, black, and golden brown glass folded in on themselves, over and over, like a kaleidoscope. “I’m sorry. I didn’t believe it. From the beginning, I thought Wickham was wrong. It was shock. I didn’t know what it would mean for us.”

“Clearly, you want no part of me.”

“That’s not true. It’s you...you who won’t want any part of me.”

He softened then. It was brief, but I saw it. That little half-step he took toward me. But Wickham came toward us and he

recoiled again. That hard heart of mine fell a little lower in my chest.

“Mr. Carew,” Wickham said, coming close. I had a feeling he was more worried that I might confess everything more than he wanted to pester the man. “If you are not on Orion’s side, if you want us to succeed in stopping him, we need to know how to find the king. Can you help us? At least point us in the right direction?”

Griffon smirked. “Oh, yes. Of course. It’s the reason you came to Oxford in the first place. No sacrifice too great.”

Wickham’s gaze cut to mine. He knew exactly why the man was so bitter. But we had secrets to keep. Breaking Griffon Carew’s heart was necessary for our own survival. If he knew what we’d done, he might destroy us all.

And if we were all taken off the board, there would be no one to stand in Orion’s way.

Orion, the Hunter.

I looked into Griffon’s eyes, begged him to know my feelings for him had been real. Then I begged him aloud. “Please, Griffon. Help us. You probably know better that we do what’s waiting down the line if we fail. Don’t turn your back on the rest of the world just because...because you can’t love me anymore.”

He roared and turned his back, cursed in a language I couldn’t understand. But he stayed.

Wickham backed away, moved back up the sidewalk and out of earshot. But he was there if...anyone...tried to hurt me.

“Griffon?”

He roared again as he turned to face me and closed the distance between us with one lunge. He wrapped his arms around my middle and lifted me off the ground. Then we shot into the sky like a rocket, tilted to the side, and...flew.

I remembered the lift and fall of massive wings.

Wickham didn't fly, but Griffon could. Wickham couldn't pop into the sky and take me away from him. Those arms were wrapped tight, but if he dropped me...

We lunged through the wind, dipping a little after every downstroke. I didn't want to puke but...

I lost consciousness instead.

THIS IS WHERE I DIE

I woke under a bulky blanket breathing icy air. I remembered I was in Ireland and at first, I wondered if we were back at Brian and Flann's house. But when I turned toward the crackling fire, nothing was familiar. Griffon stood to one side, in jeans and no shirt, staring into the flames. My leather jacket hung over the back of a chair. I'd been wearing boots...

It all came back to me, and I sat up fast. Thanks to those hours at the park, my body complained, and I groaned. Griffon turned at the sound but didn't come any closer.

"High altitude," he said. His deep, resounding voice vibrated through my bones. "It will take your body a while to adjust to the thin air."

Thin air? I needed deep breaths. There was nothing I could do about my racing heart.

The room became clearer. The curved walls and ceiling were stone that radiated cold that pulsated against my face. I pulled the blanket back to my shoulders and realized it was fur. Thick black fur that did a fine job keeping my legs warm.

I was still dressed. He hadn't found Hank. Beneath the covering, I put a hand on my waist but there was nothing there! Then I remembered I'd handed him off to Persi in the

bathroom at the bar, not wanting to look fat to a man who now hated me.

Still, I was glad Hank was safe. If I disappeared forever, at least he was in capable hands. Whomever Persi passed it to would be her worry.

Again, Griffon faced the fire, presenting me with his flawless, muscular back. I wondered if he kept the shirt off to convince me I'd imagined the wings, since there wasn't so much as a fingernail scratch on his skin.

Did I owe him an apology, or should I demand one? After all, he'd done just what Wickham feared he might—whisked me away the first chance he got. Neither of us could have expected the direction that whisking would take.

“So...you can fly.”

He ignored me.

“What now? You feed me to those monsters?”

“Which monsters would those be?” he asked, without turning.

I shivered but was glad he wasn't watching. “You know. Those Anubis looking things. Or those beavers with fangs?”

He shook his head. “You've read too many fairytales.”

“Yeah, right. They're murdering sets of witches all over the world and it's just a fairy tale.”

He turned then. A slight scowl. “What are you talking about?”

If it was an act, I certainly couldn't tell. And if he wasn't in league with O'Ryan—no, Orion—then maybe he was oblivious. “You said yourself he's hunting them. You think

he's just skinning them and hanging their hides on a barn somewhere for fun?"

"You're going to tell me everything. Now." He stared me down. I was tempted to ask if he'd throw me off a mountain top if I refused. But the possibility was too viable to joke about.

"Fine. But would you mind getting dressed first?" I couldn't hold a thought in my head with that chest in my line of sight.

He moved to the side of the room, opened a drawer, and pulled out a sweatshirt. He pulled it over his head while he crossed back to the chair by the fire, as far away from me as he could get. He sat on the edge, leaned his elbows on his knees, and watched me with those shifting eyes.

"What is this place?"

He shook his head. "The murders."

I propped pillows behind me to keep my back from freezing, scooted against them, then pulled the fur around me. I started near the beginning, leaving out my personal rescue, but included all the deaths that were caused by those creatures, beginning with the murders in Oxford, five years ago. The twin witches had gotten away, but two women in their building had been slaughtered. I told him two monsters were killed, but I didn't tell him it was Everly who did it.

"But no bodies were found," he said. It wasn't a question.

"No. As soon as they died, there was a..."

"Rent in the universe?"

"Yes. And they were—"

"Taken back."

“Yes. But where?” I went down the list, following in order of meridians. Then I went back five years and told him about the wedding without naming names. About Orion looking for a *Third* whose blood had dripped on the ground. “But the girl didn’t have that power anymore, and the fairy wasn’t happy about it.” I told him the guests fought and killed the small army of monsters he’d brought along. He promised he’d be back for revenge, on everyone, once he finished...*something*.

“You called her a third? A third of what?”

“A Muir witch born to a Muir witch, who was born to a Muir witch, is called a *Third*. They are rarely twins, and they have a lot more power than normal. We think...” I groaned. Wickham was right. Griffon was smooth. It was so easy to spill my guts. Eventually, the truth was going to fly out of my mouth and doom me.

Doom us all.

“You think the Naming Powers are hidden among this group of *Thirds*?”

I nodded, bit my lips together, and swore I wasn’t going to tell him anything more.

“You’re wrong,” he said. “This girl at the wedding couldn’t have once held a Naming Power and then given it away.”

“She shouldn’t have lost it except in death.”

“Exactly.”

“And if she did...it would have broken the contract, right?”

He shook his head, roared at me in frustration, then ripped the shirt off his head again before running around the corner. A

flash of light. His massive, fleeing shadow was replaced immediately by a flurry of hailstones that bounced and hissed on the stone floor. Over the racket, I might have imagined the whoosh, whoosh of powerful wings.

By the time I pried myself out from beneath the fur and ran to the entrance, the warmth that had been building in the room was already gone. I got only a glimpse of what lay outside before I slammed the thick door shut, but it was enough.

Clouds. Angry ones. Hail and mist...and the jutting, icy mountaintops a few hundred yards away.

This is where I'm going to die.

CROSS MY HEART

The storm raged outside the door. There were no windows, so I had no warning each time thunder pounded the stone walls, rattled my bones and teeth, and promised the next one might bring it all down.

If Griffon was flying around in this, lightning would get him for sure. If he were huddled, shirtless, in some cave just to keep his distance from me, he'd freeze to death.

I had a stack of logs to keep the fire going through the storm, as long as it didn't last for more than a day. From the chair, I retrieved the sweatshirt he'd cast aside and made a nest on the thick rug before the fire with some pillows from the bed and that big fur. I kept a safe distance from the open flames. Though I was tempted to fill the grate with wood, I knew if I kept the fire small, the logs would last.

Survival didn't seem like such a curse word anymore.

I inhaled the smell of the shirt. Clean, delicious, Griffon. "Come on, my love. Don't be dead."

I thought about the team. Wickham would be throwing fits. Even if Brian or Flann or Wickham's sisters could perform telepathy across the Irish Sea, I'd never be able to explain where I was. And I had no phone on me to trace. I'd left the

thing in my hotel room, needing a break from the obsession over a certain professor who wasn't allowed to call me.

As for the team, maybe they'd worry and fret for a day, but they had a job to do. They'd have to move on quickly and forget about me.

I laughed out loud just to hear my voice. "I've been here, what, an hour? How pathetic."

I started to imagine what might happen if Griffon ever came back for me. Just the mention of someone breaking The Covenant set him off. When he learned his brother's car had been found—without his brother—he'd be more dangerous still. And when he learned who deserved his rage...I'd be lucky if the worst thing he did was drop me from the skies.



I DIDN'T HAVE TO LOOK OUTSIDE TO KNOW THE SUN WAS down. Cold air hovered ever closer to my personal-sized dome of warmth. I refused to guess at the temperature.

Colder was all I would admit.

The thunder had lost its anger. If I slept, I could ignore my bones and teeth shaking for a little while. I'd need to sleep lightly so I could keep the fire fed, so I told myself I could nap for half an hour. And when that psychological alarm clock worked on the first try, I tried it again.

And didn't wake up.



I DREAMED OF PUTTING LOGS ON THE FIRE. I WANTED TO SIT UP and do it, but I knew I would freeze. And if I froze, I'd have to pee. And if I peed, I'd freeze. Better to wait a while longer...



THE POP AND CRACKLE OF THE FIRE ASSAULTED MY EARS, AND I woke whether I wanted to or not. The storm had stopped. That's why I could hear the fire so clearly. And my nose wasn't so cold anymore.

I opened one eye and stared at the two large logs eating up most of the space in the fireplace, their edges burning cheerfully. Had I added them in my sleep?

I pushed the fur aside and wasn't instantly attacked by arctic air. I sat up and looked around. The light had changed. Sunlight came from deeper in the cavern.

I freaking survived the night!

Still sore from the park, I stretched as I got to my feet, then froze. Griffon lay prone on the bed, his bare feet over the edge like he'd collapsed onto it, his back as flawless as the night before. No lightning burns. No wings.

Had I imagined the wings?

Ah, no. Still on a mountaintop. And a helicopter sure as hell hadn't brought me here.

I quietly followed the light and found a bathroom with a slanted skylight half-covered with snow. The wind must have cleared some away. The toilet, happily, was in working order and flushed when I pulled a chain. Two chains for working the sink. One to let the water out of the pipe and another to release the water into the drain.

Thanks to a tube of toothpaste and a clean finger, I left that bathroom feeling like I'd just had a cup of Sarah's tea, but I stopped short at the sound of Griffon gasping, then cursing, his deep voice like thunder in my heart. He ran to the front door and flung it open. I thought he was going to leave me again and shouted his name.

He spun around the grabbed the edges of the doorway. His alarm melted. He'd thought I'd tried to leave.

It took all of two seconds to get to me. The door slammed shut at the same time his arms wrapped around my waist. He lifted me onto my toes. His mouth slammed into mine and he kissed me as angrily as he'd cursed, but I didn't mind.

Without breaking the kiss, he turned me, scooped me up with an arm behind my knees, and carried me back to the bed. I'd imagined that moment a hundred times. Now I told myself it was what I wanted, convinced myself I didn't care what had brought us here. I'd take him any way I could get him, angry or not. I'd have one passionate memory I could hold onto for the rest of my life.

For the rest of my semi-dangerous life.

But his memory wouldn't be sweet at all, once he learned the truth. And he'd curse the moment he'd taken me off the street in Dublin. He'd curse the day he carried my books through the library.

He hovered over me, kissing my mouth, touching my hair, my face, my neck, learning me like a blind man. I did the same, trying to press the feel of him deep in my memory so it could never fade. *Please, please, please, don't let it fade!*

A little longer. Just a little more...

He stilled and I opened my eyes. He wiped a hand along the side of my face and it came away wet. He searched my eyes. I had no idea what he saw, but he buried his face beside my head, into the pillow, and growled. A long minute later, he rolled away from me. And the cold that swamped me had nothing to do with temperature.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his back to me. “You just can’t manage it, can you?”

“Manage it?”

“Loving a Fae.”

I got up and walked around the bed. He spread his knees and I stepped between them as he wrapped those powerful arms around me again. “Love a Fae? I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve been doing it pretty well for a long time now.”

“Then stay with me.”

“Stay?” I didn’t understand what he was asking.

“*Stay* with me—”

“Griffon—”

“We can ride it out together. If we stay here, we’ll be the last to know when the world comes crashing down. We can’t change what Moire saw anyway.”

I was dying to ask what that meant but didn’t want to give him a reason to let go. “I don’t know how much of this cold I could take.”

He shook his head. “The Fae King has a hundred such places, in all climes. We can take in the beauty of the world and still keep to ourselves. It’s the stuff that dreams are made of.” He buried his face against me. “*What we have* is what

dreams are made of. And I bless whatever fate brought you to me.”

“You’re making this so hard.”

He stood, suddenly, and I stumbled back. He caught my upper arms and turned me. I was back on the bed, looking up into those beautiful, flashing eyes. “Hard? I mean to make it impossible, woman.” His nostrils flared, breathing me in, his attention moving from my eyes to my mouth and back again. “Do you know that if a Fae claims a human, she is his? For life?”

I laughed lightly. “I don’t believe you.”

“Shall we test it?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple. I love you, Griffon. I never believed I could love someone like this. I...didn’t think I was built for it. But I can’t just ignore what’s going on outside that door. Orion must be stopped, and I might be able to help. It’s my—”

“Destiny?”

I laughed again. “I was going to say my duty.”

He shook his head and drew a line along my jaw. Tears built in his eyes, making them wet. “Still pouring other people’s coffee.”

“Something like that. Loving you is already the most selfish thing I’ve ever done in my life. And whether you want it or not, later, I probably can’t stop—”

“Stay with me. One more night. Let me prove—”

“I can’t. And you have nothing to prove. But I...I do. One day soon, you’re going to understand, but I can’t explain it. Not yet.”

“You have more secrets.”

“I do.”

“At least tell me you’re keeping them from Wickham.”

“I’m keeping them from Wickham...and the rest of the world.”

He closed his eyes for a long time, then exhaled in a huff.
“What if I kept you here? Never took you back?”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“You have too much faith in me.”

“No. I’ve known those kinds of people before, and you couldn’t be one of them if you tried.”

“I don’t know. I like a challenge.”

I shook my head, laid my hand on his cheek, and stared at his scruffy lips until he got the hint and kissed me. A long time later, I pushed him away. “You have to take me back.”

He pressed his head into the mattress. This time, his growl filled my entire body with chills and I laughed. Hovering over me again, he gave me his fiercest scowl. “I won’t be happy about it.”

“Come on. You frown and I’ll cry...and the wind can dry my tears.”

“Impossible. It will be half a day before we can leave.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t fly into Dublin unless it’s very, very dark.”

“Half a day? I’ll starve.”

“There’s a kitchen.”

“But is there any food?”

“I stocked up, just in case.”

“On what?”

“Pancakes.”

Late in the afternoon, when we finished our second breakfast of the day, he suddenly sobered. I braced myself for bad news.

“When this is all over,” he said, “if the Hunter is defeated, I’ll expect you to leave the rest of them...and choose me.”

I chose my response carefully, knowing what was ahead. “When this is all over, if we’re left standing, I promise I will deny you nothing.”

THAT FIRST STEP IS THE HARDEST

*B*y the time we were ready to leave, I had plenty of tears for the wind to dry. I stepped outside wearing my coat and his and caught a chilly breath in my lungs. The view was...indescribable. I wasn't looking down on an expanse of Irish cities, but upon dozens of mountaintops glowing blue-white in the darkness, lit from above by the entire universe of stars. We really were at the top of the world.

Understandably, the moon hid its ugly face in shame.

I could have stood there much longer, imprinting yet another glorious sight into my memory, but when Griffon came outside without a shirt, I couldn't make him freeze any longer than he had to. He'd claimed the cold didn't affect him like it did me, but I couldn't quite believe it.

He closed the door behind him, wrapped his arms around my waist, and lifted me up until our lips met. The wind swirled around us, and when I pulled back, we were already in the air. Massive, bronze wings rose and fell from his back.

"You tricked me," I said.

"Best not to think too much beforehand," he said in my ear. "The first step's the hardest. Hold tight, now!"

His arms held me against him as we tilted. In my terror, I tried not to choke him. But I didn't have to worry about my legs—the wind kept them up as we flew and soared over those icy mountaintops. My view consisted of the Milky Way and the graceful movement of wings. But only for a minute.

Again, I blacked out.

I came to lying across Griffon's arms. We were still in the air. My stomach clenched against the drop, but considering the rest of the ride, we came down slowly. The lights of Dublin rose up to greet us and we settled on the gravel of a dark alley.

"No one seems to have noticed," I whispered.

"Not a lot of people look up at this hour."

He put me on my feet, and I leaned on my knees for a minute while the world in my head settled. He took his coat off my shoulders, slipped it on, and buttoned it shut. The wings had disappeared, but I'd missed it.

He bent to kiss me, but I shook my head. "I'll start crying again."

He kissed me anyway.

Hand in hand, we walked around to the front of my hotel, slowing when we reached the door. A few seconds later, Urban came out of nowhere, barreling toward us. While glaring at Griffon, he veered my way and pulled me into a bear hug.

Griffon smirked at the Highlander while he removed his coat, then gave me one last, heart-stopping stare before he bolted into the starry night.

"I'll be damned," Urban said, searching the sky.

"Yeah. Now I know why he always smells like fresh air. I assume Wickham lost his mind worrying?"

Urban nudged me toward the hotel doors. “Aye. He did. And he’s gone back to Oxford, in case ye make yer way home.”

“And you stayed—”

“Just in case.”

“I’m sorry you worried.”

Urban grinned. “I wasnae worried. That winged fairy wouldnae have hurt ye.”

“At least not yet.” I shivered. “Though, I did think I would freeze to death.”

He led me inside and put his heavy arm around my shoulders and tucked me in close. “A fairy with wings. Who would have guessed it?”

We headed to Urban’s room where he’d stored my bag. The phone was ringing before we got the door open. Urban answered, then handed it to me and mouthed, *Griffon*.

“Hello?”

“*Lennon.*”

“What are you up to?”

“*I called to confess.*”

I held my breath.

“*I misled you before. I believe I wished you luck finding the Fae King.*”

My heart skipped a beat. “You’re not going to tell me you’re working for Orion.” I’d told him about the *Thirds*. I’d told him what we were trying to do. The Hunter could eliminate the threat easily by just eliminating us. It would be game over!

“I’m not. I swear it.”

“But you hope we don’t find him?”

“I’m saying...it’s too late. He’s dead. I’m guessing five years dead. I just didn’t want you wasting your time when you have others to find.”

“How...how did he die?”

“Murdered. The only possibility. I suspect the same man who may be behind the disappearance of my brother and sister.”

I tried to sound innocent. “And who’s that?”

“The other name on The Covenant. Afi Cean More. If I can find him, I should know immediately. I expect he’ll have the king’s...beauty.”

I tried to see Wickham’s face in my head, but my emotions made me blind to everything. “Griffon! How...how do you know all this?”

“That, I can’t say.”

“Why?”

“I suppose I’ll have to keep my secrets...for as long as you keep yours.”

“Griffon...”

I listened to him breathe, unwilling to end the call.

He sighed. *“Goodbye, my love. Remember your promise.”*



I CALLED THE FRONT DESK, TOLD THEM IT WAS URGENT, THAT I needed to know the number of the last incoming call. In the

middle of the night, there couldn't have been others in the last few minutes.

No red tape or anything. They just gave it to me. I wrote it on the Maldron Hotel notepad.

“Ye mean to call him back?”

I shook my head. “Gonna have Kitch track him. That way...that way we'll see him coming.”

Urban snorted. “Unless he comes from the sky.”

DEFCON FIVE

We didn't bother spending the night. As soon as Wickham heard my voice, he popped in to take us home. While I studied his handsome face, he looked me over like he was searching for a tracking device—or for signs I'd been abused. I finally told him to knock it off. I was fine.

He stared me down, trying to read something in my eyes. So I crossed them, worried he'd see into my imagination where he was cutting off the head of the Grandfather, over and over again.

He wasn't amused. "Glad ye're takin' this so lightly."

"Griffon could have dropped me out of the sky. Believe me, I'm not taking anything lightly." I made a face. "Glad you're back, Lennon."

He forced the barest of smiles. "Glad you're back, Lennon. And just in time, too."

"Why?"

"I thought...I feared our professor would have been informed, while he had ye... Lennon, video has been found... of ye getting into Asher Carew's taxi. His last fare. The reporters have connected his disappearance to that of his sister's, so...ye're a person of interest here in Ireland, as well

as Scotland. But if Griffon had been alerted, he might have returned ye in pieces.”

I shook my head slowly because my body was going numb. “We were...off the grid.” That hammer was about to strike again, and Griffon’s heart had just started mending from the first. “It’s just a matter of time, then.”

“Aye. So let’s get ye home before he comes lookin’.”



WE POPPED INTO ENGINEERING TO FIND PERSI WAITING IN THE corner. After a quick hug, she opened my hand and slapped a heavy money belt into it, then held up her hands and backed away. “You’re it. And by the way, I don’t want to play anymore. It whined like a new puppy at night. Got a few naps in, but I’m out.” Then she winked. “Glad you’re all right.”

In the morning, I couldn’t bear to touch the giant pancake Alwyn made for me. I used the excuse that it was just too pretty. He’d used different kinds of berries to make a map of the British Isles and outlined it with whipped cream.

He pointed to the different sections. “Ireland, Scotland, and England. Congratulations on being wanted in every country. Sure but ye’ll have to put forth more effort to get Wales to notice ye, of course. My country is a mite harder to impress.”

When we gathered after breakfast, the sisters were on the monitor, and in front of everyone, I confessed almost everything, as I’d done the night before, to Wickham.

“The bad news is that I told Griffon what we’re trying to do. I told him about the *Thirds*, and he already knew we were

trying to find the Fae King.” I noticed no one was surprised. “The good news is that he isn’t in league with Orion.”

“That we know of,” said one of the sisters.

“Right. That we know of. I’m sorry. It just...”

“Don’t worry, love,” Persi called out. She sat back in her chair with her butt at the front of the seat, her legs out, her arms crossed. Her mocking accent was meant to lighten the mood, I was sure of it. “If that man was standing in front of me with his shirt off, I woulda told him anything ‘e wanted to know.”

“There’s a little more bad news,” I said. “Griffon is sure the king is dead. That he died...five years ago.”

“So whoever killed him has the power of...” Everly nodded at the list. “Beauty.”

One of the sisters asked how he knew.

I shook my head. “He wouldn’t say.”

Persi dropped the mock accent. “So what he said at the bar, telling us to find the king and see if he’d help us?”

“He was angry.” I sucked in a deep breath. “Any minute, he’s going to see those news reports about his brother’s last passenger. And that we were at Trinity. He’ll be something much worse than angry.”

“Wickham? Son?” Brian’s voice cracked. “Just how powerful are yer wards on this estate?”



WE WERE AT DEFCON 5. LOCKDOWN.

No one left the estate for any reason and we concentrated on our next plan, which was to locate the only *Third* we had a lead on—who tended to live at or near a lighthouse on the North Sea. We suspected it was the power of Hope, from our list, the power associated with the name Mercail or Pearl.

We made a list of the lighthouses that qualified, put them in a logical order, and tracked the weather forecasts. Every morning, there were defense lessons in the gardens out back, and if it was raining, we'd use the ballroom at the far end of the boys wing. If I did very well, I'd be rewarded with an offensive move or two.

I accidentally cut Kitch's hand the first morning, so I offered to let him carry Hank around in his pocket the rest of the day. By that night, the only thing left of the wound was a pink line.

Persi watched the news so the rest of us didn't have to. And on the third day, Wickham breached our little quarantine to pop out and make a call to Brooks. Brian, Flann, and I were waiting in Engineering when he popped home again, his expression grim, his clothes and hair dripping.

He waved for us to follow, and we settled around the dining room table while the Youngs fixed us tea. "We have some choices to make. None of them good." Becca Young brought him a towel for his head. He thanked her and waited for the doors to close, then continued. "The police in Edinburgh have asked that ye present yerself for questionin'."

"The police? Or Orion?"

"Brooks said they never mentioned the Inspector or Scotland Yard."

“I can’t go to Edinburgh. None of us can. The last tower Carew’s phone pinged off of was in Edinburgh.”

Kitch joined us just as Ranald Young carried in a heavy tea tray. His wife, Deb, followed with a platter of cucumber sandwiches and skewered fruit. She poured five cups of tea, then nodded to Wickham. “The others have been served in the music room, sir.”

“I love afternoon tea,” Flann said. “Especially when someone else prepared it.”

Kitch downed a couple of sandwiches, then cleared his throat. “He’s not in Edinburgh,” he said. “He’s made his way to Wales. Pinged off a Yarborough tower this morning.”

“You’re sure?”

“Pinged off a few others in between. Must be stopping along the way, putting his battery back in to make calls.”

“Speaking of calls,” I said. “Did Brooks say there’ve been any calls from him?”

Wickham nodded.

My heart jumped.

“How many?”

“Some.”

“How many is some?”

“Twenty-two in the last forty-eight hours. After the first few, he stopped answering them. But the message is always the same.”

“Okay, okay. Then what’s the message.”

With a sour face, Wickham warned me I didn’t want to know.

“It’s alright. I can handle it. I’m positive they can’t be any worse than I’ve imagined.”

He sighed, then pulled out his phone, touched it a few times, then laid it on the table. “These are the first half-dozen.”

“Please ask Lennon to contact me.”

“Please ask Wickham to contact me.”

“Sir, this is an emergency. Please contact Wickham and tell him I must speak to her. And if he won’t allow it, then I must speak to him.”

“If you would kindly pass along this message to Lennon, I understand you were trying to warn me. But now we need to talk. It doesn’t matter what happened, I need to know the truth.”

“Mr. Brooks, if you don’t convince Wickham to call me, I’ll come get my answers from you.”

Wickham reached for the phone. “*You tell those witches —*” He cut off the recording. “They alternate after that. Pleading, then threatening, then pleading again. He must believe the messages would be passed on.”

I remembered to breathe. “Well, he was right. But like I said, nothing worse than what I expected.” It was the deep voice that shook me to my toes, not the words, and I wondered if there was some spell behind it. Maybe that’s why I always told him more than I wanted to.

But not this time.

“Do they plan to arrest me?”

“Brooks didn’t think so. Even if they have footage of ye in his taxi, there is no proof ye did anything to the man. They can only question ye.”

“Unless it’s Orion.”

“Right. But Brooks thinks ye can show up at a random police station, make a statement, and leave again before they have time to make a fuss. If they demand ye present yerself for arrest, they’ll have to contact Brooks first. But since ye didnae kill anyone, there cannae be enough proof to hold ye.”

“Make a statement? In and out? Can we do it all in daylight?”

“Aye, but why?”

“Carew can’t fly into a city unless its dark.”

“Fine, then. We’ll get ye out whilst the sun is high.”

“Just one more thing to decide, then.”

“Aye?”

“Just what am I going to say happened in that taxi?”

DING DONGS AND THUNDER

*A*t breakfast that morning I was a bundle of nerves waiting for Kitch to join us. But when he did, he was smiling.

“He’s still in Wales. Made a call this morning. Hasn’t gone anywhere since yesterday.”

“I’ll call Brooks,” Wickham said, set aside his napkin, and disappeared.

We’d already packed a bag and had our strategy for after we left the police station. If anyone intended to catch us coming or going from Oxford, they’d be out of luck—we weren’t taking a car. And when Wickham and Alwyn had taken the car, to pop out for a siege-worth of groceries for those staying behind, they hadn’t gone to the local stores.

I don’t know where they went for sure, but I found a coveted box of Ding Dongs on my bed soon after they returned.

As for the Youngs and Meral and Reem, we knew *they* knew what was going on, we just pretended they didn’t. And they pretended the same. With the killings in Tunisia, however, they were all very happy to be living under the protection of the *Seanathair* of the Muir witch clan—according to Kitchens. At least, for now.

Thankfully, the estate was large enough to provide a change of scenery for anyone going stir-crazy.

Besides the seven members of staff, the brothers remained, both reasonably confident in Wickham's power to keep the property hidden behind his magical version of camouflage. Everly and Urban stayed too, to monitor the progress of monsters along the Ninth Meridian East, prepared to go at a moment's notice as always.

Kitch and Persi came with us to find the Naming Powers. A party of four wasn't the most inconspicuous choice, but we could split up if necessary. Besides, I was just learning to fight, and was more of a liability than an asset. With the other two along, our chances of making it home again were loads better.

We just had one little stop to make before we headed for the first lighthouse on our list. Brooks was in Edinburgh already, and would pick the police station at random, then text Wickham.

At ten o'clock, right on schedule, the text came.

Brief, tearless goodbyes, then pop, we were standing in someone's backyard.



THE CORSTORPHINE POLICE STATION WAS A LARGE MODERN building with sharp angles, covered in dark grey brick and teal-green siding. It sat on the curve of a busy road just a block from the backyard we'd found ourselves in. No one noticed when we slipped out the gate and onto the front walk.

Our nervous solicitor shuffled his feet in the tiny parking lot. “They’re waiting. I explained we’re here to give an official statement. They didn’t seem to know who Miss Todd is, but they will have found out by now. Still, I expect we’ll get in and out quickly.”

Kitch crossed the busy road to keep watch from a distance. Persi, Wickham and I went inside with Brooks, and we were politely led to an interview room where a middle-aged officer greeted us. He offered us tea, invited us to sit on thick-cushioned chairs, asked if we were comfortable. I got the feeling they were stalling. A look from Wickham said he thought the same.

“Miss Todd has a statement to read,” Brooks said, still standing. He was too nervous to sit, apparently, but at least brave enough to speak up for me. “We have safety concerns for her, so we need to be quick about this.”

“She’ll be safe enough here—”

“Turn on the camera,” Brooks barked. “We can’t afford the time to discuss it.”

The younger officer jumped to obey. He switched on the camera, aimed the lens at Lennon, then announced who she was, the date, the officers in the room before giving her a nod.

I read the words I’d practiced a dozen times, telling myself they were only words, and words couldn’t make me cry. “Nearly two months ago...I was walking from the Waverly Station to the U.S. Consulate because I needed a new passport. I realized I was being followed by a woman and two men. I stopped and let them pass. They continued around the corner. I was scared they might jump me, so I backtracked a little and hailed a taxi. I told the driver where I wanted to go and he

turned that same corner, then stopped. The woman and two men climbed into the taxi with me.

“They mistook me for someone else and thought I had something of theirs. I told them they were mistaken, but they didn’t believe me. They...assaulted me, broke my arm, searched my clothes.” Though I fought it, tears came to my eyes and choked me. “They were pissed when they didn’t find what they were looking for.

“By then, we were in a dark parking lot. I kicked and fought, and when someone opened a door, I got away. I called my friends, then hid until they came to get me. I don’t know what happened to my attackers. I didn’t know anyone was missing until...recently.”

Brooks handed me a pen so I could sign the paper in front of witnesses. My hand jumped when a single boom of thunder shook the building. The officers chuckled, but I rose to my feet, unable to breathe.

“Skies were clear when we got here,” Persi said. She and Wickham were on their feet too.

Wickham headed for the door. “Ye think that was thunder?”

Fear froze me. I couldn’t even shake my head. “Not a chance.”

Wickham listened for only a second before he waved Persi to him. They both stepped toward me, but that young officer yanked me back behind him. Shouting erupted outside the door and he backed me up even further. The older officer joined him, putting their bodies and the table between me and my friends.

Wickham and Persi tried to round the table and close the distance, but the young officer held up his arm and reached for his baton. “Back! We’ve got orders to protect her, from her friends if necessary.”

Wickham sneered. “Ye think that thing that’s coming for her is her friend?”

“Th..th...thing?” Brooks backed into a corner and lifted his briefcase to cover his face.

Both batons were out now. I was grateful they weren’t guns.

Another boom of thunder and the door nearly burst off its hinges. Griffon filled the opening. His magnificent wings bracketed his shoulders and fell to his sides, appearing more black than bronze in the shadows. Judging by the murder in his eyes, his chest heaved from fury not exertion.

His gaze found me, locked with mine. Accusing and damning, hateful and...hurt.

Tears poured down the sides of my face.

Men shouted behind him, but no one was getting through. Griffon stepped into the room and those wings unfurled. No one in their right mind would touch them.

Wickham and Persi disappeared. While the officers gasped and sputtered, I mouthed “*I’m sorry.*” Before Griffon could react, Wickham appeared on the other side of the officers and grabbed my outstretched hand.

Griffon’s roar echoed in my head for hours, would probably echo in my heart...forever.

EXCERPT FROM CROWN OF TIDES AND FURY, BOOK 2
in the CROWN OF THE FAE KING SERIES.

THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE SNUCK QUIETLY INTO MY ROOM through thin cotton curtains. It warmed the corner of the bed and stared me down until I woke.

Come out and play, it said, before anyone can stop you.

I was dressed and tiptoeing to the door of the B&B a few minutes later. The screen door screeched and gave me away.

“Mornin’,” someone growled behind me. It was Wickham. He shuffled to the coffee pot with his eyes half shut, but said nothing to stop me. I kept moving so he wouldn’t have a chance.

We were there, on the north coast of Scotland, searching for a particular witch. But we were also being stalked ourselves by a man who used to love me, who had turned out to be Fae. He also happened to have wings and wanted me dead.

It was the combination of wings and threat that kept me from enjoying the sunshine for the past month. Each time I stepped outside, Wickham would point to the sky to remind me to grab my umbrella. Of course, it had nothing to do with the rain that came and went throughout the day.

Griffon, our stalker, once told me he couldn’t fly over populated places in daylight hours, but he’d proved that was a lie the last time he learned where I was. Apparently, when a Fae like him is angry enough, they do whatever they damn well want. I couldn’t assume anything anymore.

We were proud of the fact that we'd evaded him for a month now, while we went about our own business of saving the world before it knew it was in danger. But with each hour that passed, I knew we were getting that much closer to the day Griffon Carew found me. I just hoped our little company of four could do some good before that happened.

I picked my way to the cliff's edge a hundred yards from our little cottage. There was a path that took me halfway down the cliff face, to a level surface perfect for watching the violent waves of the North Sea gnawing on the rocky coast.

I raised my face to the morning sun and willed Vitamin D into my skin. I heard something shuffle on the rock beside me and jumped. When my sun-fried eyes worked again, I found a little blond girl sitting close, grinning out at the waves, her long hair dancing on the breeze.

"Hello," I said. "Where did you come from?"

She rolled her eyes and pointed at the top of the cliff behind us.

"Are you lost?"

Again, she rolled her eyes, shook her head, and grinned at the sea.

I guessed she was five or six judging from the tiny, perfect teeth of her smile. Too young to have lost any. Her cheeks were round and rosy. Her blue eyes sparkled with unabashed excitement, though she avoided eye contact like it was a game. Maybe she was like me and thought she was getting away with something.

"Are you hiding from someone?"

Another shake, followed by a giggle.

“What’s your name?”

“Fallon.” That smile never faltered.

“Do your parents know you’re out here?”

A nod.

“Were you supposed to tell me something?”

A shake.

“It’s a nice sunny day,” I said, grasping at conversation straws.

She gestured to the water. “On good days, she brings me treasure.”

“Oh, I see. You’re hoping to do some beach-combing?”

Another shake. A minute later, she got up on her knees so she could reach my face, then turned my head away from the view. “Don’t look. And count to ten!”

I did what I was told, counted aloud, counted slow, and she joined in.

“Ten!”

She took her small, soft hands from my face as she stood, then squealed.

A black figure rose from the waves, buffeted with each step. A snorkel. A wet suit. A buxom woman finally fought her way to shore and pulled her finned feet free of the water. In one hand, she held the pole of a large net full of fish and at least one crab. With her other hand, she pulled the gear off her head, along with the black covering.

She raised her chin to the cliff and grinned at the child, who waved so enthusiastically I thought she might fall off the ledge. I held onto the back of her pantleg just in case.

“Is that your mom?”

Fallon rolled her eyes again, then leaned until her nose was close to mine. “That’s my graaany,” she said, as if she thought I was the silliest person in the world.

I noticed the diver’s hair was more gray than blond. But I also realized she’d have to be nuts to go out into those ferocious waves that were intent on destruction. Only someone who knew the area well would risk such a thing for a free breakfast. Maybe someone who thought she could control the sea itself.

My body tingled from the mixture of warm sun, wet breeze, and the possibility that I might be looking at the very woman we’d been searching for.

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Preorder your copy of book 2, **CROWN OF TIDES AND FURY** now.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR...

Dear Reader,

For those who are new to my universe, welcome! For those who have crossed over into the Romantic Fantasy genre in order to follow my work, thank you for hanging in there with me. I trust the jump wasn't too drastic!

I apologize for the cliffhanger, but this story is sooo long that it will spill over into another book or two or...who knows? But it will be less than eight. Probably fewer than five, even. I just can't keep my mouth shut and want to tell you everything all at once!

By the way, the best way to keep a secret is to never entrust me with it. Seriously.

You'll notice the release date for Crown of Tides and Fury is September 2023, but I don't expect it to take that long. I promise to release it sooner if possible. I'm already deep into it—couldn't stay away from these characters for even a day!

If you want to stay in the loop, sign up for my newsletter at www.llmuir.com. If I start a new Facebook and Instagram pages for this series, I'll let you know that way.

You can follow me on Facebook at [FictionbyLLMuir](https://www.facebook.com/FictionbyLLMuir).

And from the bottom of my heart, thank you for playing.

~Lesli

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QUINN-

GASPAR-

WICKHAM-

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PERCY-

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A Good Day for Crazy

The Ghosts of Culloden Moor Series (Of most interest to the Crown series are 1, 50, 56, and 79)

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*Scottish Historical Romance

Kilt Trip

Pirate Trip

Viking Trip (maybe someday)

Under the Kissing Tree

*Regency Historical Romance

Blood for Ink

Bones for Bread

Body and Soul

Breath of Laughter

Beat of My Heart

Lord Fool to the Rescue

*Romantic Suspense

Gone Duck

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.L. Muir lives in the Rocky Mountains with her husband and family. She appreciates funny friends, a well-fed campfire, and rocking sleepy children.

Favorite quote on the wall while aiming for this book's deadline: (from *A Lion in Winter*)

King Henry II: When pigs fly, madam!

Eleanor of Aquitaine: A There will be pork in the trees by morning.

You can reach Lesli through her website— www.llmuir.weebly.com , or through any of the social media sites below.

Thank you for playing!



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1. <u>Beauty</u>	1. <u>Ghloir (Lori)</u>	1. <u>To make me bonny</u>	1. <u>Vanity</u>
2. <u>Hope</u>	2. <u>Mercail (Pearl)</u>	2. <u>To make me happy</u>	2. <u>Despair</u>
3. <u>Fertility</u>	3. <u>Thessa</u>	3. <u>To make me grow</u>	3. <u>Famine</u>
4. <u>Peace</u>	4. <u>Gilliam</u>	4. <u>To keep me kind</u>	4. <u>War</u>
5. <u>Art</u>	5. <u>Deona</u>	5. <u>To be helpful</u>	5. <u>Destruction</u>
6. <u>Light</u>	6. <u>Palida</u>	6. <u>To help me see</u>	6. <u>Darkness</u>
7. <u>Youth</u>	7. <u>Neia</u>	7. <u>To keep me young</u>	7. <u>Decay</u>
8. <u>Life</u>	8. <u>Ronena</u>	8. <u>To keep me here</u>	8. <u>Death</u>

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