

A LEGENDARY YOUNG ADULT ROMANTIC ADVENTURE

DEATH'S FAIR MAIDEN



DAN O'MAHONY

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Death's Fair Maiden

Dan O'Mahony

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To the HOPELESS and HOPEFUL romantics.

Prologue

Southwestern Ireland — 1500 BCE

This was not Aibheall's first time sneaking out of the roundhouse in the middle of the night, but it would be the last. She was meeting Conor in their special place, a secluded glen deep in the forest. From there, they would travel to the eastern shore, then hire a boat to take them to Albion, where they would start a new life for themselves.

Aibheall's parents, the King and Queen of the Luceni, and her brother and sister were still fast asleep. She slipped from the roundhouse and darted from building to building on her way to the main gates. She kept to the shadows and moved only when she was certain she was clear. The sentry on duty in the watchtower was a friend of Conor's and had agreed to let Aibheall through without blowing the alarm horn.

She still had to worry about the other people that lived within the ringfort, such as the servants, craftsmen, and her father's warriors. All it took was one person stepping outside to take a piss, and she was at risk of being caught. If caught, she would have to face her father's wrath and knew for certain she would never see Conor again.

Aibheall made it to the ringfort's inner gate, which the sentry had left unlatched for her. He had left the outer gate unlatched as well. She slipped through and, with an excited smile, jogged down the path that took her from the ringfort. As she ran past her father's fields, towards the forest, her smile became bittersweet.

She gazed back at the only home she had ever known so far. She would miss this place, where she had grown up and had so many fond memories. She would miss her family too, especially her precious sister, Emer. She was only a couple of years younger than Aibheall and was an excellent playmate and confidante.

But Aibheall had no choice. Her parents had arranged for her to marry the king of the neighboring Concani tribe. For anyone else, he would have made a fine husband, but Aibheall was deeply in love with Conor and could not imagine a life without him.

Aibheall wore a plain hooded cloak and dress with simple leather sandals. She had packed light, carrying only a small satchel slung over her shoulder filled with the barest of necessities. A smaller pouch on her belt held her jewelry, which would pay for anything she and Conor needed on their journey and help them get settled in Albion.

Aibheall's breath shuddered when she reached the forest's edge. She could barely keep her hands steady as she lit her torch. It would not be long until she would be at Conor's side, and the two of them would be together forever. She tread down the worn path that led to the glen. The bright full moon and equally bright stars helped light her way.

Aibheall spotted glimmering torches up ahead. She smiled and breathed Conor's name. She hurried the rest of the way and bounded into the glen.

Conor was there. Only he was on his knees. With one of her father's warriors standing on either side of him. A third stood in front of him. Two more warriors appeared behind Aibheall and seized her by the arms. Conor tried to spring to Aibheall's defense, but his captors held him at bay.

A figure stepped into view. It was Emer. "How touching."

"Sister. What is the meaning of this?" asked Aibheall.

Emer strode toward her. "This is what you have forced me to do, dear sister." She looked her up and down with a sneer. "Beautiful and talented Aibheall. You had such a bright future ahead of you, father arranging for you to marry the king of the Concani. What a powerful alliance that would be, the union of our two great tribes. And you would have been at the seat of that power. But you wanted to give it up for *love* and a life with a simple warrior?"

"Emer, please," said Aibheall. "If you wish to take my place and marry the Concani king, that is fine by me. All you have to do is let Conor and I go, father will have to offer your hand in place of mine in order to save face."

Emer laughed out loud. "You do not think that once father found you gone, he would not scour the lands, reach out to every ally, pay any price, to get his favorite daughter back? Yes, I will take your place. I will marry the

Concanni king. But you need to be gone for good in order for that to happen.”

She nodded to the warrior standing in front of Conor. He drew a dagger from his belt. Conor struggled. The two warriors holding him tightened their grip on his arms. The warrior with the dagger moved behind Conor and yanked his head back by his hair.

“Aibheall!” he screamed her name.

She cried out and tried to burst from her captors. Her cry turned to a full-bodied scream as the warrior with the dagger slit Conor’s throat. His body jerked and spasmed as it bled out. The warriors holding Conor let his body fall lifelessly into the grass.

“Bring her to him,” Emer ordered.

Aibheall was dragged closer to Conor. Tears stung her cheeks. She stared deep into Conor’s eyes, but they had already gone cloudy and lifeless. Aibheall turned to face Emer. Her sorrow had been swept away by rage. Emer held out her hand. The warrior who had slit Conor’s throat passed his dagger to her. The blade was still wet with Conor’s blood.

Aibheall did not turn away. She locked eyes with her sister as Emer raised the weapon over her head. Emer stopped, unable to follow through. She handed the dagger back to Conor’s killer, who had no problem plunging it into Aibheall’s heart.

He yanked the dagger out of her chest. The other warriors arranged Aibheall and Conor’s bodies so they were side-by-side. Aibheall struggled to hold on to life. She could not move. She could only watch as the dagger was placed in Conor’s hand. She took a long look at her sister then shifted her gaze to study the faces of the warriors with her. She also summoned the image of the sentry who had let her through the gate. He had to have been a part of this plan as well.

Aibheall clung to thoughts of revenge even as life continued slipping away from her. In her final moments, a breeze shook the branches of the nearby hawthorn trees, and in that sound, Aibheall heard a voice that promised her and Conor’s deaths would not go unavenged.

Chapter One

Scottsdale, Arizona - Present

My alarm went off, but I was already awake and had been for over an hour. Damn, I'd never had such a vivid dream like that before. It was like I was there, watching it all. I could still feel the night air and smell the forest. And that girl. That poor girl. What was her name again? Aibheall.

I sniffed back a tear. I was still shaking, sitting on the edge of my bed. I was a wreck when I first woke up — right after Aibheall had been killed by that guy with the dagger and as she lay there dying but still vowed to get revenge somehow, some way.

Aibheall, Emer, Conor. Nana would love all those old Celtic names, and that I'd had a dream that took place in ancient Ireland. And how did I know it was ancient Ireland? I don't know. I just did. I *felt* it.

As I stayed seated, I started having flashes of special moments Aibheall and Conor had shared together, the first time they saw each other, the first time they spoke, secret walks in the forest, and late night rendezvous in the barn. Where were these images coming from? This wasn't something I remembered reading or seeing on TV. It was all brand new to me..

I tried to think about something else, anything, even about school. But my mind quickly went back to Aibheall every time. She was the epitome of a Celtic woman of that day. Not just beautiful but smart. She could fight and ride. She wrote poetry and crafted silver jewelry too. When her father promised her to the king of the Concani, Aibheall and Conor were heartbroken. That was when they planned to escape together and make a new life for themselves in Albion, which I knew was an old name for England.

Somehow, Emer found out. Someone must have given Aibheall and Conor up. Or maybe Aibheall told her, thinking she could trust her sister not to betray her. The way Emer's men set up the scene, it would look like Conor had killed Aibheall in some sort of lovers' quarrel then killed himself in shame.

I wiped more tears away and checked my phone. Damn, it was time to get ready for school. I pushed myself up from the edge of my bed, cleaned up, got dressed, and headed downstairs. I passed my little sister Anna's room and could hear her singing along to some lame pop song.

She was always up earlier than me. That's because getting ready for school was always such a calculated process for Anna. First, she had to search her closet and dresser drawers, over and over, in order to put together that day's cutest outfit. Then there was deciding on what makeup look to go for. And then, of course, was her hair. Poor thing.

The sun was just rising. I saw Mom through the patio door doing her yoga. That meant Dad was in his home gym at the other end of the house. I made my coffee and an everything-bagel smothered in cream cheese. I ate it standing at the counter. I chewed and sipped absentmindedly, my mind still on Aibheall and Conor. Well, mostly on Aibheall.

"Tommy?" Mom tapped my shoulder. I just about jumped. She giggled. "Wow, someone has a lot on his mind. Care to share?"

"Not really," I said.

Mom made her disappointed face then ran her fingers through my hair, which I'd just recently dyed. It was light purple, almost lavender. Before that, it had been dark blue.

"You probably use better dye than my colorist," she said.

"I kind of doubt that."

"You know, if you keep dying your hair like that, it's going to start falling out before you're thirty."

"Then I'll shave it." I washed the last bite of my bagel down with the last swallow of my coffee. "I have to go."

Mom turned her cheek toward me for a kiss. I gave her a tiny peck.

"Have a good day at school," she said.

I shrugged. "Stranger things have happened."

I felt Mom's eyes on me, as I headed to the front door. She didn't like my hair or the way I dressed, but that was because she worried about

people harassing me. We did live in a pretty conservative town, where public opinion mattered and all things shallow and superficial reigned supreme.

Dad had a problem with the way I looked too, most likely because he'd rather have a son who looked more "manly" and who liked sports instead of music and poetry and art. Speak of the devil, I passed Dad on my way to the front door. He'd just finished his workout and was dabbing his sweaty face with a towel. We both avoided eye contact and mumbled to each other. That passed as a normal conversation between us.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and started walking. I was seventeen. I'd had my driver's license for a year but was in no hurry to get a car. Mom and Dad said they'd loan me the money, but I could only imagine what strings would come attached with that.

Besides, my friends, Dave and Chris, had their own car. They'd pick me up at the park. It was a bit of a walk from my house, so I'd listen to music on my phone with my Air Pods. The three of us had a garage band. We liked bands like The Cure and Morrissey and wanted to play music like theirs.

I wrote songs or at least tried to. It always felt like I was whining on paper. Dave and Chris said I was good and encouraged me to keep writing. I was still thinking about Aibheall. I could see her clearly in my head and tried to put words to what I saw. *Hair like fire. Fiery hair.* No, too cheesy. What if I flipped it? *Eyes like blue fire. Hair like red rain.* Yeah, that didn't suck too much.

A shiny convertible zoomed past me. I heard the shouting over the music in my Air Pods.

"Fag!"

"Queer!"

I stopped short, barely avoiding the almost empty Starbucks cup that was chucked at me. Then there was the laughter. There was always laughter. Two boys sat up front, and three girls were crammed in the back of the convertible. All of them were looking back, laughing at me. My little sister, Anna, was one of them.

She'd always been popular growing up. She'd always been pretty too, and during eighth grade let's just say she "fully blossomed" into her womanhood. But she was still as big of a brat as ever. She'd started high

school this year, and she and her friends got absorbed into the same popular clique her friends' older sisters belonged to.

If that wasn't bad enough, those girls associated with a clique of boys who called themselves Alpha Squad, as in each of them considered themselves an *alpha male*, and I suppose they were. They all looked like models and played multiple school sports. On top of all that, each of them came from rich and influential families. They were used to getting whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it.

I was one of Alpha Squad's usual targets. I wasn't gay. If I was, I'd have no problem admitting it. This was supposed to be the 21st century, wasn't it? Yeah, try telling Alpha Squad that.

I was really tall but super skinny and could never put on weight no matter how much I ate. I also had what beauty experts called "delicate features" and liked to color my hair. Then there was the way I dressed. I liked skinny jeans and Chucks, and today, I had on a Mohair sweater that looked like the one Johnny Rotten wore when he was in the Sex Pistols. I wore jewelry too. I liked silver, even though everyone said that was for girls. Oh yeah, and I painted my fingernails black. Can't forget about that.

I could have changed my look, but I doubted it would make much of a difference, or at least enough for people like Alpha Squad to leave me alone. But why should I change? I liked myself, and I wasn't going to let anyone take that away from me.

Dave and Chris were waiting for me at the park. Earlier this year, they'd bought an old hearse to drive around in. It was great. I loved the look of it.

"It can hold our gear when we start playing gigs," said Dave the first day he showed it off to me. Chris agreed. I played along but couldn't imagine us ever being ready to perform in front of people.

Dave and Chris were fraternal twins. I'd known them since freshman year. We'd bonded over our love of music and our disdain for Alpha Squad and all the people at our school who kissed their entitled asses.

Dave drove. Chris played DJ, scrolling through the music on his phone and picking whatever caught his eye. I'd sent them a track with some guitar chords and vocals a few days ago. The other day, they sent me a track of a bassline and drum beat they'd come up with to go with it. It was good.

I just tweaked it a little bit then mixed it with the track I'd made, using my laptop.

I didn't touch the vocals. There was no way I could make them sound good. I hated the way I sang and kept telling Dave to get ready to sing lead vocals if we were ever to perform in front of people.

Dave parked near the school's auto shop. That was his last class of the day. We would meet him there for a speedy getaway. The first bell rang. We didn't come to school early to hang out like other people did. We wanted to spend as little time at Hellansfield High — or Hellhole High, as we liked to call it — as much as possible.

We weren't alone either. There were all sorts of freaks and geeks at our school that we called friends, and we gathered together as often as we could, in classes, in the hallways, and at lunch. You know, strength in numbers. That kind of thing. When we were in groups, Alpha Squad just shouted verbal abuse at us. If they caught one of us on our own, they'd get more "hands-on."

English Literature was my first class. It was the one I enjoyed the most, so it was safe to say the rest of my day went downhill. My notebook was open, and my pen moved like it had a mind of its own. But I wasn't taking notes. I never did. Most of the time, I worked on lyrics. The teacher, Ms. Barker, was well aware and didn't mind. She knew I was still listening and could come up with a good answer to any of her questions if she chose to call on me.

That morning, she read a poem by William Butler Yeats called "The Wanderings of Oisín."

"Oisín (Ush-een). Sad to remember, sick with years," she read.

I nodded, very pleased. She'd pronounced his name correctly. The other day, she'd told me we'd be reading the poem as part of our study of Yeats and asked if I could translate the names that were in Gaelic, like Oisín, ahead of time. I was happy to do it. Yeats was one of my favorites, and I hated hearing his words get butchered.

Ms. Barker kept reading. I finished off some lyrics and then started on a sketch of Aibheall. I tried so hard to capture her looking happy, like when she was planning on running away with Conor and being with him forever. But her smile kept fading.

I had to settle for giving her a slight grin and tried to compensate for it by making her happiness show in her eyes. Only no matter how hard I

tried, I couldn't make her eyes shine very bright. They remained sad but tinged with ferocity, like when she wished revenge on her sister and her men even as she lay dying.

But somehow it was perfect. I loved it. It was her.

I let out a soft groan.

How could someone who appeared in my imagination seem so real to me?

That question haunted me for the rest of the day. The more I thought about her, the more real Aibheall became to me. I joked that if I thought about her hard enough, I could will her into existence. Wouldn't that be something?

My last class of the day was the horror that was P.E. Luckily, we were playing basketball. That meant all I had to do was run up and down the court and wait for no one to pass the ball to me. Everyone on my team knew I most likely wouldn't catch it, and if I did there was no way I'd actually make a basket. So they left me alone.

Players on the other team shot me evil looks. They were probably tempted to hurl the ball at me just for the hell of it but didn't want to risk the intentional foul and the penalty shot that would follow.

The whistle blew. Class was over. A half hour later, another day of school would be over too. God, I couldn't wait to graduate and get out of this place for good.

Each day, I made it a mission to get in and out of the locker room as quickly as possible. A lot of guys took their time. You'd think it was the highlight of their day. Those were the jocks of course, and that included the members of Alpha Squad who were in this class with me. I swear, they tossed words like *gay* and *fag* around as insults but had no problem complimenting each other's physiques and describing in great detail how tiny or misshapen certain people's dicks were. Did they not see the irony?

The air was already thick with steam and reeked of sweat and body spray. Then there was the testosterone soaked banter. Most of it was provided by Alpha Squad. Their leader, Tucker Vance, was in this class along with two guys who would probably be considered his lieutenants — I wondered if they could even spell the word *lieutenants* — Bobby Kincaid and Cooper Aldridge.

They were the ones who'd picked up Anna and her friends that morning. The three were just changing out of their PE uniforms. I already

had on my jeans and sweater.

“We took this little bitch into one of the upstairs bedrooms. Tossed her on the bed,” said Cooper. “We made her airtight. We all got to bust a nut. And when we left her, she was so out of it, she probably didn’t even know her own name.”

The three laughed and fist bumped.

“What about those little freshman chicks you’ve been working on?” Tucker asked. “Are they good to go or what?”

“They’re getting there,” said Bobby. “That one, Anna Kennedy, her body’s slamming. You see the way her ass looks in those leggings she wears? I just want to stick my dick right in there.”

I bristled. Anna may have been a total bitch to me, but on some primal level, as her big brother, I still felt a protective instinct.

“That’s her brother over there,” Cooper laughed.

All three were looking at me now.

“Her brother or her sister?” Tucker called out to me. “Hey, baby, we know you can hear us.”

I hurried to tie my Chucks.

“You ever notice how he changes his clothes before any of us?” said Bobby.

“He never showers either,” added Cooper.

“Probably doesn’t want us to see his tiny dick,” said Bobby.

“Maybe he’s got a clit,” said Tucker.

All three of them laughed, so did a bunch of the other boys standing around them. I pulled my last shoe on but didn’t bother tying it. I grabbed my backpack, ready to run, but Tucker was standing in front of me in just his gym shorts. He was all chiseled and handsome like some young god. One of the evil ones.

“So what is it?” he asked. “Do you have an actual dick or are you rocking something else down there?”

“Leave me alone,” I murmured.

“Come on. Show us the goods.”

I glanced around. No one looked like they had the slightest interest in helping me. Most just laughed. Others just ignored the whole situation. They were probably relieved Tucker hadn’t targeted them.

“No!” I tried to run, but Bobby and Cooper were behind me. Bobby grabbed my arms while Cooper went around to help Tucker. They hoisted

my legs in the air.

“Alright. If you’re not going to show us voluntarily,” said Tucker.

Cooper laughed so hard he was on the verge of hyperventilating.

I kicked and thrashed. “Stop it! No.”

They had my belt off. Tucker unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans. Tears stung my eyes. He and Cooper both had a grip on my jeans and boxers and started tugging. I threw everything I had into one final kick.

My foot caught Tucker in his pretty face. He staggered and let me go. Bobby and Cooper were so shocked, they loosened their hold on me. I bolted. Everyone around me stood stunned and silent.

I pulled up my pants as I ran and ended up tripping and falling. I landed right outside the door of the P.E. teacher’s office. Coach McDermott stood over me.

“What the hell’s going on here?” He stared at me, demanding an answer.

I sniffed and zipped and buttoned my jeans. Coach then glanced past me.

“Jesus Christ, Tucker. What the hell happened to you?” He ran over to check on Tucker whose nose was red. Blood ran all the way down to his chin.

“I don’t know, Coach,” said Tucker. “We were just horsing around, and he freaked out. Kicked me.”

I cried out, “Bullshit.”

Coach glared at me. “You want to tell me what happened then?”

Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper flashed me almost identical smug grins, daring me to say something. As much as I wanted to, I knew Coach wouldn’t believe me. Either that or he’d just call it “horsing around” like Tucker had done and say I was too sensitive or some shit like that.

“That’s what I thought. Go to the office,” he told me. “Tucker, you go to the nurse. Get that checked out, make sure it isn’t broken.”

I needed my backpack. A kid named Monty brought it over. He was fat, to the point where he had man-boobs. A couple weeks ago, Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper once took turns feeling him up. I knew he could sympathize. I thanked him and headed to the office, wiping fresh tears from my eyes.

Mom came and got me. We sat in the assistant principal's office. I had a chance to tell my side of the story but was too embarrassed. I ended up getting suspended for three days. His secretary printed out the paperwork. Mom signed it and walked me out of the office without saying a word.

Halfway through the parking lot, Mom finally decided to speak. "You know your father's going to flip out about this."

"Maybe he'll be proud," I said. "I bloodied a kid's face. That's manly, right?"

"Do not joke! Your father does a lot of business with Tucker Vance's father. It's going to take a lot for him to smooth this over."

"I'm sure he'll find a way. They don't call him 'Slick Rick' for nothing."

Mom fumed and looked ready to yell, but she held back. "Honey, don't you think you'd have less trouble if, you know, you changed the way you look?"

There. She finally said it out loud.

"I like the way I look," I told her.

Mom sighed. "Let's just go home."

"I was planning on seeing Nana."

Mom let out another sigh. "Fine. But you take the bus home."

She dropped me off at Vista Village. That was the retirement home or senior living community or assisted-living facility or whatever you wanted to call it where Nana lived. Nana liked to call it Heaven's Waiting Room.

She was my great-grandma on Mom's side. Ninety-six years young and still spry and sharp as a pin. She once said the secret of her longevity was drinking a pint of Guinness and a glass of Tullamore D.E.W. Irish whiskey every day. Of course, Vista Village didn't allow that sort of thing, but Nana had her ways. A little Irish charm and a bit of cash, and her favorite staff members were happy to act as her booze mules.

Without Nana, I wouldn't have any connection at all with my Irish roots. She came to the U.S. with her parents when she was little, and they settled into the Irish community in Phoenix. She tried to keep the old traditions alive with her family, but that got diluted over the years as her kids and grandkids became more and more "Americanized."

I loved hearing about Irish history and folklore from Nana. We'd listen to music and read William Butler Yeats' poetry. She was even teaching me how to speak Gaelic — although she just called it Irish.

I found Nana in the rec' room sitting in a big, comfy chair sipping tea and reading Yeats. I smiled and let out a big sigh the moment I saw her. All of the bullshit I'd gone through that day just fell right off me. I greeted her with a hug and kiss then pulled over a chair and sat next to her.

"Dia dhuit," she said. That was Irish for *hello*.

"Dia is Muire dhuit," I answered. That was like *hello back* to whoever'd just greeted you.

"Conas ata tu?" Nana asked. *How are you?*

"Ta me go maith. Agus to fein?" *I'm fine. How are you?*

"Ta me go maith. Go raibth maith agat," *I'm fine. Thank you.*

"You're almost sounding like a native," said Nana. "I remember when we were still living in Sligo, my parents made sure we never lost touch with our native tongue, so we'd spend two weeks each summer in a little village in Donegal, where they spoke only Irish."

"Cool."

Nana and I both noticed a couple of women playing cards at a nearby table, staring at us. They looked me up and down, chuckled, and made comments to each other.

My gaze dropped toward the floor. Nana had a different response.

"Why hello, Susan. How are you today?" she asked one of the women, nice and loud. "Have you heard from your granddaughter lately? Is she still in rehab? What is this, her second or third visit? I'll say a prayer for her. Maybe this time it'll finally stick."

One of the women, Susan I assumed, made a shocked face and became suddenly flustered. I hid my laughter behind my hand. Nana then turned her sights on Susan's card partner.

"Oh, and Rebecca," she started. "I saw your son was here yesterday. How lovely. I hope you had a wonderful visit, and he didn't show up just because he wanted money like he normally does."

Now both women were flustered and the center of attention in the rec' room. They gathered their belongings in a hurry and retreated, looking thoroughly humiliated.

"You're so mean," I giggled.

Nana dropped her book in her bag. “They had it coming. Let’s go back to my suite. I’ve hung around these old farts for long enough today.”

I helped her out of the chair. We walked arm-in-arm down the hallway back to her suite. I sat her down in her easy chair, poured two glasses of Tully and popped open two bottles of Guinness. I may not have been legal drinking age, but Nana never liked to drink alone.

“Slainte,” we each said. It was Irish for *cheers* or more specifically it meant *good health*.

Nana had me dig through her record collection. I put on an album by The Chieftains. They were considered one of the greatest Irish folk bands and for good reason. Each member was a virtuoso. Their sound was timeless and almost ethereal. I only wished I could play music half as beautiful someday.

After that, Nana had me put on an album by The Dubliners, who played a lot of the old standards. We sang along to each one. I loved how a lot of the old songs told a story, and a lot of them were about specific periods in Irish history like the Great Famine or the Easter Rising.

Before we knew it, it was dinner time. One of the staff wheeled Nana’s meal in on a cart. She was one of Nana’s favorites, so she turned a blind eye to our empty Guinness bottles and glasses of whisky. The food at Vista Village actually looked really good. Nana insisted I stay for dinner some time, and I would have if Dad didn’t have a thing about having family dinner every night. He liked to pretend we were a happy family. He was big on that. Image over reality. That was probably why he was a major player in the advertising world.

Those family dinners were always a joke. I would be forced to recount the details of my day at school like they actually mattered then I’d have to hear about Mom and Dad’s day at work. Anna of course loved it, because she got to talk in depth about her favorite subject. Herself.

I took the city bus home. It stopped just blocks from my house. I walked through the front door. Anna and a bunch of her friends had taken over the living room.

“Okay.” Her friend Vanessa snapped her gum. “I’d fuck Bobby Kincaid. Marry Tucker Vance.” That was met with a chorus of *oooo’s*. “Then I’d definitely kill Anna’s brother.”

Another one of Anna’s friends spotted me. She made a silly, shocked face then alerted everyone else to my presence. They all laughed

out loud, red-faced and pointing at me. Whatever. I shook my head and climbed the stairs. They were still laughing and going on about it, not even trying to keep their voices down.

“Oh my God, did you see the look on his face?”

“I thought he was going to cry.”

“I’m totally posting this.”

I met Mom coming out of her room.

“Well, I told your father about your scuffle with Tucker Vance at school today,” she said. “He was not happy. You’re spending the rest of the night in your room for starters.”

“No family dinner?” I grinned.

“I’ll bring you a plate.”

“I could have had dinner with Nana,” I said, thoroughly disappointed.

I went on to my room and shut the door behind me. I scrolled through my phone, looking for some music. I grabbed my Beats studio headphones instead of my Air Pods. I just wanted to get lost in some music, and those did the best job of shutting out the rest of the world.

I put on some Morrissey. I loved his album, *Maladjusted*. It ranked up there as one of my all-time favorites. I only hoped I could write lyrics half as good as his someday.

I stretched out on my bed. I don’t know when, but at some point I drifted off to sleep. I saw her again. Aibheall. Only she wasn’t in the glen where she’d been murdered. She hovered over me, dressed in a shimmering black gown. Her hair was silver and flowing behind her. She cried black tears.

Next thing I knew, Mom was jostling me awake. It was nighttime now. Man, how long had I been asleep? I sat up and turned on the lamp on my nightstand.

“What?” I asked all groggy.

Mom’s eyes were puffy. She sniffled. “That was Vista Village. It’s Nana.”

Chapter Two

Mom confirmed what I'd already feared. Nana was dying.

"A staff member was getting her ready for bed," she started as I followed her downstairs. "She helped Nana off with her mittens and found her hands had gone black. Her feet had gone black too. That's a sign that end-of-life is near."

I went numb. I was surprised I made it the rest of the way down the stairs without falling. This was all so sudden. Or was it? Thinking back, the signs were there. She was bundling up more and more and complaining about the cold. She was getting tired much easier too and was eating less and sleeping more.

But she still had such a great attitude. I'd go as far as to say she was still "full of life." It was easy to forget she was ninety-six, and that it was always just a matter of time — but I wasn't ready for it to finally happen. I just wasn't ready.

We joined Dad and Anna in the living room. They sat on the couch, and it sounded like Dad was pretty much telling her the same thing Mom had already told me.

Anna let out a little whimper. Dad met her with a hug. I joined them on the couch. Dad gave me a smile full of real emotion, not the forced one I'd gotten so used to seeing. He patted me on the leg then stood up, next to Mom.

The two of them kept talking, but I was still so numb it all sounded like they were talking through plastic. I got the important points, such as since I was suspended, I'd help Mom get Nana moved into the hospice tomorrow.

"I would do it, but I've got a lot of meetings lined up tomorrow," he said. "It's too late to reschedule them."

Jesus, it didn't even sound like he was going to try. And he thought I was a wimp?

"Nana is going to need all of our support during this time," Dad added. "It's important that we be strong for her and not fall apart."

I knew that last bit was meant especially for me. *No tears. No crying. Be tough. Act like a man for once in your life.* Dad's eyes locked on mine. I knew he wasn't going to turn away either until I'd at least nodded. So I did.

None of us really felt like eating dinner. Mom and Dad stayed downstairs while Anna and I headed up to our rooms. As we left, Mom made sure to let us know there was plenty of food in the fridge if we got hungry later on.

Part way up the stairs, I felt Anna's hand reach for mine.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Why?" I asked back, a little snippier than I should have.

"You and Nana are really close. I mean, I love her too, but I know what you two have is really special."

I paused for a moment, wondering who was this mature and thoughtful person in front of me and what had she done with my bratty sister.

"Thanks," I said.

Anna cracked a tiny smile.

"So does this mean I'm off your 'fuck-marry-kill' list?" I asked.

"That wasn't my list. Ew. That was Vanessa's. But I'll — I'll talk to them, get them to back off."

"You really think they will?"

"Of course. They're not monsters, you know."

I bit back my response. As much as I really wanted to dive into a conversation about how toxic her so-called friends were, I decided to quit while I was ahead.

"Thanks," was all I ended up saying.

Anna and I hugged at the top of the stairs then split off into our rooms. Lying in bed again, I put my headphones back on and tried to lose myself in some music.

That was when I finally broke down. I burst into tears, sobbing and weeping, my whole body shaking. I clenched a pillow over my face to

cover the sounds. It was so tight I was surprised I didn't smother myself to death.

I don't remember falling asleep, but when I woke up the sun was right outside my window. I wandered downstairs and into the kitchen. Mom was still at the table, reading the news off her phone and drinking coffee. She smiled, and we exchanged *good-mornings*. There was a box of donuts on the table, the good ones, not from the grocery store but from the bakery.

"Dad already left for work. Anna decided to go to school today." Mom nudged the box toward me. "We got you your favorites."

There was a chocolate creme-filled and a lemon filled. She was right. They were my favorite. Was it she or Dad who remembered? Probably her.

Mom poured me some coffee. I had two cups while I finished my donuts.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

It was time for us to go see Nana. But was I really ready? I told myself I was, that I'd gotten all my crying out of my system last night, and today I'd be able to hold it all together.

I kept repeating this to myself as I followed Mom into the garage and climbed into the passenger seat of her Lexus. She let me connect my phone to the stereo with a cord she kept in the glove compartment.

"You really want me to choose what music we listen to?" I warned.

Mom nodded. "I can take it."

I decided to go easy on her and chose some David Bowie, back in his Ziggy Stardust days. I liked Bowie. I knew Mom liked him too. She turned up her favorite songs and sang along to them. I bit my lip, trying not to laugh. Damn, she sang worse than I did.

We arrived at Vista Village. A van from the hospice was parked out front. As soon as I spotted it, my knees buckled a little, but I pushed myself forward and kept walking. Part way down the hall to Nana's room, I had to remind myself to breathe. Mom's hand landed on my back. She gave me a smile of encouragement.

Nana's door was open a crack. Mom knocked on it then opened it all the way.

"Hello?" she called.

"Come on in, love," said Nana.

I followed Mom inside. Nana sat in her recliner with the TV on. She gave me a bright smile and looked like she still had so much life in her. There had to be some mistake. She couldn't be dying.

The closer I got to her, the harder it got to hold it together. It was a losing battle. My face fell in my hands. I burst out crying.

Mom wrapped her arm around me. "Tommy, come on. We talked about it. We need to stay strong."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Janine. Let the boy feel what he's feeling," Nana told her.

Mom immediately backed off. I bent down and sank into Nana's arms.

"I don't think I've ever heard you cuss before," I said.

"I figure at this point I've got nothing to lose," she said.

We both laughed. I took Nana's hand in mine. It seemed so tiny and frail now. She reached up and stroked my cheek. "You have no idea how lucky I am to have lived this long, to get to have spent so much time with you and watch you grow into such a fine young man. You're a special one, Tommy. I knew that the moment I first held you when you were just a baby."

I glanced back at Mom. She retreated towards the door, looking like she was on the verge of tears herself.

"I don't know what I'm going to do without you," I told Nana.

"Oh, love." She pulled me in for another hug.

"Excuse me," Mom spoke up. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's someone from the hospice here."

I stood up but then was almost immediately knocked over by what or *who* I saw to be specific. Standing next to Mom — it couldn't be — it was Aibheall. I mean, there was no way it could actually be her. But it looked exactly like her. Like she'd stepped right out of my imagination.

Eyes like blue fire. Hair like red rain.

"This is Eve McCarthy," said Mom, introducing her. "She was sent to escort you to the center and begin your intake."

Aibheall — Eve. I looked her up and down. She was dressed in purple medical scrubs and a white coat. She carried a clipboard and leather-bound notepad with the hospice center's logo printed on it.

"Hello, Katie," she said. Her voice was the same as it was in my dream. She spoke with the same melodic Irish brogue. "It's lovely to meet

you.”

I checked Nana, and I swore there was a flash of recognition in her eyes when she got a good look at Eve.

“Yes, it’s lovely to meet you too, dear,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Eve smiled back at Nana. Looking at them, how comfortable they appeared with each other, you’d swear they’d known each other for years. They carried on that way as Eve asked Nana questions and filled out some paperwork. A couple of male hospice workers arrived with moving boxes. I helped them pack up Nana’s books and records very carefully along with her record player. Mom found some suitcases in the closet and packed Nana’s clothes.

We started bringing them to the hospice van outside. Eve was still sitting with Nana. “Go on ahead,” she told me. “We just need a few minutes.”

I nodded and carried Nana’s record collection myself. I didn’t trust anyone else with it, and I knew she wouldn’t either. The whole time I was still so bewildered about Eve’s presence and her resemblance to Aibheall — and how she and Nana seemed to have some sort of connection.

We finished packing the van. Eve and Nana were still inside. I decided to go back and let them know we were ready to leave. Nana’s door was slightly open. I heard her and Eve trade a giggle. I stopped and leaned in, trying to hear more.

They talked in Irish, and I mean fluently. I couldn’t make out everything they were saying. It sounded like they were talking about Nana’s husband, Big Jack, as well her brothers and sisters and parents who had all passed on.

My name came up a couple times. It almost sounded like Nana was asking Eve to look after me. What did she mean by that?

A Vista Village staff member arrived with a wheelchair for Nana. I let him inside. By the looks of it, Eve and Nana had finished their little talk. Both greeted me with warm smiles. Eve’s smile made me blush and forced me to look away.

We helped Nana into the wheelchair. I pushed her. Eve walked beside me. She smelled nice, like fresh-cut roses. There was a lift that loaded Nana and her chair into the back of the hospice van. I sat with her.

There was room for Mom and Eve in the row of seats in front of us. Eve handed Mom some paperwork and went over it with her.

Mom nodded. "It seems like you've been doing this for years. But you're so young."

Eve chuckled. "I'm an intern of sorts. I'm still in school, but the hospice administrator insists I'm some sort of natural so he's allowing me to do Katie's admission and orientation on my own."

"Well, you handle yourself like a pro."

Eve blushed a little and thanked her. I looked to Nana. I'd been holding her hand the whole time. She seemed so at peace with what was happening. I caught her glance at Eve then at me with a rather sly, knowing smile. What was that about?

We arrived at the hospice. An orderly met us at the door and wheeled Nana inside. It was really nice. There were lots of plants and bright pictures, and the walls were painted with warm colors.

The orderly handed Nana off to a nurse who needed to check her vitals. She would then see one of the doctors on staff. Mom went with her. Eve helped me and a couple staff members take Nana's stuff to her room.

That was also really nice. There was a big comfy bed, a TV, a radio on the nightstand, a small table with chairs, a wardrobe, and a chest of drawers. It was painted in the same warm colors I'd seen all throughout the building

Eve unpacked Nana's clothes with delicate care, like she was handling her own relative's belongings. I hooked up her record player and speakers. There was enough shelf space for her records and her books. I put a couple of her favorite volumes of Yeats on her nightstand in case she was up to doing some reading. Or I could read to her when I visited. Which I planned on doing a lot.

We finished. The staff members left. It was just me and Eve. We sat at the little table. I had to force myself not to stare at her. I still couldn't get over how much she looked like Aibheall. My eyes wandered around the room. My leg started to bounce. That only happened when I was nervous.

Eve cast a smile my way. She then began humming a soft tune as she thumbed through some paperwork. All of a sudden, I started to relax. My leg went still, and as I exhaled my shoulders went slack like a giant weight had fallen off of them.

Eve smiled at me, looking rather satisfied. "So how are you?"

“I’m good,” I told her.

“It’s okay not to be.”

I trembled a little. My eyes began to water. “This sucks. This really sucks. I wasn’t ready for this.”

“No one ever is. Even those who are passing, they might accept what’s happening and say they’re ready, but they still wish they had more time. Just like we wish we had more time with them.”

I was about to wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my sweater when Eve handed me the box of tissue that was on the table. “Thanks.”

“Katie talks very fondly of you. You’re very special to her, and I can tell she means just as much to you.”

I sniffed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do without her.”

“In a way, she’ll never truly be gone. The people we love become a part of us. And you’ve got your memories of her. You can think of it as sort of time-travel when you go back and relive those experiences.”

I managed a smile. “I like that. Thank you.”

Eve reached across the table for my hand and gave it a tiny squeeze. A wave of comfort pass through me.

“Thank you for sharing with me,” said Eve. “From this point on, just be with Katie as much as you can until the end.”

I nodded. That was exactly what I had planned. We stood up as Mom returned with Nana. An orderly was wheeling her in. Nana said she was tired. Mom and Eve stayed behind to help her change into a nightgown. I went ahead and said goodbye to Nana now, giving her a hug and a kiss, but told her I’d be back as soon as I could.

“Thank you, love.” Nana stroked my cheek. “You mean the world to me.””

“So do you,” I said, my voice catching in my throat.

I waited in the hallway. Mom and Eve came out a few minutes later. Mom gave me a genuine warm smile, something I hadn’t seen from her in quite a while and wrapped her arm around me.

“Thank you, Eve. For everything,” said Mom.

“You’re welcome,” said Eve. “And count on me being around until the end.”

“Thank you. That means so much.” Mom turned to me. “Ready to go?”

“Actually, Tommy and I were having a lovely conversation earlier,” said Eve. “I was about to ask if he wanted to pick up where we left off over a cup of coffee and some scones. There’s a lovely cafe down the street, and I do have a break.”

Mom looked just as surprised as me. “Tommy?”

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

“You’ll have to take the bus home,” Mom told her.

“I’ll be happy to drive him,” said Eve.

The three of us headed back to the reception area. I said goodbye to Mom and waited for Eve to get her purse from her locker. She came back, still in her scrubs, but with a gray hoodie on over them.

She slipped on her sunglasses and shouldered her purse. “Ready?”

I followed her to the staff parking lot. Her car was a silver Honda. It looked like it had just been washed and was impeccably clean inside. The coffee shop was only minutes away. It wasn’t some Starbuck’s either. It was a little independent place called Elemental Café. Signs out front bragged about how they served all organic, locally sourced foods, and everything was made in-house.

I ordered a large cup of dark roast. Eve did the same. When it came time to pay, I reached for my wallet, but Eve held out her hand stopping me. “I asked you out, I pay. That’s the rule.”

“So if I ask you out, then I pay?” I asked.

Eve gave me a teasing smile. “Sounds fair, doesn’t it?”

She ordered an assortment of mini scones. We took our coffees from the counter. Eve grabbed the plate of scones, which was a good thing. My hands were shaking. I could barely hold my coffee steady. I was trying to figure Eve out. Not that I had a lot of experience with the opposite sex, but I swore it felt like she was flirting with me.

But that was crazy, right? Why would this beautiful, slightly older woman be interested in a wimpy freak still in high school? This must have had to do with what she and Nana had talked about earlier, when Nana asked Eve to “look after me.” That had to be it. She was just being nice. Maybe a little playful.

I took a sip of my coffee then bit into a scone. A big smile slid across my face.

“Now I know why you like this place so much,” I told her.

“It has become one of my favorite haunts,” Eve answered.

I built up the nerve and asked, “Do you always take your patients’ family members here?”

“I have to admit this is a unique circumstance.”

“Does this have to do with Nana asking you to ‘look after me?’”

Eve’s eyes widened a bit. “You heard us?”

“Nana’s been teaching me Irish,” I said. “I’m not as fluent as you and her, but I was able to make out little bits of your conversation.”

“Like what?”

“She asked you to look after me. She also talked about her husband, Big Jack, her parents, brothers, sisters, friends who have all passed away now. I suppose that’s normal, right?”

“It is. And Katie expected you to take her death rather hard. She also said you’re not very close to the rest of the family.”

I sighed. “That’s for sure. I don’t know. I had an interesting moment with my little sister yesterday. She seemed pretty supportive.”

“That’s nice,” said Eve. “Are you two close in age?”

“Three years. I’m a senior. She’s a freshman. She was a sweet, little kid — until she hit puberty. Then she became all about clothes, make-up, boys, and parties. She’s part of the popular crowd at school. For a long time, she’s acted ashamed and embarrassed by her freak of a brother.”

“I really hope you don’t think of yourself that way. As a freak.”

“Oh, I do. But I use that word with pride. I like who I am. And could care less what others think.”

“Good for you.”

I took another sip of coffee and ate the last of my mini scone. “I think I got that from Nana. She was into art when she was younger. She liked to paint, write poetry, and play music, but she gave all that up when she got married and had her first kid. She tried to pass her love of the arts on to her kids and her grandkids, but it never took.”

“But then you came along.”

I chuckled. “She once said she always wished she could’ve gotten involved in the hippy movement during the Sixties but thought she was too old, and that other people would judge her. That’s why she always encouraged me to be myself and follow my passions.”

I barely got those last few words out. Tears were coming.

Eve handed me a tissue.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be.” Eve raised her coffee cup. “To Katie.”

I managed a smile and tapped my cup against hers. “To Katie — Nana.”

“You said your sister’s coming around,” Eve continued. “It seems like your mother might be too.”

“I love my mom. I know she loves me. She doesn’t like my look, but that’s because people judge me and give me a hard time.”

“And your father?”

I scoffed. “My dad’s a *manly man*. In other words, he’s embarrassed of me.”

Eve frowned. “Hopefully, he’ll come around. If he doesn’t, fuck him.”

I laughed. We kept the conversation casual after that. She told me how she was from County Clare in Ireland and came to Arizona, because she got a full ride to ASU.

“Do you have any family out here?” I asked.

“My sister pops in.” Eve rolled her eyes. “Whether I want her to or not.”

I chuckled. “I get it.”

Our talk shifted to music. Nana had apparently told Eve I played guitar and fancied myself a songwriter.

“I would love to hear something,” she said.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

I asked Eve what kind of music she liked. She loved the old stuff, like The Chieftains and The Dubliners, just like Nana. But she said one of her absolute favorite bands was a group from Ireland called The Cranberries.

She played a couple of their songs she had on her phone. They were great. One was kind of a catchy pop song called “Dreams,” and another was a rocker called “Zombie.” They were great. The lead singer’s voice was amazing. I was sad when Eve told me she died a few years ago. She was only 46.

I played some music off my phone for Eve. Some of my favorites from The Cure and Morrissey.

“I haven’t heard these in years,” she said. “Thank you.”

We kept on talking. I could have sat there forever, listening to Eve’s amazing accent. But Mom ended up texting. She’d picked up Anna from

school and was heading home, and Dad was bringing home take-out from Chen's. I was expected to come home ASAP.

I explained this to Eve. I was so embarrassed. I must have sounded like such a little kid, but Eve didn't make anything of it. She drove me home, and we listened to some more of The Cranberries on the way. We got to my house. Eve pulled into the driveway and insisted on trading phone numbers before she let me go.

Anna actually delivered on her promise to ask her friends to go easy on me, even Alpha Squad stopped messing with me. I even got the occasional look of sympathy from them. For a moment, I actually thought they might be decent people after all. But then I saw them harassing other people they considered "losers." Business as usual. I also noticed Anna was starting to get pretty cozy with Tucker Vance. I didn't like that. Not one bit.

I visited Nana every day after school. Eve was always there, whether she was working a shift or not. That seemed to please Nana. She called us "her two favorite people." The three of us would listen to The Chieftains and sing along with The Dubliners. Man, Eve had an amazing voice, so sultry and haunting. She'd sneak in a small bottle of Tully and some cold bottles of Guinness every time she visited.. Nana soon needed to drink hers through a straw, but that didn't stop her.

We always ended our singalongs with one of her favorites, "The Parting Glass."

*Of all the money that ever I had
I spent it in good company
And of all the harm that ever I done
Alas it was to none but me
And all I've done for want of whit
To memory now I can't recall
So fill to me the parting glass
Goodnight and joy be with you all*

Relatives from out of town had started showing up. First up were my grandparents — Mom's parents. They flew in from Hawaii, and my aunt and uncle and their kids drove down from L.A. Mom told me more would be coming over the next few days.

Our visits with Nana became shorter and shorter as she got tired, easier and easier. I was barely holding it together. Mom and Anna were there for me, and Dad began checking on me after my visits with Nana to see how I was doing. That was nice.

But it was Eve who really helped get me through. In addition to spending time with me and Nana during my visits, we'd be up to all hours on the phone. She listened to everything I had to say, and when I was hurting she always found the right words to make me feel better.

I caught her talking to Mom and to Grandma — Nana's daughter — at the hospice more than once. There were tears, hugs, and eventually smiles. Eve definitely worked her magic on them. Our out-of-town relatives were really impressed with her. Dad expressed his appreciation of Eve one night when we all went out to dinner at this expensive steak house.

"She's sweet on Tommy, if you haven't noticed." He made sure to add. "And they've been spending a lot of time together."

"Dad." I blushed a little.

Grandpa, Uncle Ken, and my cousin Matt, who was close to my age, *oo'd* and *ah'd* and looked very impressed. They were probably surprised I had feelings for a girl — I should say, woman. They probably thought I was gay too.

"They go out for coffee all the time," Dad continued. "And don't think I haven't heard you two talking on the phone late at night."

"Nice," said Matt.

"Details, Tommy-boy," said Uncle Ken. "Give us some details."

"I don't think this is really the time and place for that," said Mom coming to my rescue.

I gave her a look of thanks. The conversation shifted to talk of funeral arrangements and Nana's will. According to the adults, my great-grandpa, Big Jack, had made a lot of money over the years in real estate and construction. He never gave the slightest hint about how much he was worth. After he passed, Nana took control of the finances, and it sounded like she was just as cagey about money as Big Jack was. Not even Grandma, her own daughter, knew how much she was worth. I doubted any of her brothers or sisters did either.

After dinner, on the way to the car, I thanked Mom for helping me out earlier.

She smiled. “Eve’s amazing. I’m glad we have her — that you especially have her. And if she is, in fact, sweet on you — well, I can’t blame her.”

“Mom. Geez.”

Yeah, like someone as amazing as Eve would be interested in me like that.

We all could tell the end was near for Nana. It was any day now. Eve confirmed it. By that time, the rest of the family had shown up. We’re talking great-uncles and great-aunts along with more regular uncles and aunts and cousins. For years, these people were nothing more than faces on Christmas cards.

Mom and Dad let me and Anna stay home from school. Eve and I were there for Nana the whole time, me on one side, her on the other, and whenever Eve brought out the Tully and Guinness. All of the adults had a round too. Mom and Dad didn’t say anything when they saw me drink.

Then the day came, Nana seemed delirious, confused, and even a little frightened. She didn’t speak. Instead, she mumbled and shifted in her bed like she was in the middle of a dream. We all gathered around her bed. A box of tissues was passed around until it was emptied.

I wasn’t afraid to cry. I didn’t care what Dad thought, but then I felt his hand on my shoulder. I looked up and saw him smile. Tears rolled down his cheek.

“Of all the money that ever I had,” Eve started to sing. *“I spent it in good company.”*

I joined in. *“And of all the harm that ever I done. Alas it was to none but me.”*

Nana then joined in, her voice was just above a whisper.

“And all I’ve done for want of wit,” the three of us sang. *“To memory now I can’t recall. So fill to me the parting glass. Goodnight and joy be with you all.”*

Nana sighed and closed her eyes. Eve pressed her stethoscope to her chest. She moved it around a little. “She’s gone.”

Whimpers and sobs filled the room. I was silent, just staring at Nana. She looked so peaceful. I blinked, and I swore I could see a white light surrounding her head. It looked like a large crown. It vanished in a burst of light.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” asked Eve.

I was stunned. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what it was I saw.

“You’re a special one, Tommy Kennedy,” she said.

I gazed at Eve for what seemed like the longest time. She suddenly had this aura around her, a gentle silver light. No one else seemed to see it but me.

I had to ask, “Who are you, Eve? “I whispered so no one else could hear us. “Who are you really?”

She smiled. “You’ll know. Soon enough.”

Chapter Three

Southwestern, Ireland — 1495 BCE

Emer found herself crying genuine tears at her sister's funeral. She imagined Aibheall's death would devastate her parents, but she wasn't prepared to deal with their anguish face-to-face.

Her plan had worked to perfection. Emer had spread rumors of Aibheall's affair with Conor, and when Aibheall didn't appear for breakfast the next morning and Conor did not appear for his duties, everyone assumed they had run off together.

A search was conducted, and both bodies were found in the glen. From the damage done, it was surmised the two lovers must have had some sort of argument. *Perhaps they'd planned on running off together, but Aibheall had second thoughts* was a popular theory. In the end, it was determined Conor had stabbed Aibheall in some sort of fit of rage then, distraught, took his own life.

Emer had gotten away with it. Only her parents' grief tore at her. They were too overcome to light the funeral pyre. Emer was asked to do it instead. She was admired for her strength as she brought the torch to her sister's body with a steady hand and let it be consumed by the flames. At first, she thought she might enjoy the act of burning Aibheall's body, but Emer soon found herself forcing back sobs.

Looking back at her grieving parents, Emer vowed to be the best daughter possible to them and to do her best to outshine Aibheall. She married the king of the Concani tribe, which was cemented when she bore him a son the following spring. As predicted, the union of those two tribes created a powerful new force that took new lands for their own, increasing their power.

Emer proved to be a fine leader in her own right. One winter, her husband was bedridden with a fever. Emer made all decisions in his place,

strong and solid decisions that benefited her tribe. Most memorably, she successfully organized her husband's warriors to defend their ringfort and the surrounding land against a band of pirates.

She felt her parents were finally proud of her but knew, deep down, she would never be able to completely replace Aibheall in their eyes. She had also gained some understanding of the depth of their grief when she became a mother herself.

Watching her son sleep at night, Emer understood how heart wrenching it would be if he were to be taken from her suddenly and violently. She imagined a part of her would die as well. She soon found herself missing Aibheall and caught herself reliving memories of the happier times they had had when they were girls, long before Emer's jealousy began to take root.

A few years later, Emer bore a daughter. Her parents and brother traveled from their ringfort to celebrate the birth just as they had done when her son was born. When they arrived, the three of them seemed troubled for some reason. Emer wondered what might have happened but knew her father and her brother wouldn't tell her. Her mother, however.

The nursemaid brought Emer's daughter to the main room of the roundhouse. She was tiny and swaddled in a blanket. From the looks on their faces, Emer could tell her parents and her brother had fallen instantly in love with her. They passed her around, each enjoying a cuddle with the newborn before she was finally handed back to Emer.

Her son was present. Emer's parents and her brother all commented on how much he had grown since they had last seen him and how he would no doubt become a fine man just like his father. The men continued to talk and pass a jug of wine back and forth. In the quiet moments, between the laughter and the banter, Emer could tell her family was still bothered. But by what?

Emer slipped away, saying she wanted to put the baby down for a nap. She asked her mother to join her. It took a little coaxing, but Emer's mother was finally ready to admit what was troubling them.. She refused to say anything in front of the baby and waited until they were outside of the nursery.

"Our house was plagued by a spirit," she said. "It haunted a number of our warriors."

"Haunted?" Emer asked. "How?"

“It terrified them. These were grown men, battle-tested warriors, reduced to tears, and left pleading for mercy. That fear then turned to a deep melancholy as they swore there was no escape from this tormenting spirit.” Her mother shuddered. “Each man took his own life, slit his own throat. Others tried to stop them, to hold them back, but their madness had given them inhuman strength. There was nothing anyone could do to stop them.”

“What of your Druid?”

“Even he was confounded by what was happening. He exerted every effort to banish the spirit before any more lives were lost. He finally succeeded — he must have succeeded. The spirit must be gone, because no one else in our house has been afflicted since. Our Druid has since been making every effort to ensure we are protected from any future attacks. We just had a funeral for the men days before we left. It was so sad. These men had been with us for years.”

She rambled off the names. Each one was familiar to Emer. They were the same men she’d enlisted to trap and kill Aibheall and Conor.

This had to be some sort of coincidence, but Emer found herself unable to dismiss this notion so easily. During the remainder of her family’s visit, she played the pleasant and dutiful hostess, always smiling and doing everything she could to make sure her family were enjoying their visit.

At that same time, she was haunted by the deaths of the warriors who had helped her trap and kill Aibheall and Conor. She relived that night in her mind over and over. It plagued her while she slept and while she was awake, stoking her guilt.

The family visit concluded. Emer, her husband, and children saw everyone off as they returned to their home. Later on, Emer experienced another night of restless slumber as she continued to relive the night of Aibheall and Conor’s death. Now the warriors who’d helped her had been tormented into taking their own lives by some vengeful spirit.

What was the cause of this? Had someone summoned this spirit? Did someone discover Emer’s treachery? Could she possibly be next?

A scream from her husband’s bedchamber shook Emer from her bed. He continued to scream and wail. She reached the door. A group of servants arrived at the same moment, no doubt alerted by the screams. Emer was the first through the door. There was no one inside but her husband. He

sat huddled in a corner of his bedchamber, cowering and swatting at some invisible tormentor.

“Leave me alone!” he cried. “Please, have mercy.”

Emer knelt at his side. “My beloved, what is it? What is wrong?”

“Can you not see her? There!”

He pointed at empty space. Emer’s husband collapsed against his wife, sobbing like a child. She cradled him, smoothing his hair. *This is the work of a spirit*, she told herself. *Is it the same one that forced father’s warriors to take their lives? My husband had nothing to do with Aibheall and Conor’s death.*

Emer’s husband began screaming and wailing all over again. He tossed her aside and tried to flee his bedchamber. She lay on the floor weeping, as the servants who were present tried to block his way. The entire group could barely contain her husband. His madness had given him tremendous strength.

Warriors were summoned. It took some of her strongest to subdue her husband, hold him down, and tie him down with leather straps. He cried and sobbed.

“Please be careful,” Emer pleaded. “Try not to hurt him.”

Once he had been secured, Emer’s husband thrashed and tugged at his restraints. Emer then heard her son and daughter crying, wailing like their father. She ran to their nursery. She was intercepted by their nursemaid who was on her way to fetch her.

“They both woke suddenly, screaming and crying,” she explained. “I do not know what it is, but I have not been able to console them.”

They must have heard their father, Emer told herself. *His screams have frightened them.*

She entered the nursery to find her daughter in her cradle, screaming and flailing her limbs, her face bright red. Her son cowered in the corner almost exactly as his father had been earlier. He whimpered and shook. Emer ran to him while the nursemaid attempted to console her daughter.

Emer knelt before her son. “Darling, what is it? What is wrong?”

Her son pointed a trembling finger at an empty space. Emer sobbed and pulled him close. It was undeniable. The same spirit that was driving her husband mad was threatening her children too.

Emer had a servant bring the Druid over immediately. He had a lodge in the ringfort. He was a wise and venerable man, who had served her husband's family since he was a boy. The Druid arrived in her husband's bedchamber. Her husband lay in his bed, thrashing and muttering to himself. The Druid laid his hand on her husband's heart. Her husband let out a long weary sigh and fell asleep. The Druid then began to stride about the room.

"There is so much rage and hatred here." He moved his hands around like he could actually feel it in the air. "Take me to see the children."

They arrived in the nursery. The nurse rocked Emer's daughter in her arms, trying to comfort her, but the newborn continued to wail. The Druid saw to her first. He brought his fingers to his lips then pressed them against the baby's forehead. He held them there, and she began to calm down until she was no longer crying.

She nestled into her nursemaid's arms. The Druid approached Emer's son next. He knelt before the boy who sat frozen in fear. He held a clear crystal in his hand and placed it over the boy's heart. The boy blinked and let out a sudden gasp, snapping out of his frightened stupor. He raced to his mother's side.

"Put the child back to bed," said the Druid. "We must talk."

Emer did what he said. Her daughter was already asleep when the nurse laid her down in her cradle. Emer knelt by her son's bed and assured him she would be just outside in the corridor. Her son let out a sigh and nodded. His eyes soon closed.

Emer joined the Druid outside of the nursery.

"I have seen this before," said the Druid. "This is the work of a banshee."

"A banshee?" Emer exclaimed. "But they are supposed to be benevolent, the spirits of dead family members. They warn families of an upcoming death and help them deal with it."

"Yes, most times," the Druid continued. "But when someone is killed at the hands of family, they can return as a banshee to gain revenge."

"But my husband? My children?"

The Druid's gaze narrowed on Emer. "For their sake, is there something you wish to confess?"

"You can protect us, can you not?"

“Not indefinitely. This banshee will not stop until it has obtained its revenge. Now I need to know what crime was committed.”

Emer broke down and confessed to the murders of Aibheall and Conor. She mentioned how the warriors she had enlisted to help her had died of the same affliction her husband now suffered from. Once Emer had finished, she was surprised by how relieved she felt after finally confessing her crime. The Druid looked on at Emer without judgment. His gentle hands helped her to her feet.

“It is clear that the spirit of your sister is plaguing your husband and children as a means of torturing you.”

Emer whimpered. She wanted to curse Aibheall but found herself unable to do it. Her husband and children may have been innocents in Aibheall’s murder. But Emer was not.

“We shall now summon the banshee,” said the Druid.

He produced a small bunch of dried herbs seemingly from nowhere. He concentrated, and the herbs lit up as if they had been touched by fire. Emer’s stomach clenched as she thought about confronting her sister, now a banshee possessing both great power and cruelty.

The Druid waved the burning herbs all around them. Their earthy scent filled the corridor. He chanted in the ancient language then spoke, “Vengeful spirit appear before us so you can hear our plea.”

Emer gasped as a figure stepped from the shadows. She clung to the Druid’s arm as it came fully into view. A naked headless woman carrying a bowl in both hands in front of her. A bowl filled with blood.

“No!” said the Druid. “Show us your true form.”

At the other end of the corridor, an old woman in a funeral shroud materialized. Her wild white hair stood out in all directions. Her pale skin stretched over her bones. She was bent and crooked. She cackled and howled, as she raced toward Emer and the Druid swiping at them with her jagged fingernails.

“Your true form!” The Druid bellowed. His voice reverberated down both ends of the corridor. A sudden silence. Both figures disappeared.

Emer felt a sudden presence behind her. She turned to see her sister, Aibheall, floating before her wearing a shimmering black gown. Her skin was now as pale as ivory. Her eyes were black orbs in which Emer could see her own reflection, and Aibheall’s once red hair was now silver, and a silver aura radiated all around her.

Emer cried out and fell to her knees. Aibheall, the banshee, let out a low wail that made Emer tremble. It filled her with a deep sadness that threatened to swallow her whole.

The Druid leaned in behind Emer. “Beg for your sister’s forgiveness. It is the only way you and your family will be free.”

Emer nodded. It took a moment for her to summon her voice. “Aibheall, dear sister — no, I lost the right to call you that. Aibheall, please, I am so sorry for what I did to you and your love, Conor. I do not deserve your forgiveness, so I will not dare ask for it. Please, just know how sorry I am, and I am willing to do anything to make amends.”

Emer and the Druid remained still and silent. Aibheall’s face betrayed no emotion. Finally, she spoke. Her voice cracked like she had not used it in a very long time.

“You killed me,” she started. “For wealth and power.”

“I will renounce it,” said Emer. “All of it. I will go into exile. I will —” She fought back her tears. “I will leave my children behind with their father, if that will keep them safe.”

Aibheall appeared to ponder her offer. Emer could hear her own ragged breath in the silence. It felt as if an eternity passed before Aibheall finally spoke

“Agreed.” She faded away. Emer collapsed into the Druid’s arms, sobbing. Once she recovered, they checked on her children. Both were fast asleep, so was her husband.

In the morning, Emer’s husband recovered his senses. He could recall being visited by the banshee. Emer did not dare go back on her word. She told her husband everything, about Aibheall and Conor’s deaths, how Aibheall had returned to punish her, and what she had to do in order to save her family.

Emer’s husband was saddened to hear what she had done. He accepted her sacrifice. A hut was constructed for her on the outskirts of the tribe’s land. The ground was seeded for crops, and livestock was left for her. Emer couldn’t bring herself to tell her parents what she had done. Her husband promised to do it for her.

The day came when Emer was given a small cart filled with provisions and a pony to draw it. She said her final goodbyes. To her husband. Her son. And her daughter — Aibheall.

Chapter Four

Scottsdale, Arizona - Present

“Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit,” I muttered this like a mantra as I sat doubled-over on the edge of my bed. Did I just see what I thought I saw? It was just like when I saw Aibheall and Conor be murdered. I watched it all go down like I was there. Did Aibheall — Eve put both of those visions in my head? Is that what Eve meant when she said *I’d know, soon enough?*

“Are you scared of me?”

I shot to my feet. Eve stood by my bedroom window. My hand shook a little as I reached for the lamp on my nightstand. For a moment, I thought as soon as I turned on the light she’d disappear.

She didn’t. She stood there, dressed casually in jeans, a blue top, and sandals. She waited for my answer. Was I afraid of her? From her expression, she looked worried that I might be. I let out a sigh. I was startled by Eve’s sudden appearance, no lie there. But scared by what I saw in that latest vision?

“So all that was real?” I asked. “Not just what I saw but when —”

“When Conor and I were murdered.” Eve shuddered a little like she was reliving the event. She forced a smile. “You are a special one indeed, Tommy Kennedy.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You and I have a bond. I can’t explain it,” said Eve. “You got that first vision for free. That second one was from me.” She hesitated then said, “You haven’t answered my question. Are you scared of me?”

I thought about both visions in context and how they were connected.

“The warriors, I get it.” A chill ran through me, and I became immediately aware I was wearing only a pair of boxer briefs. I scrambled for the t-shirt crumpled on the floor near my feet. “You wanted revenge, and they were the ones who did the deed. And Emer ordered it.” I swallowed. “But her husband and her kids, they didn’t do anything. Why go after them?”

Eve turned away for a moment. “I was mad with rage and hatred, consumed by vengeance and wanted to inflict as much pain on my sister as possible and knew I could do that by tormenting her husband and children. But when she apologized and begged for forgiveness, I felt her sincerity. I was touched that she loved her family so much she was willing to abandon them forever. I was suddenly ashamed for wanting to go to such an extreme. So after that, I became a guardian spirit, like so many of my banshee sisters, appearing when someone in the family was near death and helping them and their loved ones deal with it as easily as possible.”

I felt comfortable enough to sit back down on my bed. “You said I was a ‘special.’ Was Nana ‘special’ too?”

Eve smiled and sat near me. “I first met her when she was a little girl, when her granddad was going to pass. She knew I was different the moment she met me, and I felt comfortable telling her the truth.”

“And she wasn’t scared?”

“Of course she wasn’t. This is Katie we’re talking about here.”

I laughed and nodded. Good point.

“She’d believed in the Otherworldly all her life,” Eve continued. “She was excited to meet me and finally have actual proof. We became great friends. I returned to her when her uncles and aunts were dying, as well her parents, and later her husband. You were just a baby when he passed. An adorable baby, I might add.”

“What — you saw me?”

Eve chuckled. I grinned and turned away. The only light in the room came from the lamp on my nightstand. I hoped Eve couldn’t see me blushing.

“How long will you be around?” I asked, nervous about her answer.

“As long as I wish,” said Eve.

“But in all the stories,” I started. “Banshees sort of came and went. They were just a presence. They rarely even spoke. But you, you’re *here*.”

“It was the same for me in the beginning,” said Eve. “But my sister banshees had all led full lives before they’d died and were called into service. I died before my life got to begin. For generations, I watched parents with children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives — enjoy happy moments and support each other during hard times — I yearned to experience that, or at least come as close as I could. The need grew more and more powerful as time passed. It took centuries before I was finally able to appear in person like I can now and fully interact with others. In the past, I disappeared shortly after the dying person passed over. Now I can stay longer.”

“How long do you usually stay?”

“As long as I wish to. I can’t stay too long though. I need to return to the Otherworld to recharge my power. That and, well, it’s hard being around humanity for too long. Being so close to what you know you can truly never possess entirely.”

She bowed her head. I slid next to her. I began putting my arm around her. I expected her to pull away. Only she didn’t. She even allowed me to pull her close.

Eve smiled up at me. “And here I’m supposed to be the one that comforts you.”

“You have. Believe me, you have.”

Eve stared into my eyes. A warmth filled me.

“You should get some sleep,” Eve said as she took my hand and gently removed my arm from around her. “Big day tomorrow.”

She referred to me and Mom planning Nana’s funeral arrangements.

“Yeah. Good luck with that.” How was I supposed to fall back asleep now after my whole life had just been turned upside down?

Eve smiled. “Lie down on your side.”

I did what she said without questioning. Eve moved close, almost pressing up against my body. She ran her fingers through my hair and sang to me in Irish. I couldn’t make out all the words. I didn’t want to either. I was too wrapped up in the tune. It was a lullaby. The sound of her voice, her fingers through my hair, the heat of her body. All of those together relaxed me and put me right to sleep.

I woke later, feeling the sun shine through my window blinds. Eve was gone, but she’d apparently draped my duvet over me before she left. I wasn’t going to dare say something as stupid like last night had to have

been a dream, not when I could still feel the warmth of Eve's body on my skin and her breath against my ear. Her scent lingered too. The smell of fresh-cut roses.

Mom insisted I help her and Grandma make Nana's funeral arrangements, because, well, she had to admit out of everyone in the family I probably knew her the best. Looking at coffins was kind of creepy. I mean, choosing a box to seal someone's body in and then bury it in the ground like you were picking out a new couch or a bed, thinking about style and price and whether the deceased would like it or not. The idea of a funeral pyre started making a lot more sense.

I chose a coffin I thought Nana might like. It was simple and elegant. It also reminded me of the color scheme of the furniture she had in her old house. Grandma was about to object. Knowing her, she'd probably insist on something flashier. Thank God, Mom shut her down. She reminded her that this was about Nana and not her.

I helped pick out the outfit we'd bury her in too. I chose her favorite slacks and top, her favorite set of flats, and a wool shawl she'd gotten from Inishmore, this little island off the coast of Ireland that was famous for its wool clothing. She had this gold Celtic knot brooch she wore with it.

We got home. I found myself thinking about Eve. Next thing I knew, she was calling me. A huge smile slid across my face. I headed up to my room as we started talking. Eve wanted to know how the funeral preparations went. I told her all about it and how Nana would be buried next to her husband, Big Jack.

"You'll be coming to the funeral, right?" I asked, holding my breath just a bit.

"Of course," she said. "I was thinking we should play some of her favorite songs during the service."

"Yeah, that would be great."

I sat at my desk, grabbed a pen, and tore a sheet out of one of my school notebooks. We chose some rousing tunes like "The Wild Rover," which was a good one, because it had some nice call-and-response spots. We chose some ballads too, like "The Fields of Athenry."

Talking with Eve so casually and comfortably like that, it was almost hard to believe the conversation we had last night had actually happened. She was a banshee, a supernatural creature, and that was fine. I liked her.

She was someone I'd come to depend upon for support, for friendship. There was a sudden twinge in my heart as I found myself wondering just how long she would be around.

"So how are you feeling about our discussion last night?" she asked.

I was glad she brought it up. I wasn't sure I could have. "I'm — I'm good with it. In fact, I'm kind of surprised about how easily I've come to accept that the Otherworldly exists. And that I know a friggin' banshee." I started laughing. Eve too. I settled down. "I think it's because you've been so wonderful to me and my family."

"You flatter me," said Eve. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some songs to rehearse for tomorrow. I don't want to embarrass myself."

"Yeah. Me too. You know, there is a way we could rehearse together, on FaceTime."

Eve giggled. "Clever. Let's do it."

I was already pretty familiar with the songs we'd chosen. I'd played them at one point or another, either at one of Nana's birthday parties or during one of the big Saint Paddy's Day bashes she hosted, but I looked up some sheet music online just to be safe. I was glad I came up with the idea of rehearsing with Eve on FaceTime. It gave me a chance to spend more time with her, even if it was just over the phone.

We had a big family breakfast the morning of the funeral. The service was that afternoon. It was at Nana's church, which was popular with the local Irish community. Once a month, the priests would conduct Sunday mass in Irish. The church was also a favorite of the members of the local Irish Heritage Foundation, of which Nana had been a longtime member. A lot of her friends from there showed up, so did friends from Vista Village, including her favorite staff members.

Eve arrived almost at the same time as my family and I did. Everyone was glad to see her. She looked great. She wore a simple black dress and heels with a silver pendant, and her hair was held back with a silver comb. Dad and Uncle Ken still referred to her as my girlfriend and gave me playful winks and nudges. I chose to grin and bear it.

"Did you bring them?" I whispered to her.

Eve grinned and patted her purse. "You think I'd forget?"

We giggled and made our way to Nana's coffin. It was open for everyone to see her. The mortician did an amazing job. She looked so

beautiful, almost like she was just sleeping.

I sniffled and wiped my eyes. Eve stepped up beside me and put her arm around my waist. We stood there for a moment. Eve then reached into her purse. She first pulled out a small bottle of Tully and handed it to me. It fit perfectly, nestled in the crook of Nana's arm. She then handed me a bottle of Guinness. That fit perfectly in her other arm.

Grandma let out a loud gasp when she saw what Eve and I had done, but Mom was there to quiet her down. On the other hand, all the other adults thought it was pretty cool and gave me thumbs-up and approving nods.

Nana's favorite priest conducted the service. I'd met him a few times. He even came to visit Nana at Vista Village. He was a great speaker. His eulogy was warm and thoughtful, and he injected bits of humor, particularly when he told stories about Nana.

Members of my family and Nana's friends from the Irish Heritage Foundation and Vista Village came up, one at a time, to say a few words and share their favorite stories about her. In between the speeches, Eve and I sang one of the songs we'd prepared.

Eve's voice enchanted everyone in the church. They sat and listened, swaying to the ballads with traces of tears in their eyes. They then clapped and sang along with the livelier tunes. No one carried on any side conversations or checked their phones. Everyone was immersed in every song.

We didn't have time to play all of the songs we'd rehearsed, but that was okay. We'd play the rest during the wake. After the service was the burial. Some of Nana's favorite staff from Vista Village were chosen to be pallbearers. We followed the hearse to the cemetery, and Nana was laid to rest next to her husband, Big Jack. The priest said a few more words as her coffin was lowered.

A wave of emotion hit me. It was just as powerful as the one I felt when I first heard she was dying. This was it. Nana was gone, at least from this world. I knew I could still always talk to her, and she may not be able to answer me, at least not directly, but I knew she would always be listening.

Then, there were the memories.

So many wonderful memories.

I shuddered and sobbed. Eve reached for my hand. She liked to say tears were good. Sadness, if held in for too long, turned into a poison.

The wake was held at our house. The dining room table was loaded with bottles of whiskey, a keg of Guinness, and cans of ale, lager, and cider. Another table was set up and filled with food, all of it courtesy of Nana's friends from the IHF.

Mom allowed Dave and Chris to come to the wake. This was their first time meeting Eve. It didn't take long until they were calling her *my girlfriend* just like Dad and Uncle Ken did. Thanks, guys.

I'd put together a playlist of Nana's favorite songs by The Dubliners and The Chieftains to play on the big stereo. In between, Eve and I played some of the songs we didn't get a chance to play during the service. Dave and Chris begged to join us. I gave Dave the acoustic guitar I'd been playing and went up and got my electric guitar and mini-Fender amp. I gave Chris a crash course on how to play the bodhran, a flat and round Irish drum.

Everyone at the wake stopped what they were doing and came from whatever room they were in to listen to us. Dave and Chris were just as mesmerized by Eve's voice as everyone else was. And when I backed Eve on guitar I found myself sinking into this kind of trance, getting lost in each song and feeling the music move through me.

During a break, I headed off to get drinks for the four of us. Dave and Chris came after me. They hurried me off to the side with big smiles on their faces. I'd never seen them so excited before.

"Dude, she has got to be our lead singer," said Dave.

Chris nodded.

"Who? Eve?" I asked.

"Who else?" Dave added.

I was ready to argue, but Chris cut me off.

"Will you just promise to talk to her? Ask her, please," he said.

Both stared at me, and I knew they wouldn't stop until I said what they wanted to hear.

"Fine."

At first, I said it just to get them off my back. Before I knew it, the thought of Eve being the lead singer of our supposed-band sounded amazing. I thought of how much fun we were having playing together. I had

to admit we sounded pretty good too, and everyone at the wake was enjoying listening to us.

A banshee fronting a garage band. Crazy.

I'd almost forgotten what I was going to do — then remembered, drinks. I got to the kitchen. Grandpa and Uncle Ken were getting refills too. I hung back, waiting my turn. They didn't seem to notice me. At least not yet.

"I still can't believe she didn't make anyone in the family the executor of her estate, Dad," Ken told Grandpa.

"I don't get it either," said Grandpa. "Katie insisted on this lawyer handling everything. He's the son of an old friend of hers."

"Didn't anyone try to talk her out of it?"

Grandpa scoffed and shook his head. "Arguing with that woman is like arguing with a brick wall. No one has the slightest clue how much she was worth. I mean, she was always generous, but never a real big spender."

"She never seemed to worry about money at all either."

Grandpa grinned. "That probably means she had a lot of it."

Ken chuckled. "At least this lawyer took care of all the hard stuff for us. Selling the old house, the estate sale, paying all the bills."

"Yep, and we get to reap all the rewards," said Grandpa.

They laughed and clinked glasses in a toast. I made a fist at my side. I couldn't believe I shared DNA with those two. What was really sad was that I knew a lot of the other adults were thinking the same thing. I stepped back, making sure Grandpa and Uncle Ken didn't see me. They walked away and were already talking about how they were going to spend their share of the inheritance.

I got drinks and rejoined Eve, Dave, and Chris. Eve could tell something was bothering me.

"I've just got a bunch of assholes in my family," I told her.

Eve didn't argue with me. She just gave me a sympathetic smile.

Nana's lawyer, Ben Armstrong, came to the house the next day to read her will. I'd met him a couple times when he'd stopped by Vista Village to see Nana. He was really nice, super tall with salt and pepper hair. He always wore these expensive-looking suits. He cared a lot about his looks. One time, I watched him pick a single piece of lint off a sleeve that I don't think anyone would have noticed if he hadn't drawn attention to it.

Mom and Dad met Mr. Armstrong at the door. They walked him into the living room, where everyone in the family was packed inside. They crowded the big sectional couch and three of the tall comfy chairs. Three of my younger cousins sat on the ottomans. More chairs had been brought in from the kitchen and dining room. Mom had made trays of snacks, along with a pitcher of lemonade and another pitcher of iced tea.

Mr. Armstrong sat in the last tall, comfy chair that had been set aside from him and placed at the front of the room. He set his briefcase down and helped himself to some snacks. Mom brought him a glass of iced tea. He took small sips and ate with his little plate under his chin, no doubt worried about any food falling on his suit.

He made small talk and asked about the funeral. He'd been out of town and was sorry he'd missed it. He'd just gotten back last night. As he kept talking, I noticed everyone shifting in their seats with big forced smiles on their faces. They were all, no doubt, dying to get to the reading of the will. I shook my head, so embarrassed.

Mr. Armstrong finished his last bite of food and washed it down with the last of his iced tea. He checked his suit then reached for his briefcase.

"Now what do you say we get down to business," he said.

Everyone sat up a little taller as he got out the folder containing Nana's will. He started reading. It ended up breaking down like this:

Nana's sons and daughters and their spouses received fifty-thousand dollars.

Her grandchildren and their spouses, such as Mom and Dad, also received fifty-thousand dollars.

Anna and my cousins each got twenty-five thousand dollars that was put in trust to help pay for college. They were satisfied, but the grown-ups grumbled and mumbled. I imagined they expected to get more.

"And to my great-grandson, Tommy," Mr. Armstrong continued. "I leave my record player and my record collection, as well as my personal library." He stopped to take a breath. "I also leave the remainder of my estate valued at \$410,000 —"

Everyone in the room let out their own cry of shock.

"—that will be placed in a trust until he turns eighteen," Mr. Armstrong finished.

I sat there stunned. Was this really happening? I mean, Nana and I adored each other, and she was not terribly fond of the rest of the family. She seemed pretty disappointed in them at times.

Grandpa demanded to see the will. “That’s got to be a mistake.”

“That’s too much money,” said Dad. “How’s Tommy supposed to manage all that?”

“Katie paid me a sizable retainer so I could advise Tommy when he needs it,” Mr. Armstrong told Dad. He then turned to Grandpa. “And I assure you there is no mistake. Katie was of sound mind and quite adamant when we drafted her will.”

Everyone continued to bitch and moan, except for Mom and Anna. They were the only ones who actually looked happy for me. Mr. Armstrong no longer felt very welcome. He said something about having another appointment and asked me to stop by his office tomorrow to sign some papers.

I said yes. He shook my hand and congratulated me. He meant it too, but I also imagined he did it to rub salt in the wounds of my greedier family members. While they kept up their complaining, I slipped off to my bedroom. Anna caught up with me on the stairs.

“Tommy, I’m really happy for you.” She actually gave me a hug. I couldn’t remember the last time she did that. “I know Nana loved you, and you loved her. You spent more quality time with her than anyone. Especially when she moved into Vista Village.” She chuckled. “Remember what she called that place?”

“Heaven’s waiting room,” I chuckled back.

We had a good little laugh. Anna followed me up the stairs.

“Think about what you could do with that money,” she continued. “You can get new clothes, be more fashionable. You could get a sweet whip like a Lexus or an Escalade.”

“Anna, thanks. But that’s really not me.”

“Think about it. You’ve got such great cheekbones,” she said. “With the right clothes, you could look like a model.”

I scoffed.

“What about throwing an epic party?” she suggested. “You don’t even need to wait for a night when Mom and Dad aren’t home. You could get like a hotel suite. You could throw a bunch of parties. Think how popular you’ll be!”

“Anna, those people wouldn’t like me for me. They’d like me for the parties.”

She crossed her arms. “What do you mean by *those people*?”

“You know who I mean?”

“*Those people* happen to be my friends and the most popular kids in school. I don’t understand why you always bag on them.”

“Oh, you don’t?” I asked, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Anna sighed. “Look, I know they’ve given you a lot of shit, but I asked them to back off, and they have, haven’t they? And if you change your look, get a sweet ride, and maybe throw some awesome parties they might want to hang out with you more.”

“Anna, I — I’m really overwhelmed right now. I need some time alone.”

I headed straight for my room.

“Promise me you’ll at least think about it,” Anna called after me.

I shut my door and locked it then dropped face-first onto my bed. I started thinking about Eve and seriously wished she was here right now. No sooner did I think that when I felt her settle next to me.

I sat up, smiling. “I was just thinking about you.”

“That’s why I’m here,” she said. “So what’s troubling you?”

“Nana’s lawyer just read her will. It turns out I got most of the money, and everyone else just got a bit. I’m not troubled, I guess. Just stunned.”

“Katie loved you very much. You were the world to her, and I know you felt the same way. Unfortunately, she didn’t have a lot of kind things to say about the rest of your family.”

“I just don’t know what I’m going to do with all that money,” I said. “We’re talking over four hundred grand.”

Eve blinked. “Wow.”

“I’m sure Mom and Dad will want me to put some money towards college, and that’s fine,” I said. “But that barely puts a dent in it.”

“If I know Katie, I think she would want you to pursue your passion for music.”

I blushed a bit. “I wouldn’t really call it a passion. It’s more of a hobby.”

Eve gave me a sly grin and a piercing look.

“Okay, it’s my passion. I guess I never really thought of it that way.”

“You come from a long line of passionate people, Tommy Kennedy,”
I should know more than anyone.”

“Passionate about music?”

“Passionate about music, art, people, causes. Passion comes in many
forms, and it makes life truly worth living.”

Chapter Five

Southwestern, Ireland - 950 AD

Aibheall watched as the midwife tended to the woman giving birth. She was the newest queen of this region known as Thomond. Her husband knelt at her side, offering his support. None of them were aware of Aibheall's presence. She moved about the room, shrouded in an invisible mist that kept her concealed from mortal eyes. She smiled with excitement. The baby would arrive in this world at any moment.

Aibheall sensed another arrival. Her sister banshee. Cliodhna.

"I do not know why you insist on being at so many of these births," she scoffed. "They are all the same. And how many wives has this man had so far? How many children has he fathered? It is no longer special."

"Every birth is special," said Aibheall.

"We might as well be talking about livestock."

"Quiet!" Aibheall drew a breath then stepped forward.

This family were direct descendants of hers. She had a powerful connection with each of them, from birth until to death. Each one possessed a special glow. This child who was about to be born, Aibheall could already tell he was destined for great things.

Cliodhna could not see this, as these were no descendants of hers, and even though she had many important descendants, to her, they were mere humans. Her charges. Her responsibilities.

She was about to make another comment when Aibheall shushed her. The baby arrived. A boy. His birth cry was like a mighty roar, as he announced his presence to the world. Aibheall smiled gleefully. She turned to her sister.

"He is so loud," Cliodhna said.

Aibheall shook her head and moved to the mother's side. She did not notice Cliodhna's departure. She was too busy gazing at the newborn

cuddled against his mother's chest.

She watched the boy grow. His brothers had different mothers than him, but they were all still so very close. They played like wild wolf cubs. When he got too out of control, the boy's mother would reprimand him and remind him he was descended from kings, and he needed to start acting the part.

Once he was old enough, the boy began climbing the mountain trails outside of his family's ringfort, day after day. These were Aibheall's mountains. Her home. These were no casual strolls either. Judging from his determined expression and how intensely he observed the landscape, the boy was definitely searching for something. Each day, he appeared just as resolute as he did the day before. It became clear he would keep returning and would not give up until he had found what he was looking for.

Or maybe *whom* he was looking for?

On his next trip through the mountains, Aibheall heard the boy whisper her name. She decided to approach him, and though she sensed virtue in the boy's heart, she still needed to be careful. She could not appear as herself yet. She would need a disguise.

She took the form of an old woman with snowy white hair and deep lines in her weathered face. She wore a faded dress and worn sandals and leaned on a stout cane as she walked. As they were about to pass each other on the mountain trail, they made eye-contact. The boy was the first to nod. He also offered a pleasant smile.

Seeing him this close up, Aibheall was struck by how handsome the boy was and how he carried himself with a confident and even regal bearing. She let out a false groan and pretended her knees had buckled. Before she could even say a word, the boy was at her side, propping her up and keeping her from falling.

"It is all right. I have you." The boy walked her over to a stone on the side of the trail that was large enough for them both to sit on.

"Thank you, my child."

"You are welcome." He offered his hand. "My name is Brian Cinnédidh."

She feigned surprise and bowed. "I am humbled to meet you, young prince."

Brian giggled. "You do not need to do that." He reached into his pack for an apple and a small knife. He offered the first slice to the old

woman. “May I ask what you are doing on this trail? Are you from a village on the other side of the mountains?”

“Yes. Of course,” she answered.

“There does not appear to be anyone with you, and this is quite a hearty trek to take.”

“True. I unfortunately could not find anyone to join me. Everyone insisted this was an ‘old woman’s foolish errand.’”

“So you went anyway? This must really be important to you.”

She nodded.

“May I ask what it is?”

She narrowed her gaze. “You promise not to mock or tease me?”

Brian shook his head. From his expression, it looked like he would never have even considered doing such a thing.

“Well, I have come in search of the Banshee-Queen, Aibheall. She is said to watch over the land from a craggy perch high up in the mountains. I have heard stories about her since I was a girl and vowed one day I would meet her in person. That sounds so foolish, I know.”

Brian shook his head and smiled. “I have also been searching these mountains for Aibheall!”

“Have you now? But someone as young as you, have you not been taught to abandon the old ways for the teachings of the Christian god?”

“We have, but the old seanchaí, the keeper of the old lore, he still entertains us with stories of the old gods, the Tuatha De’ Danann, and the great heroes, CuChulainn and Fionn Mac Chumail. I do not know why, but those stories speak to me in a way no others do. They carry a truth other stories do not.”

She nodded. “Hold on to that, boy. Those stories will ensure you grow up to have the heart of a true hero. Now tell me what you know of Aibheall.”

Brian cut another piece of apple for her and another for himself. He told her how Aibheall ruled over a kingdom of fairies that lived deep within the mountains. He boasted about how she was the guardian spirit for his family. She came to tell them when someone was about to die, and her very presence helped soothe the dying and comforted the mourners in their time of need.

“She also plays a harp and wears a cloak of shadows that allows her to disappear in an instant,” he made sure to add.

She smiled, quite taken by young Brian. “While I am quite fond of the harp, I must say I do not need a cloak to help me disappear. And the mountains where we sit contains a portal to my realm. It is not the location of the realm itself.”

Brian blinked, looking confused. What he thought was an old woman chuckled as her form shifted. She now appeared young, a fair maiden, with ivory skin and silver hair and dressed in a shimmering black gown.

Brian breathed her name. “Aibheall.”

He immediately fell to his knees.

She chuckled and beckoned for him to rise. “You do not need to do that.”

Aibheall held his face in her hands and gazed at him, taking in every tiny detail. And not just what lay upon the surface. She gazed deep into his very soul.

“You are a special one, Brian Cinnédidh,” she said.

He blushed a little and turned away slightly. “There is so much I wish to ask you.”

“And I will tell you all that I can. But not today.” She gazed past him, toward Beal Boruma, the ringfort he called home. “Your family searches for you. Your father is leaving on another of his journeys and wishes to say goodbye to all of you before he departs.”

Brian gazed toward the ringfort then back at Aibheall. “You will be here tomorrow?”

She nodded. “It goes without saying you must not tell anyone we have met.”

Brian chuckled and started back down the trail. “No one would believe me if I did.”

He waved at Aibheall. She smiled and waved back to Brian and watched him disappear down the mountain trail. She found herself missing him almost immediately.

Aibheall was excited to see him return the next day. The feeling appeared mutual. The two spent hours each day, telling stories. When Brian told her he was learning to play the harp, Aibheall showed him how she could fashion one out of Otherworldly energy. It was silver, solid to the touch and detailed with fine etchings.

She showed Brian how to play it. He took to the harp quickly, and it was not long until he could accompany her on more complex tunes on a

smaller harp she created for him. When he told Aibheall he was learning to use a sword, she fashioned two silver swords out of Otherworldly energy, one for each of them to practice with. Brian was quite surprised at how adept with a sword she was.

As a banshee, Aibheall was aware of a descendant's death only if it was imminent, such as if they were dying from natural causes or an illness or injury. She was not aware of sudden, violent deaths until the damage had been inflicted.

That was what happened that evening. Aibheall materialized in the middle of Beal Boruma, surrounded by flames and screams. So many lay dead and dying. She sought out Brian but could not find him anywhere. He returned later with his father and brothers, who were horrified by what had happened to their home.

Aibheall listened, unseen by Brian's father or any of the others. He had taken Brian and his brothers, along with some of their nightwatch, to hunt what they thought was a pack of wolves that had ravaged one of their flocks.

They learned wolves were not the culprits. It was Vikings, barbarians from the cold north. They had been terrorizing the coast, but Brian's father, along with other local tribal kings, had believed they were safe as far inland as they were, that the Vikings' dreaded longships were not nimble enough to navigate the Shannon River.

This particular band of Vikings had proven to be as cunning as they were vicious. They made it seem as if a wolf pack had been terrorizing the family's sheep in order to draw them out. Somehow, they knew Brian's father would wish to handle this threat in person and bring a squad of his best men to accompany him. They did not count on him bringing his sons with him as well. They saw that as a bonus.

There was an ambush, but Brian, his father, his brothers, and their nightwatch proved to be too formidable for the Vikings. They slew them all, but the last man they put to the sword, before he died, told them how this was not only a ruse to ambush them but to draw them away from Beal Boruma, which by then had already been attacked.

Brian's father, his brothers, and their men fought the flames and checked the fallen bodies for survivors. Aibheall glanced from one Viking

corpse to the other, so consumed with rage she did not notice her sister, Cliodhna, appear at her side.

“Savages,” she said, talking about the Vikings. “Their own land does not provide enough to sustain them, they have to take from others. They are everywhere, putting men to the sword, sacking homes, and enslaving women and children. They barely give families time to mourn before they are out killing again.”

Aibheall cursed these savages. She then realized she had lost track of Brian. The searing flames made the air hazy, but she found him ducking into the remains of his family’s roundhouse. Aibheall vanished from Cliodhna’s side and reappeared beside Brian. He was in his mother’s bedchamber, weeping over her corpse.

She knelt behind him. Brian somehow sensed Aibheall. He turned and buried his face in her chest and wept even harder than before. She held and comforted him, shielding him from the flames. She released him when his father and brothers arrived. Aibheall was only visible to Brian, but she was able to provide comfort to Brian’s father and brothers by singing soothing melodies to them. Brian’s father and brothers could not actually hear her voice, but it still registered in their minds and hearts and eased their sorrow.

A funeral was held. Druids chanted and said prayers while the great pyres burned. Aibheall continued to watch over Brian after that, even after Beal Boruma had been repaired and life appeared to go on as normal. Aibheall’s behavior troubled Cliodhna.

“Why are you still here?” She stood over Aibheall, who sat on a chair beside Brian’s bed as he slept. He’d been having troubling dreams lately, and she liked to be there for him. “Might I remind you we are to warn our charges of an upcoming death when we can and to help console them and their families as they pass. Why do you insist on lingering?”

She gazed upon Brian, who twitched and whimpered in his sleep. Aibheall smoothed his hair and hummed a gentle tune. Brian sighed and returned to a restful slumber.

“I stay because the death of loved ones can continue to affect their family members, long after the pyres have been extinguished,” Aibheall answered.

Cliodhna had no reply. She simply vanished. It would be years before Aibheall would see her again. She continued to watch over Brian. He

became withdrawn and prone to fits of anger that caused him to lash out and injure other boys his age.

Aibheall had to intervene. She appeared before him when no one else was around and scolded Brian for his behavior, going so far as to tell him he was behaving no better than the savages that had slain his mother. Those words splintered the hard exterior Brian had formed. They struck his heart and made him weep with shame.

Not long after that Brian's father decided to send him to Clonmacnois to be educated by the monks there. Brian tried to protest, but Aibheall supported his father's plan. She reminded him of the stories of Lugh the Light One, the greatest of the Tuatha De' Danann and how he was skilled in so many disciplines. He was an artisan, a scholar, and also one of the greatest warriors ever known.

Brian agreed. He threw himself into his studies. He became a model scholar, seeking to learn everything he could, especially about great leaders such as Alexander and Charlemagne, hoping to follow in their footsteps someday. Aibheall continued to visit him. She could always tell when he was troubled and had doubts about the path he was taking. As usual, her comfort and counsel helped him regain his focus.

One day, not long after he'd turned seventeen, Aibheall came to pay Brian a visit. From her somber expression, he could tell she bore bad news.

"My father," Brian choked on his words. "He is dead."

Aibheall confirmed it. Word officially came the next day. Brian knew that his father had joined the effort to combat the Vikings that had invaded Munster province. His father was never one to shy from a fight, and he would rather lead his men into battle than bark orders from the rear. It was no surprise to Brian that he had died in battle.

The monks commended Brian for being so stoic upon receiving this news, not knowing he had had plenty of time to weep, because Aibheall had told him the day before. Aibheall remained by Brian's side and accompanied him on the ride back to Beal Boruma.

Brian did not stay long. His older brother, Mahon, who was now king of Thomond, had taken charge of their father's army and was aiding in the fight against the Vikings. Brian joined them. Over the next five years, he served under Mahon's captains and received an extensive education in warfare and gained a reputation as a formidable warrior.

Unfortunately, his brother and the other generals had been fighting for much longer than him. They were much wearier than Brian and the other young warriors like him. Mahon felt as if he owed it to Brian to be the one to tell him that he and the other kings of Munster had chosen to form a truce with the Vikings in order to spare more death and bloodshed.

Brian was horrified that his brother would agree to a truce with the same people who had killed their father and Brian's mother. A ragged Mahon had no answer for him. As always, Aibheall appeared to Brian and provided him both consolation and counsel.

"If you wish to carry on the fight against the Vikings, by all means do so," she said. "But do it wisely."

"How?" thought Brian.

He knew he was not alone. As news of the truce spread throughout the various armies' camps, there were voices of discontent and protest. Brian thought of those men, but there were not enough of them to directly face the Viking armies. To make matters worse, Irish clans were entering into alliances with the Vikings.

"Go back to the old lore," Aibheall told him. "Remember Fionn MacCumhaill and his men, the Fianna? They lived off the land, slept in the forests. They knew the terrain and used it to their advantage, turning their opponents' larger numbers against them. You can do that too, Brian."

Aibheall's words lifted Brian. He gathered a sizable number of warriors to follow him. They stalked and strategically attacked bands of Vikings, striking and running, splitting larger forces into smaller, more manageable ones. They would hide within the brush and strike when they had the advantage. They drove their enemies into traps and ambushes, oftentimes luring them into the mountains then driving them over the craggy edges and onto the rocks below.

As their successes grew, so did support from their fellow Irishmen. Peasants gave them shelter and brought them whatever food they could spare. In time, Brian's mission became about more than just simple vengeance. He fought now for the love of his country and its people and to free them from their oppressor.

Aibheall watched Brian's achievements with great pride and appeared to him whenever he was in need. She watched as he was made King of Thomond and then King of Munster. He fought and took over more of the provinces and united those clans under his banner. He was feared and

respected, but no tyrant. He was revered as a man of strong character. During combat, Brian would take hostages from rival clans. Typically, they would be returned once the battle had ended, but the hostages taken by Brian had grown to love him so much they wished to become part of his clan — of which Brian always obliged.

It was not long until Aibheall stood witness, invisible to the crowd, as Brian stood on top of the Hill of Tara and was declared the High King of Ireland. Only one obstacle remained. The Viking clans that still remained in Ireland and the Irish clans that remained aligned with them.

All of that would be decided in Clontarf, in the year 1014. Brian and his army established their camp in Kilmainham. Brian withdrew to his tent the night before the battle. He smiled when he saw Aibheall waiting for him.

“Look at you,” he said. “You have not changed at all. You are just as beautiful and radiant as you were the day I met you. I wish I could say the same.”

Brian was now seventy-four years old, a miraculous age for any man to reach during that era. He groaned as he reached for a chair and slowly eased himself down into it.

Aibheall cast a loving smile upon him. She held his face in her hands. “I look at you, and see the curious boy who climbed my mountain, day after day, in search of a myth.”

“But you were not a myth, were you?”

“Above all, I see a man, a king, who has inspired and united a country.”

Brian blushed. “I could not have done it without you.”

“I merely advised you. It was up to you to decide whether or not to listen.”

“I am glad I did.” Brian coughed then summoned his attendants who were standing outside of his tent. “I must pray then I must sleep.”

“Will you be joining your men in battle?” Aibheall asked, her voice tight with anxiety.

Brian chuckled. “I am far too old. I shall remain here, receiving messages from the battlefield and giving my orders.”

Aibheall was relieved. She waited as Brian’s attendants got him ready for bed. She said goodbye and planted a tender kiss on his forehead. That night, Aibheall materialized on a rocky outcrop, overlooking the battlefield.

Shortly after sunrise, both armies approached the battlefield. The fighting raged on for the entire day with both sides taking heavy casualties.

The whole time, Aibheall played her Otherworldly harp. The song carried onto the battlefield, lamenting the fallen, comforting them in their last moments and granting courage to their comrades to persevere in their name.

Among the dead were Brian's son and grandson, but in the end Brian's army prevailed. The Vikings and their Irish allies were defeated. Aibheall was there for both Brian's son and grandson to ease their passing. She then returned to Brian's tent, wanting to be the one to inform him of their deaths.

She reached his tent and was greeted by the sight of carnage. Brian's bodyguards lay slain, along with the bodies of three Vikings, who must have retreated early from the battle. Aibheall found more Vikings inside, pillaging the tent, stepping over and kicking aside the corpses of Brian's attendants.

Brian was at the very rear of the tent. He clutched a blood stained sword. He had fought well even at his age, but one of the Vikings grabbed him from behind and plunged his dagger into Brian's chest.

Aibheall trembled with rage. She let out a piercing scream, a violent sound that sent each of the Vikings into convulsions. Blood ran from their eyes, their noses, ears, and mouths. One after the other, they collapsed into heaps.

Aibheall ran to Brian's side, feeling the last strands of life leave him. She cradled him in her arms. Tears of black blood ran down her cheeks. Brian managed a smile as he gazed at her through half-opened eyes. He reached for her face, but his hand did not make it. It fell lifelessly to his side.

Aibheall trembled. She closed Brian's eyes and laid him out to rest on the ground. As she exited the tent, she heard soldiers outside, returning from the battle, roaring in triumph. Sadly, she knew that would end when they found the body of their beloved king.

Chapter Six

Scottsdale, Arizona - Present

“Wow, Brian Boru,” I said.

Eve and I were still sitting on my bed. She had projected her memories, her most important moments with Brian straight into my head, like she’d done before.

“That name means ‘Brian of the Tributes,’” said Eve. “He was given that title back when he was still fighting with other Irish clans, trying to unify them. Surely, Katie mentioned he was an ancestor of yours.”

“She did. We’ve got a copy of the family crest, and she hired a genealogist one time, who put together a big family tree. But you actually knew him. You were like a mentor and a confidante.”

Eve responded with a proud smile.

“And you’re a queen too,” I said.

Eve chuckled. “It’s a small provincial role. I rule over a couple dozen other banshees. I tend to the direct descendants of my line, while they see to the indirect ones.”

“Do they all have the same powers as you?”

“They can appear to humans like I can, but only for moments at a time. They can change form. They also have the wail of sadness, and they can soothe others with their voices as well.”

“What about that high pitched scream you used on the Vikings?”

“I developed that myself. Banshee queens like me and Cliodhna are more powerful and possess abilities the others don’t.”

I grinned. “Is Cliodhna that sister you mentioned who’s always popping in on you?”

Eve rolled her eyes and nodded.

“Do you think I’ll get to meet her?”

Eve let out a rather exasperated sigh. “I’m sure you will at some point. But let’s get back to talking about you and music. You’ve got the money now to really begin following that dream, where do you want to start?”

I wasn’t sure. My gaze drifted toward my laptop. I’d need gear. That seemed like as good a place as any to start. From the look on Eve’s face, I could tell we were in sync. I fired up my laptop and went to Guitar Center’s website. In addition to instruments, they also had loads of recording equipment for sale. It wasn’t that expensive either — well at least not for me.

Once I’d added all the recording equipment we’d need to my Wish List, I still had so much money left over, it wasn’t even funny. I added a couple new electric guitars and another acoustic, along with a mandolin and a sitar. Eve recommended something called a bouzouki. It was like a mandolin’s big brother. I put that on the list too.

I was having so much fun with this, especially with Eve at my side. I caught myself smiling and staring at her — for maybe a little too long. She gave me a playful elbow jab and returned my attention to my laptop.

“You should probably look into colleges while you’re at it,” she suggested. “Find out how much it will cost for four years. I’d show your dad those figures first before you hit him with your Wish List.”

“You’re right. Thank you.”

Ah, I did it again! I caught myself giving Eve another dreamy smile. I had to stop that. There was a knock at the door.

“Tommy, are you ready?” Mom asked from the other side.

“Ready for what?”

Mom let out a sigh I could hear through the closed door. “We’re going out to dinner with the family, so we can say goodbye. Everyone’s flying home tomorrow, remember?”

Oh yeah, that’s right. I checked my phone. It was that late already? I immediately turned to Eve, wanting to catch her before she disappeared.

“Before you go.” I grabbed my notebooks with my lyrics and handed them to her. “I’d love for you to read these, let me know what you think.”

Eve took the notebooks gently into her hands like they were precious treasures.

“I’d be honored,” she said with a warm smile.

Mom pounded on the door. “Tommy!”

“I’ll be down in a couple minutes!”

I turned back to where Eve had been standing. She was gone. Wisps of the mist she used to travel lingered, along with a trace of her scent. Like fresh cut roses.

At dinner that night, everyone wanted to talk about what I planned on doing with my inheritance. The first word out of my mouth was *college*. That satisfied everyone, at least for the moment.

“Any idea where you want to go?” Grandpa asked.

I swallowed, then said, “I’m thinking about somewhere I can study music and learn how to produce music.”

My response wasn’t exactly met with excitement or keen interest, but at least there were no howls of shock and outrage.

“Well, it’s good you’re thinking about college already.” Uncle Ken gave my cousin, Matt, the side-eye. Obviously, he wasn’t.

After that, Uncle Ken tried to sell me on his alma mater. Then Grandpa tried to sell me on his. I waited for Dad to do the same.

“I think it’s great you have a passion, son,” said Dad, catching me by surprise. “Why don’t you research some schools, and we can crunch the numbers tomorrow after we get back from Mr. Armstrong’s office.”

I smiled back at him. My sarcastic side wanted to say Dad had somehow been replaced with an identical but more supportive robot version. But I didn’t. And decided to enjoy the moment instead.

I started researching performing arts colleges as soon as we got home from dinner. I’d heard of Juilliard in New York. It was supposed to be the best. It was also seriously expensive. I wasn’t sure I wanted to move all the way out to New York either. ASU’s school of music was supposed to be pretty good. The price was decent, and I could still live at home or maybe even get an apartment with Dave and Chris.

I wrote down the prices of some apartments near campus just to have an idea what rents were like there. I’d make sure to tell Dad that Dave and Chris would be chipping in on the rent if we went that way. There was also a local school that focused just on music recording and production. Their program took less than a year, and it looked like I could work on it while taking classes at ASU.

Dad and I went to see Mr. Armstrong early in the morning. We had some paperwork to fill out. Mr. Armstrong also had a lot of information for me about safe ways to invest my money. There were T-Bills, CDs, mutual funds, and some reliable stocks and bonds he'd researched for me. It sounded like my money would be making more money for me.

Dad and I thanked him. We took all the information he gave us and said we'd look it over later then get back to him. When we got home, Dad and I were set to discuss other things I could do with my inheritance. I was prepared. I had notes, facts, and figures ready to show off. Like Eve suggested, I started off with the college information I'd put together. I was so thorough Dad didn't have any questions. He looked really impressed too. I couldn't remember the last time he'd looked at me like that.

"Instead of an apartment, you might want to consider getting a condo," he suggested. "You can mortgage it just like a house. That will help you build a credit score."

"Thanks." I added that to my notes. Wow, a credit score. That sounded so grown-up.

"Is there anything else you're thinking about buying?" Dad smirked. "You are allowed to play around with some of this money. You could, I don't know, buy a car?"

Oh snap, why didn't I think of that?

"Well, since you mentioned it." I showed information on the recording equipment and instruments I found on the Guitar Center's website.

"Don't you have to go to school to learn how to produce music?" Dad asked. "I thought that was part of the plan."

"It is. That'll make me official, and maybe even help me get a job, but I've learned a lot online. There's all sorts of instructional videos on YouTube," I added with a cheesy grin.

Dad chuckled. "I'll bet there are. God bless, YouTube." He gazed at me with that proud smile I was still getting used to. "This looks great. I love it. Let's do it."

We talked about more bank stuff. I already had a savings account. I'd be getting a checking account too. We also found a credit card that I could apply for now. I didn't have to wait until I turned eighteen.

"You know, you'll still have plenty of money to get a new car," said Dad. "You could finance it too. That'll help with your credit score."

“What’s this about a car?”

We turned to see Anna in the kitchen dressed in her comfy clothes with some fruit and yogurt in her hands, the refrigerator door open behind her.

“Tommy’s getting a car? I want a car,” she declared.

“Do you have the money to pay for a car?” Dad asked her.

“I have my inheritance.”

“That’s set aside for college.”

“What if I don’t want to go to college?”

“What if —?” Dad rose from his chair. He had a tight grin on his face that I knew meant he was trying really hard to keep his cool. “Janine!” He started toward the stairs. “Can you come down please? We have something to discuss with our daughter.”

“What?” Anna shrieked. “No!”

She glared at me, looking like she wanted to yell at me or at least call me a name, but couldn’t. She stormed after Dad.

“What’s this about you not wanting to go to college, young lady?”

I heard Mom ask from the hallway. I cringed. Poor, Anna. Oh well, she had to know how Mom and Dad were going to react to saying she didn’t want to go to college. That was a death sentence for sure. You’d think she’d know better.

I was still buzzing over the fact I was going to be able to get all that new equipment. I wanted to share the news with Eve. Next thing I knew, my phone vibrated. It was her.

I chuckled. “I was just thinking about you. Don’t tell me you were able to pick up on that?”

She chuckled back. “I’m good, but I’m not that good. Are you free for a bit?”

Of course, I was. For her, anything. “Yeah. Sure. What’s up?”

“I want to pick you up. We can go to Elemental Cafe for coffee and scones and talk about your lyrics.”

“You read everything? Already?”

I could almost feel her smile over the telephone.

“What can I say?” she said. “I was inspired. Pick you up in thirty minutes?”

“That sounds great.”

Oh man, my heart was fluttering. You'd think I hadn't seen Eve in weeks instead of just yesterday. I chilled in my room, far from the argument — I mean *heated discussion* Mom, Dad, and Anna were having.

Luckily, it ended before Eve arrived. She texted when she was outside of the house. Mom and Dad were in the living room, still discussing Anna not wanting to go to college. Anna must have been up in her room.

They spotted me heading for the door. I told them Eve was outside waiting for me.

“Why is she outside?” Mom asked. “Tell her to get in here.”

“Honey, they've obviously got plans,” said Dad.

Mom grumbled. “Okay, when she drops you off, she's staying for tea — or dinner depending on what time you get back. Tell her I won't take 'no' for an answer.”

I nodded on my way out the door. I mouthed a *thank you* to Dad for the assist. He gave me a thumbs-up in return. Each step I took toward Eve's car was faster than the last one. I opened the passenger door and sat down. She greeted me with a smile.

“So how'd it go with your dad?” she asked.

“Awesome,” I said. “I'm getting everything I want — and possibly a car too.”

“That's great. I'm so happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

Eve pulled out of the driveway. I eased back into my seat listening to her sing along to “Linger” by The Cranberries. Her singing gave me chills as always. It made me think about how badly Dave and Chris wanted Eve to front our supposed-band. We got to Elemental Cafe. I immediately noticed my notebooks sticking out of Eve's bag. We ordered, got our coffee and scones, and found a table.

Once we were settled in, after our first sips of coffee and first bites of a scone, Eve set my notebooks on the table. I couldn't wait to hear what she thought of them. At the same time, I was scared to death. What if she didn't like them?

Eve gave me a sly grin and took her time before she spoke, like she was toying with my anxiety.

“I loved it all,” she finally said. “Your use of words and form. There's such a natural rhythm in everything you write. Your writing is so

brave. I can tell you're digging deep inside you and confronting feelings most people would shy away from."

"Thank you." I felt both proud and relieved at the same time that she really liked my lyrics.

"Do you ever have moments when it feels like the words you're writing or the notes just come to you automatically?" Eve asked. "Like they're flowing through you from some outside source?"

I blinked with surprise. "Yeah. It's been happening more and more lately. It's never easy though. And it never happens on purpose. It's like I'm working then suddenly this wall comes tumbling down and everything starts flowing through me like you said."

Eve looked very pleased with my answer. "Are you familiar with the Druids?"

"They were the holy men of ancient Ireland." I said, wondering where she was going with this.

"There are many still out there." Eve paged through the top notebook. "One tradition that's remained steadfast is the practice of the bardic arts. Poetry and storytelling. Druids believed creativity to be a form of spiritual practice."

Really? That's pretty cool.

"Their goal was to achieve that 'flow' you spoke of. It's a higher form of consciousness. During that time, you achieved your best self. You're perfectly aligned. Mind, body, and soul. It's also when great truths are revealed to you."

Wow. That's awesome. It's like I had some sort of magical power. I guess, according to the Druids I did.

"It never lasts though," I added. "At least not as long as I want it to."

"You can't force it. Just be with it, in the moment. Your ability to achieve the Flow will strengthen on its own.. Someday, you might find yourself able to reach it during everyday activities and not just when you're writing or making music."

I had to sit there for a moment just taking all of that in. Eve stared at me, still smiling. "You really are a special one, Tommy Kennedy."

I blushed and said thank you. Eve returned to paging through my notebooks.

"Thank you for sharing these with me."

She started singing one of my verses, adding a perfect melody. I just sat there, entranced by the sound of her voice.

“So will I get to hear some of your recordings next?” Eve asked.

I took a breath to steady my nerves. “I think I have an even better idea.”

Chris sent me a line full of excited emojis, and Dave sent me a GIF of Lisa Simpson doing a happy dance when I texted them to tell them Eve wanted to be our lead singer. They were ready to start rehearsing immediately, but we’d wait instead until our new equipment arrived.

Eve rounded the corner onto my street. My house was a couple blocks away.

“When my mom heard we were hanging out today,” I started. “She was hoping you’d stop inside. She’s dying to see you again, so’s Dad. Anna too. I mean, if you’re not too busy or anything.”

“I’d love to see your family again,” said Eve. “This will give me a chance to listen to some of your recordings too.”

I let out a nervous chuckle. “Okay. I just want to warn you, my mom will ask you to stay for dinner. If you can’t, that’s okay.”

“I can.” Eve smiled. “And I’d love to.”

We pulled into the driveway. I held the door open for Eve and followed her inside. Judging by the pop music and the giggling, it sounded like Anna and a bunch of her friends had taken over the living room.

“Eeeve!”

Anna squealed and ran to meet Eve with a huge hug. If I didn’t know better, I’d have sworn she’d been sitting on Tucker Vance’s lap. He and some other members of Alpha Squad were there along with a bunch of Anna’s friends.

“It’s so good to see you,” said Anna.

“How are you holding up, love?” Eve asked.

“I’m doing okay.”

“If you ever need to talk, Tommy has my number.”

Anna dragged Eve into the living room and began introducing her to her friends. They were their typical, phony selves, and I had a feeling Eve could see right through them. Through their smiles, I could tell the girls were holding in their venom and trying to find some flaw in Eve that they could gossip about behind their back. As for Tucker and his Alpha Squad, I

didn't want to know what sleazy thoughts were running through their heads as they checked out Eve.

"It was lovely meeting you all." Eve nodded to me and reached for my hand.

"Why don't you stay?" said Tucker. "Hang out with us."

Eve brushed him off with a polite smile. "I want to hear some of the songs Tommy and his friends have recorded."

"Upstairs?" said Anna. "In his room? Alone?"

Looks of shock and disbelief traveled across the room. Eve took my hand and started leading me from the living room.

"It was lovely meeting you all," she said.

On our way up the stairs, we ran into Mom. She greeted Eve almost as excitedly as Anna did.

"We're just going to listen to some of the songs Tommy and his friends have recorded," said Eve.

"In his room?" said Mom. "Alone?"

I gritted my teeth. Oh my God, please kill me now.

"Well, have fun," she then said. "With the door open. And Eve, you're staying for dinner. I insist."

"That sounds lovely," Eve chuckled. "Thank you."

Mom watched us head into my room. I started closing the door a little at a time. When it was about three-quarters closed, she held up her hand and nodded.

I returned my attention to Eve. "Thank you for putting up with them."

"There's nothing to 'put up with,'" said Eve. "They're lovely people. Now. Music."

I pulled out my desk chair for Eve and pulled out a stool I'd liked sitting on when I played guitar. My fingers fumbled a little as I opened the folder on my laptop that had the recordings I'd made with Dave and Chris. I couldn't quite bring myself to call them songs. At least not yet.

I told Eve which song I was playing first so she could follow along with the lyrics. I sang on the track but not very loud. Eve closed her eyes for a moment and started swaying to the music. She began signing. Her voice brought the song to life in the most amazing way

She made the song her own, adapting a new rhythm and pitch for it. It wasn't what I intended. It was even better. Something clicked. I

grabbed my acoustic guitar and started strumming along, changing the chords here and there to better compliment Eve's vocals.

She stopped short. "Do you want me to take it from the beginning?"

"Yes. Please," almost breathless.

I took notes on the original guitar track I'd composed and adjusted Dave and Chris's rhythm track with my computer the best I could. Since my door was open, we drew a bit of an audience. Dad stopped by to say hi to Eve. He had a lot of good things to say about our music. Later on, one of Anna's friends, Vanessa, lingered by the door.

I stopped mid-chord when I spotted her.

"No. Don't stop, please," she said. "That sounded so good."

"I didn't think this would be your kind of music," I told her. After all, there were no synths or drum machines or any of that cold electronic crap she and Anna and the rest of them ate up.

"It isn't. But it could be. Your voice is amazing," she told Eve.

"Thank you," Eve answered.

"And the lyrics. They're so beautiful."

"I'm afraid I can't take credit for those," said Eve. "Those are all Tommy."

"Really?"

"And the guitar parts too."

Vanessa leaned against the doorframe. "Wow, you're so talented." She nibbled her bottom lip. "Well, I'll get out of your way. Let you get back to it. Bye, Tommy — and Eve."

She made a quick exit. I was ready to pick up where we left off, only Eve was staring at me with this totally surprised look on her face.

"What?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Let's get back to it."

We'd finished working on three songs, adjusting the structure to match Eve's vocals, when Mom came up to let us know dinner was ready. Eve and I got downstairs right when Anna was saying goodbye to her friends. She seemed especially smiley with Tucker. He gave her what seemed like an extra-long hug before leaving. I waited for him to grab her ass. But he didn't. I guess he could be a gentleman sometimes.

"You guys wait a moment," Vanessa told the others. "I think I forgot my phone. I'll meet you outside."

Anna walked the rest of her friends outside. I spotted Eve disappear into the kitchen to help Mom. It was just me and Vanessa. And the heavy silence between us.

She chuckled. "I didn't really forget my phone."

"Yeah, that was kind of hard to imagine," I said.

Vanessa shifted her feet then finally spoke. "I know I've been really mean to you. And I'm sorry. I really am. You don't deserve it."

Her voice cracked a little too, like she was trying not to cry. Wow, one of Anna's friends was actually capable of human emotions.

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate that."

Vanessa smiled, looking seriously relieved. "Great. I'll see you around then."

I nodded. She moved in for a hug but aborted it mid-attempt, probably thinking it wasn't right for this moment. We shook hands instead.

"Bye." She gave me a playful little wave as she headed out the front door.

"Well?" I turned to see Eve standing behind me, smiling in anticipation.

"Well, what?" I said.

Eve rolled her eyes and headed back into the kitchen.

I'd recorded Eve and me playing those three songs, along with the changes we'd come up with. When I got back to my room, I FaceTimed Dave and Chris. They didn't look happy when I told them about the changes Eve and I had made. But all that went away once I played the new recordings for them. They loved Eve's vocals, of course.

Dad and I took care of everything with the bank. My inheritance was put into a trust fund I could access when I turned eighteen, which was only a few weeks away. But I was allowed to access enough money to order our new instruments and recording equipment. I even got to spend extra on overnight shipping.

When everything I'd ordered from Guitar Center arrived, it was like every Christmas and every birthday ever rolled into one. Dad insisted all the new equipment stay at our house and that we have rehearsals there too, which Dave and Chris didn't mind, especially since our garage was bigger than theirs.

We'd rehearse after school and on the weekends. Eve still worked at the hospice in order to maintain her "secret identity" and was able to rearrange her schedule so she could attend rehearsals on a regular basis. When she couldn't make it, we just worked on the instrumentals.

We started with the rhythm tracks. Eve had a lot of great input, and we ended up creating these cool tribal-like rhythms. I could almost hear Druids chanting when Dave and Chris played their drum beats and basslines. I was pretty sure that was what had inspired Eve.

When the four of us were together, I thought about what Eve had said about the Flow. I became more aware of it when it happened. At its peak, it was like the line between creator and creation got blurred to the point where it almost disappeared completely. In those moments, I honestly could not tell whether I was playing the song, or the song was just moving through me.

I felt connected to whatever guitar I was playing at that moment. It was a tool to channel my energy through. Then there was the connection I felt with Eve, Dave, and Chris when we played, our energies flowing together in each song we played. And never the same way twice.

Dave and Chris had a friend who was a techie in the school theatre department. His name was Pat. We liked a lot of the same bands, and he offered to work our soundboard. He was awesome. He made us sound even better. We were starting to feel more and more like a real band.

Pat also told us about a community showcase that was coming up. It was for professional and amateur performers. Musicians. Dancers. Actors. Poets. There would be artwork too, from local painters, sculptors, and all that.

Auditions were coming up, and we had enough original material and had practiced enough cover tunes that we could put together a nice little set. The auditions were held at the local community theater. There were a lot of groups from school there. Some from the drama club, the jazz band, and both the varsity and JV dance squad. Anna and some of her friends, including Vanessa, were on the JV squad.

They both came over to wish us luck. We did the same. Vanessa walked slowly behind Anna as they left. She kept glancing over her shoulder at me. I turned to Eve, who I swear looked like she wanted to slap me upside the head. What was I doing wrong?

I filled out the application with our names and the name of our band.

Death's Fair Maiden.

I'd come up with the name. Dave and Chris agreed to it, because they thought it was cool. Eve was especially touched. I did choose it to honor her.

Our turn to audition was up. We took to the stage. Chris counted us off, and we broke into our cover of Siouxsie and the Banshees "Cities in Dust." Dave and Chris liked it, because it was a cool song. So did Eve and I, but we also thought it would be funny to have an actual banshee signing a song by that particular group.

I won't even try to be humble. We sounded great. I mean, we totally killed it. A lot of the other participants were definitely feeling us too, as they smiled and moved to the music. The showcase committee, the ones we had to audition for, might as well have been carved out of stone. I couldn't read them. Not even a little bit.

We finished. The other participants gave us a round of applause that was quickly shushed by the showcase committee. The four members of the committee huddled up. They glanced at us a couple times as they talked to each other. I tried to ignore them and went ahead helping the others pack up our gear.

A lady from the committee stepped onstage to meet us. She'd been sitting in the middle of the group. I figured she was in charge. She was dressed in a skirt suit and had obviously spent a lot of time on her hair and makeup. Her skin looked a bit stretched. Her forehead didn't move either. I knew that meant she'd had some plastic surgery, and her hair had definitely been colored.

She greeted us with a big, fake smile. "Hello, I'm Dolores Walker. I'm the showcase chairperson. How are you?"

We each answered, but it didn't look like she was listening. She was just waiting for her turn to speak again. "Good. Wonderful. Well, I want to thank you all for auditioning. I wanted to tell you in person and right now that, unfortunately, we don't think your band quite fits in the aesthetic we're trying to go for with the showcase."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, the name of your band for starters, we just didn't feel it was appropriate. I mean, there will be children present. And your music is just

— it's not what we're looking for.”

I was about to say more, but Ms. Walker was already walking away.

“Thank you again for auditioning,” she said. “Best of luck to you, I really mean it.”

The four of us just stood there facing each other. Eve, Dave, and Chris looked exactly how I felt. Then again, it made me think about our little community, how they “strove to be generic” and were uncomfortable with anything that was the slightest bit unique and different. Now that I thought about it, we never had a chance. Why did we even bother?

Dave and Chris went back to packing up their gear. Eve moved to my side.

“If you'd like, I can persuade the committee to change their minds,” she said.

I wasn't exactly thinking straight at that moment and assumed Eve was making some sort of joke to make me feel better. “Sure, why not.”

Chapter Seven

That morning, I got woken up with a phone call from a number I didn't recognize. Normally, I let those go to voicemail. For some reason, I felt like I needed to answer this one.

"Is this Tommy Kennedy?" the woman on the other line stammered.

"It is."

"This is Ms. Dolores Walker, from the Community Showcase committee. How —how are you?"

"Too soon to tell. I just woke up."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She stammered even more now. "I didn't mean to inconvenience you."

"It's okay," I said. She sounded almost scared for some reason. "What's going on?"

"Well I just wanted to let you know as soon as possible that we, the committee, changed our minds, and we would be — privileged to have your band perform at the Community Showcase."

"Seriously?"

"Of course."

I scoffed. "This isn't going to turn out to be some sort of practical joke, is it?"

"Oh, I assure you this is no joke. I would never ever dare do such a thing. You have to believe me."

Damn, she sounded almost terrified now. What the hell happened to her?

"Okay. That sounds great," I told her. "Why don't you send me whatever info' we'll need, and I'll go ahead and tell the rest of the band the good news."

She thanked me and let out what sounded like a huge sigh of relief. She said she'd email me the participant information. She also asked if I had

any other questions, but I could tell she wanted to get off the phone as quickly as possible.

I thanked her and hung up. What the hell was that? That was not the same bitchy, boss lady who looked down her nose at us after our audition yesterday. What happened?

Screw it, I'd figure it out later. I texted Dave, Chris, and Eve to let them know the good news. Dave and Chris were just as surprised as I was and wanted to know what had happened to change Ms. Stick-up-her-butt Walker's mind. But I didn't have anything to tell them. Eve texted me back. One single word.

Good.

That was weird. Usually, she was a lot more eloquent than that. I then thought back to yesterday, right after Ms. Walker said we wouldn't be playing the Showcase. Eve had said she could "persuade" the committee to change their minds. I thought she was just messing around, but — oh, man, did she do something?

I turned to see Eve standing behind me, mist fading around her.

"You were so upset yesterday," said Eve, starting in like she was reading my mind. "I knew this showcase meant so much to you, and it seemed so unfair that that woman would deny us. She was clearly being completely arbitrary in her decision, basing it solely on personal taste than talent."

"What did you do?" I was almost afraid to ask.

Eve grinned. "Nothing too severe. Just enough to change her mind. And her only. From what I could tell, the rest of the committee will bow to any decision she makes. Did I go too far?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that. I mean, I did get what I wanted, and it wasn't like Ms. Walker was exactly the nicest person in the world. But still?

Eve waited for my answer, her jaw set with concern.

"It's okay, and — thank you. But next time, wait for me to say something first."

"But you did say something," she reminded me.

And I suppose I did, technically. "Next time, just wait until you're sure I'm sure."

Eve smiled and agreed. I gazed at her. My Eve, if I could call her that. So beautiful, so smart, so funny and caring. It was so hard to forget

that she wasn't like the rest of us. She was a mystical force. A goddess to be both worshiped and feared. And here she was, wanting to make my dreams come true.

I realized I must have been staring at her for too long of a time.

I tried to defuse it with a chuckle. "Showcase."

"Showcase," Eve chuckled back to me.

The four of us rehearsed every day until the showcase. We had our set down, choosing a nice blend of cover tunes and originals. We put them in just the right order. We'd hook the audience in with something full of energy and up-tempo. On our next song, we'd kick it up a notch with something even more powerful. After that, it would be a slower song. We'd play another slow song after that then start ramping things up until we closed with a big rocking number.

The showcase was downtown. They'd blocked off an entire street for several blocks. Stages were set up on both sides. Shops were open, local artists had their work on display and for sale, and the park was filled with food trucks.

Anna's dance squad was on early in the morning. I stood with Eve, Mom, and Dad as we watched them perform. Vanessa was on the squad too. When she saw me, she smiled big and bright. Eve checked my reaction. Once again, I obviously wasn't doing what I was supposed to, judging by the way she scoffed at me.

A couple hours later, we were on. Ms. Walker made sure to catch up with us as we were getting ready. She'd met us when we'd first signed in that morning with the other performers and made a point of telling us how great our stage was.

"It's big, but not too big, and the acoustics are wonderful," she said, then waited for my reply.

Eve looked to be waiting for my reply as well.

"Sounds good," I said. "Thank you."

A very relieved Ms. Walker continued on her way, barking orders into her headset. I glanced at Eve. She gave me a sly grin. So help me I did not want to know what she did to poor Ms. Walker to get her to change her mind. Well, at least not yet. Maybe someday.

We tuned our instruments, making jokes about how we needed to hire roadies next time. We weren't exactly dressed like rock stars. For the

most part, we wore our normal clothes. Jeans and faded t-shirts. But that was the plan.

Eve, on the other hand, dressed to stand out. She was fronting the band and deserved all of the attention. She wore red Doc Martens with fishnet stockings and a tartan skirt, a white top with a motorcycle jacket, and black fingerless gloves. She'd teased her wavy red hair and wore dark lipstick and eyeshadow and some blush to highlight her cheekbones.

We started with a cover of The Cranberries "Dreams," which allowed Eve to show off her amazing vocal range. It was peppy and upbeat. We just wanted to show Ms. Walker, and the rest of the crowd for that matter, that we weren't all dark and gloomy.

We followed it up with one of my originals called "Stolen." It was all about hating the world around me and wanting to be taken away to a magical land. I based it on Yeats' poem "The Stolen Child" and even worked some of the lines from the poem into the lyrics.

A pretty large crowd surrounded our stage. Some people drifted in and out, but a constant group remained. Our parents and friends were there of course, but there were plenty of others. There were a lot of younger kids, middle schoolers. From the way they dressed, I could tell they were the freaks at their school. They were so absorbed in our music. It reminded me how important it was to find a band or bands who played music that spoke to your soul. It allowed you to find common ground with others and become part of something bigger than yourself.

I recognized plenty of kids from our school, fellow rejects and losers — and I used that term with pride. Own it and no one can use it against you, right? To my surprise, there were a lot of adults enjoying our music. They looked Mom and Dad's age and probably had kids of their own performing in the showcase. Maybe we were playing the type of music they enjoyed when they were young, and we took them back to that time.

We were only supposed to play six songs, but the crowd demanded an encore. Oh man, I was so hyped already, but being asked for an encore took me to a whole new level. I knew the others felt the same way. We started with an original song that we were still tweaking called "Work of Art" then followed that up with The Cure's "Love Song." That wrapped everything up nicely.

We got a huge round of applause. The crowd hung around while we packed our gear. For fun, we had band t-shirts printed up with a logo I

designed based on one of my first sketches of Eve. They were black and white. The only color was the blue in Eve's eyes and the red of her hair. They looked awesome if I didn't say so myself.

We also sold stickers we'd made and postcards with QR codes that allowed people to download songs from the website we'd created. Dave and Chris's family sold our merchandise. There was a pretty big line. We came out to meet our fans, posed for selfies and signed shirts and postcards. It was amazing. I didn't think I'd ever stop smiling.

Eve was the center of attention and totally deserved it. She was surrounded by a bunch of young girls of all ages as they got hugs, selfies, and autographs from her. Some guys watched her from a distance, looking too intimidated to approach her. Each one dared the other to step up, but no one was going for it. Good thing they weren't. They needed to stay away. None of them were good enough for Eve.

Not everyone standing around were fans though. I spotted a group of snobs shaking their heads and sneering at us. I recognized a few of them from school events Mom had helped organize. Some of them also belonged to the same country club as us. Sonoran Sands. I called it Sonoran "Blands."

We'd been members forever, but I hadn't set foot there since I was younger, when I could be easily dragged there by Mom and Dad for dinner or whatever. The only way I'd ever go back today was if there was a nuclear war and that was the only local designated shelter. Even then, considering who I might be penned up with, I'd probably end up deciding to take my chances with the nukes.

I was ready to write those people off under "haters gonna hate." It always surprised me how that type paid more attention to and talked more about the things they hated than what they actually liked. I knew Mom and Dad cared about what other people thought. They shrank a little under these people's collective gaze, but instead of folding, they looked to each other, nodded, and joined Dave and Chris's family at our merchandise table.

They each put a Death's Fair Maiden t-shirt on over what they were wearing and helped sell our merchandise. They didn't even bother to pay any more attention to that group of haters, who'd apparently had enough and decided to walk away. Both Mom and Dad flashed me proud smiles. I had to say I was pretty proud of them too.

I turned and almost ran into this guy, shorter than me with a long scraggly beard and a bald, tatted-up head. He was dressed in a Clash t-shirt, ripped jeans, and Chucks. Both of his arms were sleeved up by the looks of them. He looked really out of place in this Scottsdale crowd. I wondered how many people had tried to give him their spare change — or call the cops. I then noticed he had a bunch of our shirts draped over his arm and a stack of our stickers and postcards in one of his hands.

“Dude, you got a hell of a band. Great sound. And your singer, damn.” With nowhere else to put them, he shoved the stickers and postcards in my hands as he handed me a business card. “I’m Conrad Keller. I own Conrad’s Corner in downtown Phoenix.”

I blinked with surprise. “I’ve heard of it. And you.”

They mostly sold used music, books, and DVDs. They sold a lot of new music too, mainstream and independent. Conrad also sponsored a lot of local bands.

“So what brings you around here?” I joked.

Conrad grunted. “My kids are performing. The ex remarried and moved them to this little slice of hell. No offense.”

I chuckled. “None taken. I don’t exactly root for the home team, if you know what I’m saying.”

He laughed. “I’m glad I did show up. Not just for my kids, but to find a diamond in the rough like you guys.” He took the stickers and postcards back from me. “Those postcards are brilliant. I want to sell these at my store. Same with your stickers and shirts. You guys doing anything on First Friday?”

That was a big deal that happened downtown on the first Friday of each month. There were musicians, artists, and poets — like this showcase but on a bigger scale.

I nodded. “I think we can work something out.”

“Right on. Your band can play outside my store,” said Conrad. “We still got a couple weeks to smooth everything out. You’ve got my card. Can I reach you through your website?”

“Yeah. Sure. We’re going to start putting out a newsletter too.”

“Right on.”

Conrad excused himself. He needed to catch up with his kids. I had chills. I couldn’t get over what had just happened and couldn’t wait to tell the others. Before I could —

“Heyyy.” Anna threw her arms around my neck. “You guys sounded awesome.”

Vanessa was with her. The moment Anna released me, Vanessa jumped in and hugged me. I couldn’t say it wasn’t nice. Both she and Anna had on their warm-up gear from earlier. Vanessa smelled nice, a bit like jasmine.

“I can’t wait to get a t-shirt,” she said.

“You better hurry.” I pointed toward our merchandise table. “They’re going fast.”

“Family doesn’t get freebies?” Anna joked. “What’s up with that?”

Vanessa giggled. I caught myself smiling.

“Check with Mom and Dad,” I said. “I’m sure they’ll hook you up.”

They headed off to do just that. Vanessa gave me a lingering glance over her shoulder. I smiled back and turned to see Eve standing behind me, hands square on her hips and frowning like she’d had enough.

“What?” I’d finally had enough of this.

“Are you completely thick?” she asked. Before I could answer, she went right on ahead. “That girl, Vanessa, likes you. She’s been sending you all sorts of signals. You really haven’t noticed?”

“I — thought so — I mean, I’ve been wondering.”

“Well?”

I sighed. “The last time a girl like that acted interested in me was in middle school, and it turned out she was just setting me up for some guys she knew to jump me. They pantsed me and dumped me in a trash can.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks,” said Eve. “I guarantee you Vanessa doesn’t have that on her mind at all.”

“You’re sure?”

“If she does set you up, you know she’ll have to answer to me.”

I was equally parts touched and horrified by that statement.

“Please, don’t ever joke about that,” I told her.

Eve answered with a slightly, fiendish giggle then urged me to hurry after Vanessa.

Chapter Eight

County Cork, Ireland - 1602

Donal O'Sullivan had sworn to save as many of his people as possible. He thought back to two years earlier when he'd joined with the "The Two Hughs," Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell, in their war against the English. Their greatest allies in Spain sent a large contingent to aid them, but they were overpowered by the English and forced to surrender in Kinsale.

English troops had moved against the O'Sullivan castle in Dunboy. A fierce battle ensued, and all 143 defenders were slain. Donal was at his family's castle in Ardlea when this news reached him.

There was no way they could surrender. The English had been brutally executing their prisoners. Donal gathered as many people as he could. They would flee north to the O'Neill lands, where they would be safe. From there, they would journey to Spain, where their allies had promised them sanctuary.

Donal was able to gather 400 soldiers and 600 women, children, and servants. They were forced to leave in such a hurry that they were only able to secure a day's worth of provisions. Two days into their journey, as they crossed a ford near Liscarroll, they were ambushed by English allies.

Donal led his men into battle, ordering two of them to stay behind and guard his wife, Ellen, their two-year-old son, Daniel, and their son's nanny, Eabha. In the midst of the melee, Donal glimpsed a group of their attackers closing in on his family's cart. The guards he'd assigned were overpowered. Donal fired his flintlock, hitting one of the men in the chest. He returned it to his belt, drew his heavy sword, and charged.

What he saw next caused him to stop short.

Eabha transformed. A silver aura radiated from her. Her skin was now almost ivory pale, and her hair had turned from red to silver. She hovered over the ground and let out a terrible roar that carried enough sheer force to send the attackers reeling.

Donal charged, cutting down man after man with his sword. Eabha stood guard over Ellen and their son. She let loose piercing shrieks that caused anyone who came near them to convulse and fall to the ground.

The two slew the last of the attackers. Donal glanced at Ellen. From the look on her face, it appeared she had no idea Eabha was capable of such power either. Due to the battle's chaos, no one had witnessed Eabha's transformation or her display of power. Several people talked about the terrible roar and the piercing shrieks they'd heard, but Donal refused to address this and reminded them they needed to concentrate on getting to the North as quickly as they could.

Donal drove his family in their cart. Ellen at his side. Eabha sat behind them.

"I am Aibheall, banshee queen of Munster," she admitted. "You are part of my family line, and I have come to help you in this time of need."

Donal did not want to believe it. This was, after all, the Christian era, and the old stories of the gods and fairies were just that. Stories. Only peasants in the remote regions insisted on them being true.

Yet, how else could Donal — or his wife, for that matter — explain what they'd just seen Aibheall do? There was no denying the fact either that Ellen and Daniel would be dead if it was not for her. For that, Donal owed Aibheall his gratitude.

Donal led his people over the Galtee Mountains and through northern Tipperary. The attacks continued. Aibheall's presence helped keep casualties to a minimum, but constant assaults steadily diminished their numbers. Aibheall then confessed she could only remain in this world for short periods of time before needing to return to the Otherworld to replenish her power.

After some deliberation, Donal and Ellen made a difficult choice. They turned Daniel over to Aibheall's care. She swore she would see him safely to Spain then return to aid them on the remainder of their journey.

"No. See to our son," Ellen demanded. "And watch over him if we are not able to join you in Spain."

Donal agreed. Aibheall lifted little Daniel into her arms. A mist rose out of nowhere and surrounded the two of them. It faded, and they were gone. Ellen collapsed against her husband, sobbing. Donal consoled her and swore they would be reunited with their son in due time.

The journey grew increasingly dangerous. They made it through the Galtee Mountains, fending off more English. On the ninth day, they had run out of food and needed to cross the Shannon River. They slew several of their horses, salted the meat for eating and used the bones and skins to make currachs, boats they could use to cross the river.

They were ambushed by Donough McEgan, the sheriff of Tipperary, and his men who intercepted Donal and his followers in their own currachs. McEgan proved brutal and merciless. He ordered his men to drown as many women and children in the party as they could.

Donal rallied his people. He killed McEgan with a well-placed shot from his flintlock. The sheriff's body tumbled and sank into the Shannon. The rest of Egan's men continued to fight, but without their leader they lost heart and began to flee.

As much as Donal wished to chase them down, he focused his attention on the surviving members of his party, getting them to the shore. Their journey continued. They faced more attacks. Desperation drove them to raid villages for the supplies they needed.

In Galway, Donal's party faced off against English troops led by Henry Malby. They were barely able to defeat them. They then narrowly escaped a local lord, MacDavid Burke, who chased them from his lands.

They finally reached a forest called Diamrach — which meant *loneliness*. Just past it were the Curlew Mountains, their final obstacle before reaching the safety of Leitrim Castle in O'Neill's lands. Donal's party reached a small village. They were not sure what kind of response they might receive, so they made sure to arrive armed and ready for anything.

To their relief, they were greeted warmly. The villagers took them in, giving them shelter and food and some much needed rest. Winter would be coming soon. It promised to be a heavy one, according to the town mayor. He offered to give Donal and his party shelter, not just from the elements but from the English and their sympathizers as well.

Donal gratefully accepted. The mayor offered room in his own home for Donal and his wife. A mattress was tucked into a nook near the hearth. It was pulled down and layered with blankets. Donal and Ellen slept well, in each other's arms. He imagined reaching Spain and being reunited with their son, Daniel, and with Aibheall, to whom they owed so much.

Donal woke as rough hands grabbed him. His wife screamed, and the two were dragged from the house in the middle of the night by a group of men. Donal tried to fight back but felt weak and sluggish. He thought back to the food and drink they had been given the night before. Had it been drugged?

Their attackers' bare chests were streaked with green and red paint, and even though they wore serpent masks Donal knew it was the villagers. Through heavy-lidded eyes, he saw more villagers outside, in similar masks and with painted chests, carrying his people. They had all been drugged. They were loaded into carts, dumped like sacks of grain.

Some villagers held torches to guide their way. Donal fought to stay conscious. His captors chanted in old Irish. They made their way toward a cluster of barns and sheds. A pair of townspeople stood by the open double-door of the largest barn. Once everyone was inside, they closed it behind them.

Donal lifted his head. What he saw sent a jolt of fright through him, he was able to fight back for a moment but was immediately overpowered and knocked to the ground. It was a tall golden idol, a grotesque serpent with the face of a man with matted hair and beard and a mouth full of fangs. Surrounding the idol were twelve smaller stones. On several of them rested human skulls.

The villagers filling the barn chanted as one in old Irish. Donal recognized a handful of words. One of them sent a tremor through his flesh. Crom. That was the name of one of the ancient gods, far older than the Tuatha Dé Danann, from a darker, more brutal time. Crom demanded strict loyalty from his followers and could only be appeased with human sacrifices.

Fingers twisted Donal's hair and yanked his head high enough so he could watch one of his men be dragged to the foot of a large flat stone stained almost black with dried blood. The man was held in place, his head pressed against the stone.

Donal wept as one of the villagers raised a ceremonial sword in the air. A low hum filled the barn. It drew the attention of the villagers. The executioner held back his blade. He appeared just as confused as the other villagers. None of them seemed to have any idea what was going on.

The low hum rose in pitch and volume until it became a violent scream. Cracks split the idol's surface. i t exploded. Shards flew in all

directions, striking the villagers, knocking several of them to the ground.

Dust cleared. A figure appeared in the remains of the idol. Aibheall. She hovered above the ground wearing silver sandals and a shimmering, black gossamer gown. Her ivory skin glistened, and her silver hair flew behind her.

The villagers who were still on their feet looked ready to attack her. Aibheall's lips parted. She released a scream, just like the one that had destroyed the idol. It penetrated the skulls of the nearby villagers. They convulsed and bled from their ears, eyes, noses, and mouths.

The effects of the drug they had been given had worn off enough that Donal was able to pull himself to his feet. He tackled the closest man to the ground. His hands bound together, he raised them over his head and hammered the man with both fists until he was unconscious.

Some of the other men followed Donal's lead, knocking down their attackers and kicking them until they no longer moved. Donal pulled a knife from the man he had knocked out and used it to cut his bonds.

By then, the barn floor was strewn with bodies. Only a handful of villagers had escaped.

Donal turned to Aibheall. "Daniel?"

She smiled. "He is safe. And so are you."

"Thank you."

He threw his arms around her. Ellen was just as grateful. To their surprise, it appeared as if no one else could see Aibheall. She disappeared while he checked on his people.

Donal rallied them. They hurried, gathering only what they could carry. None of them wanted to stay a moment longer in that evil place. They would have to take their chances with the mountains which were already covered with a thick blanket of snow.

Temperatures fell. Winter winds whipped Donal and his people as they trekked through the Curlew Mountains. Those who could not walk were carried. They finally reached Leitrim Castle, the home of their allies. Out of the one thousand who had started this journey, only 35 remained.

Once they were healthy enough for travel, Donal and his wife were given safe passage to Spain, where they were reunited with their son and Aibheall. Ellen took Daniel away with her. Donal wanted to speak with Aibheall. They stepped onto the balcony of the villa where they were staying.

“I cannot thank you enough for everything that you have done for us,” said Donal.

“I only wish I could have done more,” said Aibheall. “I did watch over you from the Otherworld. Your strength, your courage, your march through Ireland will be the stuff of legend.”

“Thank you,” said Donal. Out of all the adversaries he had faced on his journey, the cult of Crom would stick out the most. “It was shocking enough to learn banshees exist. But Crom.”

“He waits deep within the ground,” Aibheall explained. “For gods, worship equals power. Fortunately, Crom’s worshippers are few and far between. There are not enough of them to grant him power to manifest on Earth. At least not yet.”

Yet? That bothered Donal.

“But his remaining worshippers continue sacrificing innocent people in his name,” he said. “Hoping to bring him back.”

Aibheall nodded, confirming this.

“Have you encountered Crom’s worshippers before?” he asked.

Aibheall nodded. “And I dealt with them just as I did those who had captured you and your people.”

“And you will continue to do so?”

Aibheall stood firm. “The time of the old gods is over, and I am personally insulted by the idea of human sacrifice. Life is too precious. I will destroy Crom’s worshippers wherever and whenever. I will hunt them until none remain. Crom, or any of the old gods for that matter, shall never reappear in this world again.”

Chapter Nine

Scottsdale, Arizona - Present

I sat up in my bed, with this latest vision, Donal O’Sullivan’s famous march fresh in my head. The fight with Crom’s worshippers was the most vivid. Why did Eve send this to me? What was I supposed to learn from it?

“You weren’t meant to see that.” I looked up to see Eve, mist fading around her. “Or at least I didn’t mean for you to see it.”

I didn’t understand. “That first vision, when I saw you and Conor die, you said you didn’t send me that one either. That it had to do with this bond we share.”

Eve nodded and sat on the edge of my bed.

“But the other visions,” I continued. “What happened to Emer. Brian Boru. You sent them to me. You wanted me to see them. But this last one, with Donal? And Crom?”

“I suppose you needed to see all that. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it. Your worldview has been expanded. You now know the Otherworldly exists, and you need to know what that means and what your place is in all of this.” She smiled. “You’re very special, Tommy Kennedy.”

“You keep saying that. What does that mean?”

“You’ve got a strong connection to the Otherworld,” said Eve. “All humans have one, but for most of them, it’s very faint. A flicker. Katie had a strong connection. Yours is even stronger. I can feel it.” She slid closer and rested her hand on my stomach. “It’s like a ball of silver light inside you.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It’s what allows you to access the Flow for starters.” Eve grinned. “You might be capable of even greater things.”

“You mean, like, magic?”

“Possibly.”

My imagination immediately started running away with me, dreaming about possibly having magical powers. Then again, I was sitting next to an actual banshee. Wow, it seemed like the world as I knew it was gone forever. Or maybe it was still there, and I was just seeing things from a whole new perspective.

“Will you show me how to strengthen this connection?” I asked.

Eve smiled. “Lay down.”

I did as she said. Eve sat very close to me. She led me in a guided meditation. She touched each part of my body as she helped me relax a little at a time, starting at my head and working all the way down to my feet. It worked. I was more relaxed than I’d ever been.

Eve directed my focus inward. And I felt it. That ball of light she talked about. It was just below my belly button. It pulsed like it had a heartbeat and radiated heat.

“Don’t try to hold that connection,” Eve instructed. “Just remain aware of it for as long as you can. It’ll grow in its own time when you’re ready.”

Tiny pulses of energy emanated from that ball of light inside of me. It was such a rush. I wanted more. Only it started fading on its own. I was desperate to get it back. Eve must have sensed it, because she reminded me not to force it, so I didn’t. I cleared my mind and went back to that relaxed state.

I don’t remember falling asleep. When I woke up, Eve was gone. Damn.

It was morning already. It was Sunday, and I could hear Mom, Dad, and Anna getting ready for church. Mom and Dad didn’t bother asking me to go anymore, not after the time I dipped my fingers in the holy water and acted like it was burning me.

I got out of bed and pulled on some jeans and a t-shirt, thinking about Eve. My phone buzzed. It was a FaceTime call from Eve. I smiled and dropped onto my bed. I hit the Accept button and was greeted by Eve’s beautiful face.

We exchanged good mornings.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“Better than ever. Why are you calling? Why don’t you just come over?”

“You remember what I told Donal during that vision,” said Eve. “I cannot overexert my power while in your world.”

“Yeah, you once said you have to return to the Otherworld even now and then to recharge.”

Eve nodded. “The more I exert, the quicker I have to return.”

I smiled and started chuckling.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I was just thinking about how badass you were,” I said. “Especially when you handled Crom’s worshippers. The way you blew apart that statue and were able to take out multiple people with that scream of yours.”

Eve blushed. “I have more power in Ireland, because the land is still soaked with magic. Over here, in the States, I hate to say it, but there’s not much magic to be found.”

“Good to know. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Sharing all this with me. I feel all kinds of important now.”

Eve chuckled. “You’re quite welcome. And like I said, you have a right to know about this. You’re a part of this now. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate.”

I thought about this for a moment then asked, “So all the gods of Ireland were real then?”

“You mean Crom?”

I nodded. “All of them.”

Eve tensed up a little. “Crom was one of the old gods. He ruled during a dark, brutal time when humans were first learning how to tame the land and simply survive. He demanded human sacrifice. During his peak, his followers would sacrifice a number of their children to him each year in order to have successful crops.”

A chill grabbed me. Damn. “And if there were no kids, strangers would do?”

Eve nodded. “Then the Tuatha De’ Danann arrived, the new gods. They taught humanity how to not just survive but to thrive, bringing science, poetry, and the arts. Certainly, you’ve heard of the Danann.”

“Oh, yeah. Nana taught me about them.”

“For any god, worship is power. More and more of the humans turned to the Danann. As they did, old gods like Crom lost their influence and their power. Small pockets of them remained and have caused a bit of trouble.”

“From what you said to Donal O’Sullivan, it sounded like you took care of them all.”

“As many as I could find.”

Eve went quiet after that. Something told me there was a lot more to that story, but it was too difficult for her to talk about. At least it was right now.

“So what happened to the Tuatha Dé Danann?” I asked, hoping to take her mind off whatever was bothering her. “Are they still around?”

“Some are,” said Eve. “They relinquished control of the Earth to man and faded into the background. They made their presence known every now and then. You know they weren’t traditionally immortal, right?”

“Really?”

“There was this special mead they drank once a year at a feast that extended their lives and kept them young. Sadly, one year the bees that produced the honey for that mead died. Without the mead, the Danann died almost instantly of old age.”

“Oh, no!”

Eve smiled. “It’s all right. They’re destined to be reborn. But that’s someone else’s adventure.”

She then asked if I wanted to have breakfast with her. Of course! She picked me up thirty minutes later. We decided on Elemental Cafe’. In addition to coffee and treats, they had a full menu of breakfast and lunch goodies. Like everything they served, it was all organic and locally sourced. I felt healthier just reading their menu. We ordered a couple breakfast sandwiches along with coffee and our usual assortment of mini scones. We took the coffee and scones to a table. The cashier said someone would bring our sandwiches when they were ready.

“Do you have more questions about the Otherworldly?” she asked.

I glanced around. “Are you sure it’s safe to talk about that here?”

Eve chuckled. “If someone is eavesdropping on us, I doubt they’ll take anything we have to say seriously.”

I smiled. “Good point. No, I don’t have any questions. At least not right now.”

“Excellent.” Eve rested her chin in her hands. “Because I’m dying to hear how it went with Vanessa yesterday.”

“What? Uh?” I stammered a little. The way Eve had her gaze locked on me, I knew she wasn’t going to give up until she got what she wanted. I sighed. “Not much to tell. We had coffee, talked. She had a lot of questions. I almost felt like I was being interviewed.”

Eve shrugged. “It’ll be good practice for when you’re interviewed by one of the big music magazines someday.”

“Yeah. Right.” Although that would be sweet.

“Did anything — you know?”

I almost choked on my coffee when Eve asked me that. Was she serious? She sat there waiting for an answer, so she obviously was.

“We made out a little,” I admitted.

“Any tongue?” Eve teased.

“Jesus!”

Eve laughed. “That’s all right. There’s always the next time. Do you think there will be a next time?” She must have picked up on my hesitation.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “We just didn’t seem to click.”

“That’s okay. It happens. What matters is you tried. Fortunately for you, you’re a big rock star now. You’re going to have plenty of opportunities.”

“You think so?”

“A lot of girls were looking at you yesterday, and I told several of them you wrote all of our original songs. You’re officially a sensitive poet. The girls will be lining up for you in no time.”

I let out a nervous chuckle. “I don’t know if I’m that type of guy though. If I can do the whole groupie-thing.”

“Of course not. And that’s not quite what I meant.” Eve gazed long at me. “You’re a romantic. You want a soulmate, and she should be someone who burns just as brightly as you. But you’ll never find her unless you put yourself out there.”

I chuckled some more, still blushing.

“She’s out there, Tommy,” Eve continued. “And the two of you will be legendary.”

What Eve said dazed me. “That was awesome. A legendary love. Maybe we should try writing some songs together.”

Eve smiled. “Maybe we should.”

Over the next few days, we started doing exactly that. We texted lyrics back and forth to each other, a line here, a line there. We shared what we wrote with Dave and Chris during rehearsals, and it wasn’t long until we had another original tune, Eve’s and my first collaboration.

We called it “The Fire,” and it was all about finding your soulmate and how they would burn as brightly as you did, and that fire would act like a beacon leading you to each other. From there, you’d blaze new trails together and write your name across the heavens. You would be legendary.

As a band, we decided to include it in the set we prepared for our first First Friday show outside of Conrad’s shop. It turned out Conrad had been playing our songs in the store, and a lot of people loved them. He told us ahead of time that he’d sold out of the first set of cards he’d bought at the Community Showcase along with the shirts. We brought over a fresh batch of both.

Our popularity had been growing ever since our first gig. A whole bunch of people signed up for our email newsletter, and when we announced we’d be appearing outside of Conrad’s on First Friday, the comments section blew up with so many responses. People were so excited and couldn’t wait to see us.

We got there early to drop off our new merch’. Conrad gave us our split of what he’d made off that first batch he’d purchased. It was a decent haul.

“You’re making money off your music. You can consider yourselves professionals now,” said Conrad.

I thought about that. I supposed he was right. Us, professional musicians. Who’d have ever thought? We checked out Conrad’s store before it was time for us to go on. Man, it was amazing. So much great music for sale, some mainstream but a lot of independents too. There were also a lot of rare imports. I picked up a live Cure album from one of their European tours and some other hidden gems. There were lots of great books too, new and used. I picked up a collection of Jonathan Swift, another fine Irish writer, and an autobiography of Johnny Rotten from the Sex Pistols.

Conrad gave me a discount on everything. He did the same for Eve, Dave, and Chris. It was time for our sound check. We were going on first before the other bands that would be playing outside of Conrad’s, which was fair, because they were all established bands who had been around for years.

A crowd was already gathering and cheering for us even when we were just tuning up. Word must have spread that we were going on, because more people rushed over and joined the crowd.

They were a fine assortment of misfits and freaks of all ages, and as always I meant that with love. We'd been getting a lot of fan emails through our website. A lot of people loved our music. Many of them said my lyrics really touched them. They were able to connect. I got pretty choked up when one fan, a young boy in middle school wrote that "I was reading his heart."

We finished our set, and a bunch of fans stayed behind to hang out with us. Mom and Dad were there to congratulate us. They didn't stay long. They didn't want to "get in the way" as they put it. Anna stopped by with some friends too, including Vanessa. She and I had both decided we wouldn't work romantically but would stay friendly.

Eve was right on when she said there'd be other opportunities. I was a "rock star" now, and there were plenty of girls looking for my attention. It started during the show as they danced in front of me while we played. Later, we hung out in Conrad's shop. I left that night with quite a few numbers — and started getting a whole bunch of naked pictures texted to me on a regular basis. Rock 'n' roll!

That First Friday, a lot of the other bands wanted to meet us. They had been around for a while, had record deals with small indie labels, and played a lot of local clubs and theatres. They had a lot of great advice. One band, Portal, was especially cool. They invited us to open for them at an all-ages show they were headlining at a club in Tempe near ASU.

A few weeks later, they got us a spot playing at this big Halloween festival that was coming up. It was called the South Mountain Summoning, and it was sponsored by a bunch of local businesses and social groups as well as local TV and radio stations.

This would be its first year, and it was supposed to be epic. Since Halloween that year landed on a Saturday, it would be an all-day event with a Haunted Hayride, a Corn Maze, a huge haunted house, rides, games, and a performance stage. Kids who arrived in costume got a free bag of candy, a big one too and filled with lots of good stuff. That's because one reason for this event was to provide a safe alternative to trick-or-treating for little kids — and to hopefully keep bigger kids out of trouble.

Death's Fair Maiden was the first band to perform. We went on at sunset and had a decent sized crowd. It was definitely more than we'd played in front of before, so I was not disappointed. Eve had gotten us these

awesome leather Druid masks to wear. Mine was black with stag antlers. Dave and Chris' masks looked like gnarly tree bark with branches springing out from the top of them. Eve's mask looked like a white cat.

We were into our second song when a couple of girls made their way toward the stage and began dancing with each other right in front of me. They eyed me the whole time. I tried to play it cool, but inside I giggled like a little kid. I glanced at Eve, curious to see if she'd noticed the attention I was getting. She didn't even give me the tiniest glance, probably because she was so focused on her singing.

I returned my attention to my two admirers only to see them hurrying away from the stage. What the hell? Another girl stood in their place. Had she chased them off?

I could see her doing that. This new girl was very beautiful and very intense. She was tall with long black hair. Her pale skin reminded me of Eve. She had on dark eyeshadow and black lipstick. She wore thigh high boots and a black pleated skirt. She also wore long black fingerless gloves, a leather halter-top, and was decked out in silver jewelry.

Her pale blue eyes sucked in my gaze. She danced sensuously, twisting and turning, while touching and rubbing her hands all over her body. She turned at one point, showing off a tattoo of three colorful birds on her back.

A couple of guys danced toward her. They got close, too close for her liking. One glance from my mystery girl, and both guys recoiled like they'd been shot. They slunk back into the crowd. My mystery girl returned her attention to me.

My heart was beating in my ears. For a moment, it was hard to concentrate on my playing. Eve caught a glimpse of my mystery girl. Her voice dropped in pitch a tiny bit. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Her singing was perfect all the time. She glanced at my mystery girl then back at me. She looked seriously concerned.

I didn't have time to talk to Eve between songs. After our set, she disappeared. I caught only the slightest flash of her leaving the stage. That was so unlike her. She always stayed to help us pack up our gear. Dave and Chris thought the same exact thing. They asked what was going on with Eve, but I had nothing to tell them, at least not yet.

I got the sudden sensation of being watched. And I was. By my mystery girl. She leaned against the stage scaffolding. Her hands were

behind her back, and she arched forward just a bit, showing off her breasts. She smiled and gave me a very hungry look.

Dave and Chris noticed this going on. Both had huge grins on their faces.

Chris took my guitar case from me. "We'll take it from here."

"Let me know if you need any backup," said Dave.

I waved him away and took my first step toward my mystery girl. After that, my feet seemed to move on their own, like she was drawing me in with an invisible rope. But that got stopped short when Eve appeared. She glanced at me as she pulled my mystery girl aside and had what looked like some serious words with her.

I stood there, trying to figure out what was going on. My mystery girl pulled away from Eve and started strolling toward me. Eve followed her, looking like she had a lot more to say.

My mystery girl offered her hand like she was royalty. "I've heard so much about you, Tommy," she said in a husky Irish brogue. "It's lovely to finally get to meet you."

I took her hand but looked at Eve.

"This is my sister, Clio," she said.

"Clio." I suddenly made the connection. "Cliodhna. The banshee queen of South Munster."

"At your service."

Clio's skin started to glimmer. She gave off a silver glow. Eve snatched Clio's arm.

"What," Clio chuckled. "It's Halloween. Everyone will think it's a special effect."

When we first got to the fair, it was still daylight. There were mostly families out, having a good time, enjoying the Halloween-themed rides, games, and food. Now that night had fallen, the festival had taken on a whole new vibe. There were less kids, and a lot more alcohol being served. More adults came in costume, ranging from scary to sexy and everything in between.

Eve positioned herself between me and Clio as we walked together. The whole time, I could feel Clio eyeing me up and down. Eve kept trying to shut her down with a cold glare. I didn't understand why she was doing that. Eve never had any problem with girls paying attention to me before. Then again, Clio was not exactly a normal girl, was she?

“Did you enjoy our set?” I asked her.

Clio lips parted in a luxuriant smile. “Indeed. I found your lyrics especially moving. I’ve always been drawn to poets. Aibheall can tell you.”

From the look on Eve’s face, she had a lot more than that she wanted to tell her.

“I can see why you like this one so much,” Clio told Eve. “He does burn bright, doesn’t he?” She made that last line sound really suggestive.

“Excuse me.” Eve snatched my hand and whisked me off to the side.

I glanced back at Clio. She stood waiting, swaying gently to the music coming over the PA. She was starting to mesmerize me with her movements.

Eve stepped in front of me, snapping me out of whatever trance I’d been in.

“So are you going to tell me what’s going on with you and Clio?” I asked her.

“It’s complicated. We’ve been friends. We’ve been rivals.” Eve took a long hard look at Clio before returning her attention to me. “You should know that she’s taken a lot of mortal lovers over the centuries. Like she said, she is quite fond of poets. Only they’re playthings to her. And let’s just say Clio is not always careful with her toys.”

I looked back at Clio and could see what Eve was talking about. She did seem like a form of seductive predator.

“She is starting to seem like a bit more than I can handle,” I said. “I’m betting she doesn’t take rejection very well, does she?”

Clio rejoined us. She hooked her arm around mine and started walking. Eve kept pace, scowling at Clio, who ignored her. “Quite an impressive spectacle they’ve arraigned here.. It does remind me of ages gone by. And there’s to be a bonfire at midnight. Doesn’t that just take you back, Aibheall?”

Eve mumbled a reply.

“You know the original significance of this night, don’t you, Tommy?” Clio asked.

“It was known as Samhain (Sow-een),” I answered. “It was the end of the harvest year and the beginning of winter.”

“Very good, and you even pronounced it correctly. Yes, this night has been known as All Hallow’s Eve. The next day is the one of real importance, the beginning of winter, the ‘dark-half’ of the year. Of course

back then, we had no calendars to govern the year. For centuries, we were ruled by the seasons and the harvest, which never precisely fell on the same day each year. Samhain never lasted a single day either. In some regions, it was three days. In others, the celebration lasted an entire month.”

We passed a fake cemetery. I’d walked through it earlier. It had all sorts of funny headstones. Some had names on them like “Barry D. Live” and “Dianne Rott. “Others had funny quotes like “Rest in peace Cousin Huet. We all know you didn’t do it,” and “Here lies the body of Johnny Blake. Stepped on the gas instead of the brake.” My favorite was the tombstone that just said VACANCY.

At night, the cemetery took on a different tone as actors dressed like zombies popped out of some of the graves to scare the bejaysus out of people walking by. There were always screams at first, followed by big belly laughs.

Clio grinned, watching the action. “Originally, it was an honor for the dead to return to their homes and visit their loved ones on this night. Aibheall, do you remember when it was a custom to leave one’s door open and have a place set at the table for the visiting dead?”

“Of course, I do,” said Eve. “We were often the gatekeepers. We decided who deserved to return and who didn’t.”

We turned to hear more screams. A group of bloodied teens ran past, chased by a pack of demons with blood-drenched fangs and claws. I wondered if they were hired actors or festival guests. Either way, the people they passed by jumped, gasped, or screamed but were always left laughing in the end.

“They do love their manufactured frights, don’t they?” Clio rubbed my arm. “I wonder how they would react if they ever encountered the actual thing.” Her breath caressed my neck. “I imagine they might go into denial at first. But then, I imagine some instinctive memory would arise, telling them that what they are experiencing is very real.”

Eve stepped between us. “That’s enough, Clio.”

I expected Clio to be upset. Instead, she just smirked. “Aibheall, I don’t understand. You have told me, many times, that you have no romantic interest in Tommy.”

I turned to Eve. She didn’t say anything.

“Why are you so opposed to him and I having some fun together?” Clio asked.

Eve appeared to search for an answer then said, “I don’t want you to hurt him.”

Clio chuckled. “Who’s to say I will? It’s clear to us that Tommy is quite special. Maybe I’ll take him away to the Otherworld, where we can be together forever.”

“He deserves to be more than just a plaything.”

Clio slipped close to me. Heat radiated from her body. “I believe that’s for Tommy to decide. What do you say? Eternal life and youth, not to mention boundless pleasure. Or?” She cast a disgusted look around her. “This?”

I stammered a little. It was an easy enough question to answer. I was just worried how Clio might respond.

“I’m going to have to take a pass,” I told her.

I tensed up, expecting Clio to be angry. Instead, she looked surprised.

“Well, I can’t say that’s ever happened before,” she said.

“Sorry.”

Clio stroked my cheek. “Don’t be. Darling, boy.”

“You should leave now, Clio,” said Eve.

“I think you’ll prefer to have me around a little while longer.”

“And why would I want that?”

Clio gazed past her, all around. “Darling, sister. You’re slipping. Don’t tell me you haven’t detected their presence yet?”

Eve started scanning the area around us. I did too. My attention was drawn to a trio of — I couldn’t tell if they were men or women. They looked absolutely ancient with sagging gray skin and scattered strands of white hair on their heads. They were dressed in ragged black clothing, and their bloodshot eyes and hooked noses looked too large for their small heads.

I thought maybe they were supposed to be dressed as some sort of zombies, but the shiver down my spine told me they were all too real. They were scanning members of the passing crowd like predators picking out their targets from a herd.

I spotted another trio of these “hunters” not far off. Two of them scoped out the crowd. A third seemed to be communicating with the other group with nods and hand signals. Eve looked focused on both of these groups, so did Clio.

“They’re the Sluagh. Also known as the Host, the Underfolk, or the Unforgiven Dead,” Clio explained. “Do you remember, Aibheall, in the old times, when they flew through the night sky en masse in giant flocks? On nights like this, when the veil between the worlds was thin, they would terrorize entire towns and cities alike? Nowadays, and especially in places like this, where magic is at a minimum, they’re little more than scavengers, skulking about, desperate to feed on anything they’re able to sink their talons into.”

“I’ll take the three on the left,” said Eve. “You’ll take the three on the right.”

“Sounds fair,” Clio answered. “Holler, if you need any extra help.”

Eve scoffed then shot me a look of concern. “Promise me you’ll stay out of this.”

“I will. I will!”

It took that second time to finally convince her.

A mist rose out of nowhere. All around me, everything slowed down. Not completely. If you looked hard enough, you could see people and rides were still moving but painfully, painfully slow. Music came out of the PA at an incomprehensible drawl. The only ones moving at a normal speed were me, Eve, Clio, and the Sluagh.

“That’s the Sluagh’s doing,” Clio told me. “We can do it too, shift our immediate surroundings out of sync with the rest of this world. That way we can act without people noticing and getting terrified out of their mortal minds. It lasts only a few minutes.”

“They must not have detected us,” said Eve. “They should know we wouldn’t be affected by this.”

Clio looked me up and down. “Speaking of not being affected. He truly is special, Aibheall,” Clio added.

She was right. I could move normally and was aware of everything going on, not like the other people around me.

“We’ll discuss it later,” said Eve.

The Sluagh were closing in on their prey. They moved at a normal pace compared to their prey. In a blink, Eve was on her three. She let loose her piercing scream. One Sluagh dropped to its knees, its brains reduced to mush. The other two were stronger. They let out their own blood curdling screams and threw themselves into the air. Their black coats turned to wings. Arms outstretched, their fingers were tipped with sharp black talons.

Eve took a sharp breath and let out a louder scream. One of the remaining Sluagh's heads exploded like a bomb had gone off inside its skull. The last one closed in on Eve. I caught myself ready to spring forward and help her. No need. Eve sidestepped the attacking Sluagh and snapped its neck with her hands in one sudden move.

Clio had her three well under control. She was in the midst of singing a sweet melody that had her three Sluagh entranced. She then smiled and told them, "Kill each other. Leave no one standing."

The Sluagh followed her orders, tearing into each other with their talons. Clio watched with an amused smile as two of the Sluagh took out one almost immediately, and the last two fought until only one was left alive — but not for long. That last Sluagh staggered then fell at her feet, bleeding out from its wounds.

That appeared to be the end of it. Then I noticed a seventh Sluagh, smaller than the others, ready to pounce on a little girl dressed like Elsa from *Frozen*. There was no time to tell Eve or Clio. I charged.

That last Sluagh was stronger than it looked. It barely budged when I rammed into it with all my might. In fact, I was the one who hit the ground. I groaned and clutched my shoulder. It was like I'd ran into a brick wall.

I looked up in time to see the Sluagh pounce on me. I screamed as its talons sank into my chest. They remained buried there. The Sluagh used them to suck the energy from my body. I tried to fight back. But the more I fought the weaker I became. My whole body went limp. Was this it? Was this how I was going out?

Eve released another piercing scream. The last Sluagh's head exploded, splattering me with black goo that smelled like hot vomit.

Eve was soon kneeling over me. "Stay still. Don't move." She had tears in her eyes, but at the same time gritted her teeth. "I told you to stay out of it!"

I tried to apologize but my voice was too weak.

Eve wiped her eyes. "Then again, why am I not surprised you'd risk your life to save a child?"

Clio stepped up, her face full of concern. "Let me take care of it, Aibheall."

Eve gave her some room. Clio's skin shimmered and gave off a soft glow. The colorful bird tattoos on her back rose from her flesh and came to life. They flew toward me and landed on the ground, surrounding my head.

They sang so beautifully. As they did, my wounds tingled and itched. The vibrations of the birds' song passed through me, mending my shoulder and stitching my torn flesh together. I could feel the life the Sluagh had stolen from me being restored. I pushed myself to a seated position with Eve's support. Clio's birds returned to her, becoming tattoos on her back once again.

"Thank you," I told her.

Clio gave me a warm smile. "You're very welcome." She turned to Eve, with all seriousness. "Aibheall, you need to be honest with us and especially with yourself. Admit it. You are in love with Tommy."

Eve's jaw trembled like she was struggling to speak. I turned my gaze to her, wanting to know if this was really true. Eve's mouth settled into a sad frown. Fresh tears gathered in her eyes.

"Sister, why are you so afraid to admit it?" Clio asked. "Is it because of Crom? Are you still afraid of him?"

Crom? What about him? What was Clio talking about? I looked to Eve for an answer.

Chapter Ten

Dublin, Ireland - 1916

Death circled Dublin and threatened to descend. The only ones aware of this were the few Otherworldly beings mingling with the unknowing humans. They could sense it all around them. It was only a matter of time.

That night, in the Liberty Hall, Aibheall, a banshee queen, sat amongst the human audience. Even though no one suspected her true nature, she still preferred to sit by herself, towards the rear of the theatre, with a grand view of the stage.

Her attention was fixed on Sean Connolly. Handsome and athletic, he was also a learned scholar, and had a rich singing voice. She smiled, folding her arms on the back of the empty chair in front of her.

“Mmm, very nice.” Aibheall turned to see her sister, another banshee queen, Cliodhna, sitting in the seat next to her. “Do we know his name yet?”

Aibheall did a quick check to make sure no one had seen Cliodhna materialize in the theatre. “It’s Sean — Connolly.”

“It’s about time you took another human lover,” said Cliodhna. “How many decades has it been?”

“Well, excuse me for having discerning tastes,” said Aibheall.

Cliodhna was about to speak, but Aibheall shushed her and returned her attention to the stage, where Sean Connolly raised a green flag over his head and stated, “Under this flag only will I serve. Under this flag, if need be, only will I die.”

Aibheall had seen this performance more than once, but that moment always raised tears in her eyes.

“I guess I can understand your infatuation,” Cliodhna admitted. “He is quite a specimen.”

“You’re not going to try to steal him from me, are you?” Aibheall asked.

“Why would I ever do that?”

“For the sheer sport of it, as you always do.”

Cliodhna giggled. “Yes. It does make for good sport.”

“Clio. Please.”

Cliodhna sighed. “Fine. He is all yours. Enjoy him for as long as you can.”

And with that, Cliodhna disappeared from both from her seat and from the theatre entirely, not caring if anyone saw her or not. Aibheall sat back in her seat, but rose to her feet, along with the rest of the audience, to give the cast members a rousing standing ovation.

This play had special significance. Tensions between the Irish and their English oppressors had reached a critical point. This would not be the first time conflict had arisen between these two populations. Aibheall had witnessed every attempt the Irish people had made to free themselves from England’s yoke. Sadly, like every banshee, her role was to attend to the dead and those they’d left behind.

And there were so many souls.

For almost 800 years, the Irish made regular attempts to rebel. Each time they were met with defeat. Yet they never gave up. They would bide their time and strike back again and again, always inspired by a great leader. This time, it was Padraig Pearse, a teacher and poet. He possessed the passion and charisma to enlist many fervent supporters. Among them was Sean Connolly, who had quickly risen to the rank of captain in Pearse’s rebel army.

Aibheall, calling herself Ava, ended up joining their ranks. In this army, women trained along with the men and prepared to fight alongside them. It was inspiring. Aibheall hadn’t seen that for centuries. There was a time when that was commonplace.

The army trained in Croydon Park, two-to-three nights a week, with rifles and revolvers. Aibheall had witnessed the evolution of firearms over the centuries. On her first day of training, she proved to be more proficient with a rifle and revolver than any of the other women and a good deal of the men in attendance.

“Excellent.”

Aibheall jumped when she heard Sean Connolly’s voice and turned to see him behind her. He studied her target and nodded, looking quite impressed.

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?” he asked.

“I grew up in the country,” she told him, making something up off the top of her head. “My father had no sons, so he was determined to teach me to work the land with him. And to hunt.”

Sean chuckled. “You mean, poach? I assume where you grew up, the English owned all of the good hunting land.

Aibheall chuckled back at him, her face flushed. “Too true.”

“You are a fine shot,” said Sean. “But you can be even better.” He positioned himself behind her. “Do you mind?”

Aibheall shook her head, her voice suddenly caught in her throat. She raised her rifle. Sean stood so close she could feel his heat. He adjusted her stance and placed his hands on hers in order to improve her grip. She shuddered. It took a moment to catch her breath.

Aibheall fired. The shot came closer to the center than any of her others. Sean showed her tips on how to use her revolver as well. The two collected the casings she had spent. Part of their training **included** how to recycle and create new ammunition.

“I must confess I’ve noticed you in the audience at Liberty Hall,” he told her. “You’ve seen our performance repeatedly, night after night.”

“It was excellent. Very inspiring. It is why I am here.”

Sean grinned. “Several of us are going to the pub after this. I insist you join us.”

“I would like that very much,” said Aibheall, slightly breathless.

The men they met at the pub were also officers in Pearse’s army. Aibheall impressed them with her knowledge of Irish history and her passion for their cause. They had in-depth discussions on history, poetry, and politics that went on until the pub closed.

Sean offered to walk Aibheall home. They reached the front steps of her boarding house. He moved in like he might kiss her. Aibheall was ready. But Sean pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m married,” he admitted. “We have a young son too. I made sure to send my wife and our child somewhere where they’ll be safe from what’s to come.”

Aibheall’s heart sank in her chest. Yet, at the same time, she had to admire Sean’s fidelity to his wife.

“Please forgive me,” said Sean.

Aibheall managed a smile. “There is nothing to forgive.”

Sean offered his hand. “I hope we can at least be friends, as well as comrades-in-arms.”

“Of course,” said Aibheall, taking his hand in return.

Liberty Hall was closed for the season. It now became the headquarters for Pearse’s army. Bombs were made, bayonets were adapted to fit different types of rifles and shotguns, and ammunition was altered to fit their weapons.

Everyone felt prepared. Until a shipment of guns sent by German allies had been intercepted and confiscated. Pearse had no choice but to move the attack up to Easter morning. The day before, Pearse lined each man and woman outside of the Hall and told them they were no longer a Citizen army or Irish Volunteers. They were now the Army of the Irish Republic.

That night, an impromptu concert was held, where Sean sang an old ballad that moved everyone. By then, Sean and Aibheall were no longer able to hold back. They’d tried so hard to contain their passion for one another, but it only grew more powerful.

For Aibheall, she knew the days to come would bring death and suffering. So that night, she wanted to celebrate life with the man she’d fallen in love with. She could tell Sean wanted to do the same. Sean took her to the theatre’s costume shop, where they made love throughout the night and slept in each other’s arms on a bed of costume gowns they had laid down for themselves.

The next day, while Dublin’s citizens celebrated Easter, the Army of the Irish Republic moved out. They wore green uniforms and bandoliers. Each man and woman carried a haversack, a service rifle or a shotgun, and either a German Mauser pistol or revolver, along with ammunition and three days’ worth of rations.

Sean’s squad proceeded toward Dublin Castle, which was now a castle in name only. It currently housed local administration offices run by English officials. On the way, Sean divided his squadron into sections. Each one had their own set of orders. They would take over neighboring buildings and position themselves on the rooftops, where they could overlook the Upper Castle Yard gate.

Aibheall had been placed in charge of the women’s section. They proceeded up Lord Edward Street toward the Synod House, next door to the Christ Church. Two shots rang out from the direction of Dublin castle.

Aibheall knew something had gone wrong. She ordered the women to follow her to Dublin Castle.

Aibheall's fears were confirmed. The body of a slain police officer lay near the front gate. She knew Sean had hoped to capture their target without bloodshed. He and his group would be in City Hall, which was located on the castle grounds.

Aibheall found them inside. He looked furious at first to see her and the other women, but that quickly passed, and he appeared relieved to have the extra support. She was brought up to speed by Sean's second-in-command. The police officer at the gate had tried to keep them out. Sean tried to order him to stand down, even going as far as aiming his rifle at him. The officer wouldn't waver. A nervous soldier shot him, thinking he was defending Sean, swearing he saw the officer reach for some sort of weapon.

One of the soldiers stationed at the castle heard the shot then fired a warning shot to alert the others. Sean and his men were able to catch the remaining soldiers while they scrambled for their gear. They overpowered them and tied them up with the leg wraps that were part of the soldiers' own uniforms.

At that moment, the Republican Army's medical officer arrived, Aibheall and the other women were ordered to prep rooms for first aid and for food and water. Aibheall was ready to argue. Death felt imminent. She wanted to be at Sean's side in case his final moment was near. Or maybe she could even save him. And make sure he returned home to his wife and child. But Sean had already returned to the roof with a group of his men before she could reach him. Aibheall bit her lip and followed orders.

Gunfire erupted from the roof.

More shots rang out from the nearby streets.

Even more shots could be heard in the distance.

Aibheall caught a soldier coming down from the roof for more ammunition. He told her an armored car had been stopped at the gates, and they were trading gunfire with the soldiers who'd emerged from it. He also told her more English soldiers were moving in, but it sounded like their soldiers who had been stationed on the neighboring buildings were holding them off.

An armored car, Aibheall thought. She knew it would only be a matter of time before the English sent in more of these vehicles into the streets.

They also had ships that could navigate the Liffey River armed with heavy artillery. And they would have thousands of troops at their disposal.

Aibheall couldn't bear to stand by and simply listen to the volleys of gunfire that surrounded them. She broke from her post and headed to the roof, where Sean and his men were positioned behind the parapets, firing on English troops below.

She searched out Sean and saw him by the building's dome. He'd just finished hoisting the army's green flag high above the building. She moved toward him, crouching and zigzagging as enemy bullets flew from nearby rooftops. Aibheall closed in on Sean. He spotted her and moved toward her, no doubt trying to get her out of the line of fire.

That was when the sky dimmed to a deep shade of gray, and a mist rose all around them. Everything slowed down. Each bullet's path could be followed through the air. Sean's men moved at an almost imperceptibly slow pace.

Aibheall knew all too well what was going on. The rooftop had been shifted from its normal plane of existence and placed between Earth and the Otherworld. Beings like her did this from time to time, so they could use their abilities unseen by humans. Only Aibheall wasn't doing this. This was the work of another.

Hoof beats echoed through the clouds of mist. They grew louder, and the shape of a horseman appeared. A headless horseman. Aibheall's breath caught in her throat.

This was a Dullahan. A servant of the god, Crom. Aibheall had done a lot to anger this ancient god over the last several centuries. She had been wiping out his worshippers when and wherever she found them. She thought she'd seen the last of them when she destroyed a faction that had captured Donal O'Sullivan and his party over three hundred years ago during his now famous march.

This would be her first encounter with a Dullahan. She did not know what to expect. It stepped into full view. Its stallion was pitch black. Sparks shot from its eyes. Smoke seeped from its mouth as it whinnied and snorted. The Dullahan was clad in black leather, a hulking brute with its head cleaved from its body at the neck.

It held its severed head, dangling at its side, twisting its black gloved fingers in its hair. The head was in the beginning stages of decay. The flesh was puffy and emanated rot. The corners of its mouth were raised in a grin,

showing off stumps where teeth had once been. The ears and nose were gnarled. Its eyes were white and glassy but remained alert and pointed at Aibheall.

The head ordered the body to attack. It rode down on Aibheall, raising a whip that looked like it was made from the spine of some great beast. Aibheall leapt aside. The Dullahan lashed again and again. Each time, Aibheall evaded and moved in that much closer.

Once she was in range, she channeled Otherworldly energy into her hand and formed a silver sword. She leapt and swung at the Dullahan. She severed its whip in half.

She landed on her feet and struck again before the Dullahan could recover. She sprang high into the air and landed a cleaving blow that knocked the Dullahan off-balance and sent it tumbling from its horse. The Dullahan's head fell from its grasp. The head rolled about but still barked orders to its body.

Aibheall went in for a killing blow. The Dullahan drew its own sword and blocked her strike in one move. They parried back and forth. Aibheall used her speed and precision, slicing the Dullahan's arms and shoulders.

The Dullahan let out its own burst of speed and struck Aibheall with a backlist that sent her reeling. Dazed, she barely rolled out of the way from an overhead strike.

“Now. Do it now,” ordered the Dullahan's head.

The Dullahan hurled its sword at Aibheall. It flew past her. It went wide. She didn't even need to dodge it. She let out one of her piercing screams, aiming it at the Dullahan's head. It shrieked and rolled on the ground.

From the corner of her eye, Aibheall noticed the body staggering and flailing its arms in agony. The Dullahan dropped to its knees then landed chest first. The head had stopped rolling. Its tongue lolled from its mouth, and blood seeped from all openings.

Aibheall smiled — until she saw Sean. The Dullahan's sword had pierced his chest and exited through his back. She raced to his side, only to stop short when a massive gray worm rose out of nowhere and wrapped its coils around Sean. It had the face of a madman with matted hair and beard, wild yellow eyes, and a mouth stuffed with jagged fangs.

Aibheall breathed his name. “Crom.”

The old god grinned and let out a hiss.

Aibheall steadied herself. "Please allow me to do my duty and send this brave soul to the Otherworld."

Crom laughed and tightened his coils around Sean's corpse. "Not a chance, little banshee. My rider slew this mortal, therefore his soul is mine to do whatever I want with it for eternity."

"No!"

"For centuries, you have slain many of my worshippers. Driven the rest into hiding," Crom roared. "But my most devout remained true. It has taken three centuries, but I am finally strong enough to exact my revenge."

"Then take your vengeance out on me," Aibheall cried. "Not on him. Please."

"Oh, but in hurting him, I know for certain I am hurting you even deeper than any weapon that could pierce your flesh. I have watched you. You are tender hearted. A romantic." Crom sneered. "From now on, know now that I will keep watching you, and if you ever fall in love with another mortal, my Dullahan will slay them and bring me their souls to torment for eternity."

Aibheall dropped to her knees. "Please. I beg of you."

Crom bellowed with laughter. As he retreated, he wrenched Sean's screaming soul from his body and dragged it down below with him.

Up above, the sky returned to its previous shade of blue. The mist faded, and the cries of the soldiers and the volleys of gunfire reigned. Aibheall did not respond to any of it. She cradled Sean, stroking his face. She glanced up at the army's green flag he had hoisted with his own hands. The words Sean had recited his last time onstage sounded in her ears.

"Under this flag only will I serve. Under this flag, if need be, only will I die."

Chapter Eleven

South Mountain, Phoenix, Arizona - Present

Clio's birds had completely healed my wound. It was still a bit sore, and there were holes in my shirt from where the Sluagh had plunged its talons into my chest. There was a bit of dried blood too, but this was Halloween so I doubted anyone would look twice. The vision Eve had shown me about the Easter Rising was still ripe in my mind.

Her and Sean Connolly, the Dullahan, Crom.

But hearing that Eve might be in love with me overpowered all of that.

"Eve, is it true?" I asked. "If it is, it's okay. I feel the same way. I — love you."

A pained expression took over Eve's face. She bolted. I stood watching her, my heart sinking. Clio slapped me on the back of my head.

"Well? Go after her," she said.

I was unsure, but Clio kept urging me. I caught up with Eve just outside of the cemetery, sitting on a bench, looking oblivious to everything around her. I took a few tentative steps forward, afraid she might bolt again. Instead, Eve started talking like she knew I was there, without even looking up.

"I told you I started spending more time with humans, because I'd felt robbed of a full life," she started. "I've craved real connections." She gazed up at me. "And there were times I fell in love."

I took a seat next to her. Eve spoke to me from over her shoulder.

"I still thought about Conor," she continued. "From time to time, I'd meet boys that reminded me of him. Something in their voice, their eyes. But whenever I tried to reveal my true self, they couldn't handle it." She smiled and turned more my way. "Not like you've been able to."

"Am I like Conor?" I had to ask.

Eve stared at me. "I have to say you are completely different than Conor, in every way. But I still love you as much as I did him."

Tears ran down her cheeks. She let me hold her.

“I don’t know what I’d do if Crom got ahold of you,” she said.

“Oh, please.”

We both looked up to see Clio had found us.

“It took that old bastard over three hundred years to gain enough power to take revenge on you,” she said. “It’s been over a hundred years since then. And I’ve got to tell you, Crom isn’t exactly a household name these days, not just in this world but the Otherworld too. And if his threat was to take the soul of anyone you fell in love with — well, you and Tommy may not have ‘consummated’ things, but the love between you is strong. It radiates from the both of you. If Tommy was in danger from that old bastard, I think it would have happened by now. And if he does send one of his Dullahan after you.” Clio wiped a tear from Eve’s cheek. “I’ll be there to help. I promise.”

I couldn’t believe this. Clio hadn’t struck me as the caring, sensitive type so far. Eve looked just as surprised. But still just as unsure.

She sprang from the bench. “I don’t know. I need time. I need to think.”

“Eve!”

She ran off again. I was about to go after her, but Clio grabbed my arm and shook her head.

“She’ll be back,” said Clio. “Trust me. I’ve known her much longer than you have.”

I wiped newly formed tears from my eyes. “I didn’t know you had a romantic side.”

“I do. I once deeply loved a young man, but the gods back then disapproved. While I was out for a walk down my favorite path, overlooking the sea, a giant wave came out of nowhere and swept me away. I was lost for, I don’t know how long, but I fought my way back to the man I loved.” She grimaced. “Only to find he’d married another. It was bad enough to discover he’d moved on, but when I confronted him he confessed that I’d been nothing more than a dalliance, a final fling before entering into his arranged marriage. I was furious. He didn’t know who or what I truly was before that, but I showed him. Oh, did I show him. Along with many of his loved ones.”

A chill ran through me. I’d seen what Eve was capable of and imagined Clio could do the same. Perhaps worse.

“I have to say no one has been unluckier at love than my dear Aibheall,” Clio continued. “But to her credit she has never given up.” She gazed at me with a bright smile. “It seems now that her persistence may have paid off, and I’ll be damned if I let some decrepit god from the dark times ruin it for her.”

I smiled back at Clio. “Thank you.”

Clio stepped up close and planted a very tender kiss on my cheek. She then turned and disappeared into the crowd. I let out a long sigh and looked all around, in every direction. I couldn’t see Eve anywhere.

I told my family, Dave, and Chris that Eve’s sister was in town, and they’d decided to take a road trip together. I told them it would only be a few days and really hoped it would be just that.

I couldn’t believe how much I missed her and how much it hurt being without her. It was like walking around with a giant open wound.

Over a week had passed. I told everyone Eve and I FaceTimed all the time, and I did my best to pretend I was doing fine. But by that point, I found myself starting to question Clio. Maybe Eve wasn’t coming back. Maybe something had happened to her — no, I forced myself not to go there. I just wished I had some news. I wished I knew something.

I had night after night of restless sleep. That particular night was the worst. I tossed and turned and ended up kicking my duvet off of me. I finally settled into this kind of half-sleep when a light shone on me. It was a gentle glow.

I opened my eyes. Eve straddled me. She had a silver aura and wore a shimmering black gossamer gown. Her skin was porcelain pale, and her silver hair flowed freely. Before I could say anything, she leaned over and kissed me, deeply and passionately.

Was this real? Was this really happening? I gave in to it. Eve felt so warm against me, almost feverish. Her lips were soft, but her kisses bordered on ferocious. They made me drunk. My head buzzed.

She pushed away from me. I was afraid she might leave. Instead, she pulled off my boxer briefs and chucked them aside. My breath grew ragged. She pulled her gown off over her head and dropped it to the floor. Her naked skin glimmered. Her body was so perfect.

Eve reached down and slid me inside of her. A wave of pleasure rushed through my entire body. It got more intense as her hips glided up and

down. Her hands rested on my shoulders. Her eyes locked with mine.

My body grew hotter and hotter, so did Eve's. She started to glow, brighter and brighter. I realized I was glowing too. And I could swear we were floating above my bed.

The sun's light, through my curtains, coaxed me awake. My head still buzzed as I tried to figure out what had happened. Did I dream that? Was it real? I became aware that I was under my duvet, naked, kind of sweaty, and yeah, a little bit sticky.

Eve let out a sleepy moan and draped her arm around my chest. Her naked body nestled close to mine. She lifted her head and smiled.

"Good morning," she said.

"A very good morning," I chuckled. "Last night, that really happened, did it?"

Eve leaned in and kissed me. "There's plenty more where that came from. Except for the special effects. I'm afraid that was a one-off."

"The first time should be memorable." I wiped at a tear.

"What's wrong, love?" Eve asked.

"I was worried I'd never see you again."

Eve leaned over me and bathed my mouth with tender kisses. She then laid back down resting her head against my chest.

"What about Crom?" I asked

"I was away in the Otherworld, replenishing my power and learning new magic." Eve pushed herself up a bit so she could look me in the eyes. "Crom be damned, what we have — it's worth protecting. It's worth fighting for."

I smiled back at her. I couldn't remember ever being this happy. Our lips met, just a peck at first then grew in intensity until our mouths opened, and our tongues caressed. Our arms wound around each other. My hands and mouth explored her flesh. I delighted in every tiny groan or whimper she made. Eve pulled me on top of her.

My door opened. Mom burst in. "Tommy, are you alright? What's — Oh, oh. Oh, my god."

I scampered off of Eve. "Can't you knock?"

"What do you think I was doing, but you didn't answer?" Mom smiled. Her face became flushed. "Now I understand why."

Eve giggled. "Good morning, Janine."

“Good morning to you too,” Mom answered.

“Mom, please,” I grumbled.

“I was coming up to tell you we’re having a family breakfast this morning,” said Mom. “I guess I’ll be setting an extra place at the table.” She started easing her way out the door, closing it behind her. “You two, no rush. Take your time. Well, within reason. See you downstairs.”

She finally closed the door. I hid my face under my hands, listening to Eve laugh out loud.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I’m half-expecting her to bake us a cake,” she said.

“Don’t put it past her,” I said, breaking into laughter of my own.

We turned to face each other, side-by-side.

“So what’s next?” I asked.

“Shower.”

“Together?”

“Of course.”

We both slid out of bed. I spotted my boxer briefs on the floor. Eve’s gossamer gown had turned into a regular blue sundress, but she didn’t bother with it. She just walked out of my room, completely naked.

It was safe to say that Eve had unofficially been part of the family for a while. But now, I guess you could call it official. She had dinner with us once a week. She became Anna’s surrogate big sister, and she often went to Eve for advice. Eve appeared to enjoy that new role.

Thanksgiving was coming up, and Mom started making plans to have out of town relatives over for the holiday weekend. They all still remembered Eve from when they were out here for Nana’s last days and were just as thrilled as my parents and Anna that she and I were a couple.

Eve looked so happy. And why not? After all these centuries, she’d finally got what she’d always wanted. Real connections. And to be part of a family. That family extended to the band. She started treating Dave and Chris like bratty little brothers, giving them all kinds of shit in a good natured way of course, and they loved every moment of it.

Then there were the fans. We got lots of emails as a group, but some were specifically for me and Eve. Word must have gotten out that we were together. Maybe someone caught us smooching after a show. So many of our fans said they always thought it was just “a matter of time” before we got together, because of the chemistry they felt between us when we

performed. They were super-psyched for us and wished us nothing but the best.

Life was amazing. Things were going great.

No wonder why what happened next caught all of us totally off-guard.

Chapter Twelve

Eve and I weren't the only new couple in the family. Tucker and Anna were now officially dating. Mom and Dad were thrilled. Tucker's dad and my dad did business together, and it was almost unanimous everywhere you went and with everyone you met that Tucker was "a fine young man from a fine family that was meant for great things and would really be going places when he gets older."

Sadly, that last part was true. Fortune seemed to favor those with families who had huge fortunes. At school, Tucker may have been leaving me, Dave, and Chris alone — one, to make a good impression on my sister, and two, because we were becoming kind of a big deal around town let alone around school — but he and Alpha Squad were still pulling their usual crap. Picking on boys they thought were weak or different and harassing girls.

Good luck trying to get anyone at school to do anything about it. Everything they did was considered all in "good fun" and "boys being boys."

Anna, of course, was in heaven being Tucker's girlfriend, and why not? Tucker was campus king. That made her a queen. It was bad enough I had to see Tucker almost every day at school, holding hands with Anna as they walked down the halls. She'd also practically sit in his lap during lunch. Now, I had to see him almost every day after school.

He and Anna would be up in her room. Luckily, Mom had a Door Open policy, so they were forced to keep it pretty PG. Every time I'd pass by, on the way to my room, I'd catch a glimpse of them making-out on her bed and getting into some over-the-clothes action. It's not like I really wanted to look. It was like passing a car crash.

And when Tucker wasn't over at the house, Anna was always talking about him — to Mom and Dad and Eve. That was more than a little frustrating. I knew Anna would be telling Eve things she wouldn't tell Mom, but Eve was a loyal big sister and kept everything Anna told her confidential.

That day, after school, we had a short band rehearsal, because Dave and Chris had a family-thing to attend. A band Eve and I liked were playing a show downtown. We planned to go. Eve dropped me off and said she'd pick me up in a couple hours.

I bounded up the stairs. I needed to piss really bad. I opened the bathroom door only to find Anna standing in front of the mirror taking naked selfies. Well, almost naked. She was still wearing a thong.

She was so quick to cover her breasts. "What are you doing? Knock much?"

"Sorry." I pulled the door shut. "You know you could have locked the door! That was just as traumatic for me, you know."

I needed to go really bad and ended up using Mom and Dad's bathroom. I was on my way back to my room when Anna was leaving the bathroom, fully clothed, and giving me serious stink-eye.

"I assume that was for Tucker," I said.

"Who else?"

"Anna."

"What? I know what I'm doing," she grinned. "And it's not like Tucker hasn't sent me any pictures of him."

Eww. "You know he's a huge asshole, right?"

Anna scoffed. "He's been nothing but cool to you and your friends."

"Yeah, but he and his buddies have a whole bunch of other targets to choose from."

"You ever think those people are just being too sensitive?" she asked. "Maybe you were too."

My jaw dropped. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Anna, you haven't heard the way they talk about the girls they've been with. It's like they're not even human."

"I know what girls you're talking about. They're total sluts. They have no respect for themselves."

I groaned. Was I too late? Was she too into Tucker that there was no going back?

“Look, Tucker’s been nothing but honest with me,” Anna continued. “He likes how easy I am to talk to and how I’m so mature for my age. He’s ready for something real, and he’s chosen me. If you don’t like it, then stay out of it. Keep your opinions to yourself.”

Opinions? Those were supposed to be warnings. I didn’t get a chance to say anything else. To be honest, I couldn’t think of anything else to add that wouldn’t have made Anna even more angry with me. I was left just standing there as she headed into her room and closed the door behind her.

When Eve came to pick me up for the show, I told her about catching Anna sexting. This was the first she’d heard about it.

“This sexting. It’s a mating ritual for the 21st century,” she said.

“I take it you’re not happy about it?” I asked.

“Of course not.”

“You’ll talk to her? She really looks up to you.”

Eve replied with a quick smile then got serious again. “It’ll be tricky. I can’t tell her you were the one who told me. I do that, and I lose her confidence. I need to wait for her to bring it up on her own. Odds are she will, she sounds like she’s pretty pissed at you and will want to vent.”

I nodded and settled back into my seat. It felt good knowing I had backup on this.

“You’ve met Tucker,” I said. “What do you think of him?”

The way Eve winced when I said his name spoke volumes. “He’s got charm and charisma, but deep down — he’s more than just a horse’s arse. There’s a darkness in him. I can feel it.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know if we can do anything. Tucker has won over your parents. I’m sure they’re probably planning the wedding already. And if you keep coming on as strong as you did today, it’s just going to make her want him even more.”

As much as I wanted to argue that point with Eve, it made a lot of sense. “So you’re saying there’s nothing we can do?”

“Anna’s got to figure this out for herself,” said Eve. “I’ll try poking holes in Tucker’s character whenever I can. Hopefully, she’ll come to her senses.”

I gazed at Eve. What did I do to deserve someone so wonderful in my life?

“Thank you.”

I held out my hand. Eve gave it a gentle squeeze.

The school’s Winter Formal was coming up, and as a senior I was proud to say I never attended any school dance, event, or function.

Until now.

We — and by *we*, I mean the band — had been asked by the administration to play a set. They said those four special words. We. Will. Pay. You.

So naturally, we agreed. Eve found a costume store downtown that had some great Gothic-looking formal wear for us to rent. She chose this amazing black and crimson dress and there was a matching tux my size. Dave and Chris were all decked out in black. Dave’s tux came with a top hat that made him look like some sort of Gothic undertaker.

We weren’t scheduled to go on until later in the evening, so we took our time getting there. We’d hired friends from the theatre department to be our roadies. A couple of them played guitar, so they tuned our equipment too. We joked how we were like real rock stars now. All we needed to do was start talking in British accents.

When we were ready to go on, the principal spoke to the DJ. He stopped playing after his current song was finished. The principal took to the stage and grabbed the mic. He told a couple of lame jokes then spoke seriously about how great everyone looked all dressed up and how proud he was of all of us.

He got everyone hyped up and introduced us. One of our buddies pulled back the stage curtain, and we got a nice roar from the crowd. I had to admit it was kind of nice, being accepted by so many kids at school — and I did it my way. On my own terms.

We had a half-hour and chose tunes that had a good beat to them. Everyone looked like they had a good time dancing to our music, and we got a nice round of applause between each song. Our last number was our cover of The Cure’s “Love Song.”

It had become a standard, and we’d recently turned it into a duet between me and Eve. For the longest time, I’d hated my singing voice. But now, with Eve at my side, I felt like I could do anything. I had the

confidence to just relax and let my natural singing voice emerge from deep down inside of me. I wasn't exactly the greatest singer, but I definitely didn't suck. And from what fans told me, they could feel the passion in my voice when I sang. To me, that was most important.

We got more applause from the crowd as we finished that song and our set. While our stage crew buddies packed up our gear, we decided to help ourselves to some of the refreshments that were set out. A lot of kids showed us love. They wanted to shake hands, fist bump, or get selfies.

We found a table in the back. Our stage crew buddies joined us, even though they weren't exactly dressed for a formal. Some of the chaperones, teachers and parents, took notice of that and looked like they wanted to say something, but ended up letting it go, probably because we had just rocked the house.

Anna came over to give me and Eve a hug each and congratulate us on our set. She didn't stay for long.

"Tucker's waiting for me," she said.

Eve and I exchanged a look when she said that. Anna gave us each one more hug before taking off. I left to get a couple glasses of punch for me and Eve.

"You guys are amazing."

I turned around. It was Vanessa.

"Thanks," I told her.

"You and Eve sounded great together on that last song," she said. "You could really feel the love between you two." She sounded a little sad. Her smile faded for a moment but then flickered back to life. "Eve's amazing, and so are you. You two belong together."

I got choked up for a second. "I appreciate that. Thank you."

"Hey, a bunch of us are going to Tucker's house for an after party. If you and Eve and the rest of the band aren't doing anything ..."

"We do have something going on," I lied — but for a good reason.

"Okay. See you at school on Monday."

Vanessa gave me a quick hug then headed back to her table. I turned to see Eve standing behind me with her arms crossed and a pretend scowl on her face.

"No wonder why you were taking so long with our drinks," she said.

"It's not what you think," I chuckled.

“Relax. I know a platonic hug when I see one. I was just taking the opportunity to mess with you.”

She moved in for a kiss. I happily obliged. She took her drink from me.

“We were invited to a party at Tucker’s house after this,” I told her, saying Tucker’s name like it was the most disgusting thing in the world.

“And you said?” Eve asked.

“I said we had plans.”

The truth was Eve had to go back to the Otherworld to recharge.

“You know you could go without me,” said Eve. “I do trust you.”

That was when I caught sight of Anna and Tucker slow-dancing on the dance floor. His arms were around her waist, her arms were around his neck, and they both stared into each other’s eyes all lovey-dovey.

“I don’t think I can trust myself,” I admitted.

Eve noticed Anna and Tucker now and appeared to share my concern. “If I can remind you, if we protest —”

“That will just make her want him even more.”

Eve took my hand. “I’ll drive you home.”

Dave and Chris stayed with our stage-crew buddies. Some girls had joined them. Good for them. When we got to my house, Eve stared at me with a big grin.

“What?” I asked.

She reached across me for the passenger seat controls. She eased my seat back. I smiled, knowing exactly what was happening next. It wasn’t our first quickie in her car. It probably wouldn’t be the last.

We finished, and Eve laid on my chest for a while, my arms around her. We kissed goodnight, and I watched her drive off. At least Mom and Dad weren’t waiting up for us. I didn’t even want to think about what time Anna would be sneaking in.

I yawned like a bear. That quickie was definitely going to put me right to sleep. I took off my tux and hung it in my closet. It was due back at the costume shop tomorrow, but I was actually tempted to buy it along with Eve’s dress and Dave and Chris’ black tuxes.

I’d check in with them on that in the morning. Right now, sleep called. I crawled into bed with just my boxer briefs on. My eyes closed, and my whole body relaxed just about all at once.

A deep sleep took over. What happened next — I thought it was a dream at first. But it wasn't. It was a vision.

I heard the faint sound of electronic dance music, like there was a party going on. Only I was in a bedroom. Tucker and Anna were in bed, under the covers, having sex. What the hell? Was Eve doing this? Why the hell was she showing me this?

The door opened just a bit. Tucker's BFFs, Bobby Kincaid and Cooper Aldridge, snuck inside. They were giggling and bleary-eyed drunk, each telling the other to shut up. Tucker saw them. He smiled and turned Anna's face so she couldn't catch a glimpse of them.

I didn't like this. It got worse when Bobby and Cooper took their clothes off. They were already hard and stroking themselves. Tucker finished then rolled off of Anna. Her eyes were closed. She stretched her arms over her head wearing a big dreamy smile on her face.

That changed when she noticed Bobby and Cooper climbing onto the bed on either side of her. Anna covered herself with the sheet and turned to Tucker, who just smiled and told her not to be so *uptight*.

No, please, no. Don't make me see this.

The light dimmed as a gray mist filled the room. Everything slowed down just like at the Halloween Fair with the Sluagh. Eve stepped through the mist and let loose with her mournful wail. Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper staggered in super-slow motion, their faces contorting with sorrow.

Eve kept wailing until they fell onto the floor in heaps. She then went for Anna, wrapping her up in the bedsheet. Tucker and the others writhed and wept on the floor.

The vision ended. I sat up, gasping. Did that just happen right now? Until now, Eve showed me things that had already gone down. She must have already brought Anna home. I grabbed some jeans and a t-shirt from off the floor. I got to Anna's room as Eve was leaving and shutting the door behind her.

"You sent me a vision," I said.

Eve responded with a perplexed look. "I didn't send you a vision."

"But I saw what happened to Anna. And how you rescued her. You didn't send that vision to me?"

Eve shook her head.

"Who did?" I asked.

"You might have done it on your own," said Eve with a proud smile.

I blinked with surprise. Seriously?

“It’s probably because you were so concerned about Anna and wanted to know what was going on,” Eve continued. “I did too. I had a bad feeling. I was able to watch Anna from the Otherworld, and when I saw ...”

Tears clouded my eyes. “Thank you.”

Eve smiled. “I do love her.”

“You used that mournful wail of yours on Tucker and the other two boys. Does that mean —?”

Eve shook her head. “I didn’t use my full power. They’ll just feel really shitty for a while. Even though they deserve much worse than that.”

I agreed. Looking at Eve, I knew all I had to do was say the word, and she would finish the job, but I wasn’t sure I could go that far.

“How’s Anna?” I asked.

“I sang her to sleep,” said Eve. “There’s no telling how she’ll be in the morning, except ...”

“Except what?”

Eve pursed her lips. “You know that when I summon the mist, the humans trapped within it aren’t aware of what’s going on, but I swear Anna was. She stared right at me the entire time as I took her out of there.”

That made me think about how I had been able to move around in the mist when Eve and Clio fought the Sluagh. It was because of my connection to the Otherworld. Did Anna have one too?

Right at that moment, Anna opened her bedroom door. She wore sweatshirt and sweatpants. Eve must have dressed her in those before she put her to bed. Eve and I stared at each other in shock. Whenever Eve sang someone to sleep, they stayed asleep for a long time. I knew that from experience.

Anna stared back at us, confused at first but edging toward panic.

Eve nudged me toward her. “Talk to her. Tell her everything.”

“You’re sure?”

Eve nodded and walked away. I guided Anna back into her room. We sat on her bed, and I told her everything. Anna immediately looked like she was about to call bullshit but didn’t. Or couldn’t. I mean, after all, how else was she going to explain what had happened to her that night?

She pulled her knees to her chest and just seemed to stare ahead into nowhere. I imagined her struggling to accept the existence of the

Otherworldly and that her brother's girlfriend, whom she'd come to confide in, was also an Otherworldly being.

"In spite of everything I just told you," I started. "She's still Eve. The same Eve who helped us deal with Nana's death, who you've been going to advice for, and who just rescued you from getting raped by Tucker's friends."

A tear ran down Anna's cheek. I pulled her close and laid my cheek against the top of her head. Eve joined us a few moments later. Anna sat up and gave her a warm smile. Eve looked relieved that Anna was apparently okay knowing the truth about her.

"I sang your parents to sleep," she said. "Hopefully, I was successful this time."

"What am I going to do?" Anna's voice cracked. "How am I supposed to go back to school on Monday?"

I looked to Eve. A crazy idea came to me.

"Eve, now that you've been in Tucker's room. Do you think you could go back and get his phone?" I asked.

Eve nodded. She summoned the mist, and it took her away. Anna watched in awe. The two of us just sat in silence. Which was fine. I was sure Anna needed more time to process everything she'd just learned.

Eve returned. We both got to our feet to meet her. She handed me Tucker's phone.

"The party's over," she said. "He was the only one home. Sleeping."

I took the phone. "It's face-recognition, of course."

"Give it here," said Anna. I handed it over. "When Tucker would come over, we'd sync his phone to my Bluetooth speaker to listen to music. One time, he was too lazy to get up and change it. So he told me his passcode."

And like that, Tucker's phone was opened. The wallpaper was a picture of him and Anna kissing, no doubt for her benefit. Eve and Anna stared at me, probably wondering what I had in mind.

"If Tucker is like any of us, his whole life is probably on his phone," I explained. "There's got to be something here we can use against him."

It turned out there was. And lots of it.

To start with, we found long text chains with Tucker, Bobby, Cooper, and some other boys going into graphic detail about their

“conquests.” There were pictures and lots of talk about getting girls black-out drunk or drugging them. They included names and dates of all the girls. Then there were the pictures, folder after folder. All of them taken in the act.

The videos were the worst, watching and listening to Tucker, Bobby, Cooper, and some other boys I recognized from school cheering each other on as they raped girl after girl. A lot of them were half-conscious, others were straight up passed-out, and the ones who were awake were crying the whole time. How could anyone call that consensual?

My eyes were blurry with tears. Anna erupted into sobs and fell into Eve’s arms.

“How could I have been so stupid?” she cried.

I helped comfort Anna. Once she was okay, I got to work.

Step one, I transferred the pictures and videos from Tucker’s phone to my laptop. I took screenshots of his texts too. Tucker would have to notice his phone was missing at some point. I disabled his Find my iPhone app. He probably had all his pictures and videos in the Cloud. I doubt he’d delete them. Just transfer them somewhere else.

Either way, I was prepared. I not only had all our evidence on my laptop, but I downloaded them onto two separate flash drives so we could have a backup.

We thought about going straight to the police with our evidence, only we’d have to explain how we got ahold of everything. I went online and found a local chapter of a feminist law group. Fighting against discrimination, sexual harassment, and rape were all in their mission statement. They sounded perfect.

It was the weekend, so their office was closed. They had a hotline though. I called and explained what I had in my possession. The operator told me she’d let one of her bosses know at once. I didn’t want to wait until Monday to speak with someone. We didn’t have to. Gloria Espinoza, one of the lawyers, called us back almost immediately. We arranged to meet later that morning at Elemental Cafe.

First we had to deal with Mom and Dad. They’d just woken up. They mentioned the wonderful night’s sleep they’d had and how refreshed they felt — thanks to Eve singing to them last night, not that we could actually tell them that. For some reason Mom asked if Eve and I wanted to

go to church, we politely declined. Anna asked to stay home too, saying she wasn't feeling well.

Once they'd left for church, we were able to leave for our meeting with Gloria Espinoza at Elemental Cafe. I'd downloaded some of the pictures and texts to my phone to show her. Gloria, as she insisted we call her, was just as disgusted as we were.

"There's a lot more," I said as I handed her a flash drive.

Gloria held it up like a trophy. "We'll take it from here."

"Won't people want to know where you got that from?" asked Anna.

"I'll call it an anonymous source." Gloria winked. "In the meantime, lay low. If any of these boys try to contact you, ignore them. If they approach you in any menacing way, call the police. But you have my word, they're not getting away with this."

Chapter Thirteen

Anna was quiet all through the meeting with Gloria. I thought she'd be the most excited out of all of us by the idea of Tucker and his friends going to prison and, most likely, get done to them what they did to all those girls.

I reached for her hand as we walked to the car. "It's going to be okay now."

Eve smiled, backing me up.

"Yeah, I just," Anna started. "I just wish I could tell my story too, but I can't without mentioning Eve. People won't believe it."

Eve and I exchanged a glance.

"I'm sorry," I told her.

"Me too," said Eve. "Hopefully, you can take some solace in knowing the other girls they hurt will have the chance to tell their stories. With so much evidence against those boys, they should feel safe enough to speak up. And you helped make that happen."

Anna looked to me. I nodded, agreeing with everything Eve said. Anna's smile returned. She hugged me then Eve. We headed home.

Mom and Dad were still gone. They usually liked to go to brunch after Sunday mass, so we could look forward to them being gone for a couple more hours. They'd be gone even longer if Mom wanted to go shopping like she did sometimes.

We'd just barely gotten through the door when Anna's phone buzzed. She whimpered.

"It's Tucker," she muttered.

I snatched Anna's phone. Tucker must have used someone else's phone, because just a number came up, no name. The text was in all caps. **WHERE'S MY FUCKING PHONE BITCH!!!**

Okay, I knew this was a possibility. I swallowed and fought back a tremor. If this had been a face-to-face encounter, I don't think I could have been nearly as brave as I was in that moment.

I typed and hit Send. *This is Tommy Leave Anna alone*

The response was almost instantaneous. STAY OUT OF IT FAG!!!

I flashed-back to past instances of Tucker's abuse. I held my hand steady and typed. *We dont have your phone*

Tucker responded. BULLSHIT YOUR FUCKING SLUT SISTER MUST HAVE TAKEN IT AFTER SHE FUCKED ME AND MY BOYS!!!

I glanced at Anna. Eve was holding her close.

I started typing with a sudden surge of confidence. *Your lying and you know it*

A moment passed then Tucker typed. GIMME BACK MY PHONE!!!

I answered. *We dont have it*

I wanted to ask him why he was so desperate to get his phone, was there something on there he didn't want anyone to see? But I worried about tipping our hand.

Tucker typed. I WANT MY PHONE GIVE IT TO ME OR IM COMING TO YOUR HOUSE TO KICK YOUR FAGGOT ASS!!!

I fumed. *Well call the police.*

Tucker responded. DO IT ILL TELL YOU STOLE MY PHONE AND I CAME TO GET IT BACK!!!

I fired back. *What are you going to do when they find that we dont have your phone?*

I waited for a response. None came immediately. I glanced at Eve and Anna. Anna looked anxious. Eve looked ferocious.

Tucker responded. IM GONNA MAKE YOUR SLUT SISTER WISH SHE WAS NEVER BORN

I exited the Messages app.

"What did he say?" Anna asked, her eyes red and puffy.

I looked to Eve and told her and Anna. "Let's get ready for anything."

Eve nodded. I could tell she was just waiting for me to say the word. I wished it wouldn't go that far, knowing what she was capable of. But I know she loved Anna like a little sister and would do anything in her power to keep her safe. We'd leave that as our last resort.

We settled in the kitchen. Eve made us tea, and we sat at the counter, sipping in silence. Anna's phone started blowing up, buzzing with notification after notification. She tapped the screen. Her eyes went wide, and she started to whimper. She continued to scroll and erupted into sobs.

I snatched Anna's phone while Eve consoled Anna. A bunch of texts were popping up, each one more vile than the last. There were pictures of Anna with words like SLUT and WHORE scrawled across them and what looked like jizz on her face.

From what I read, and was able to stomach, Tucker had spread the word that Anna had sex with him, Bobby, and Cooper willingly. So many people were choosing to believe them. I recognized names in the texts. They were all people Anna had thought were her friends. No one was on her side. There wasn't a single message from anyone saying they didn't believe Tucker.

My heart broke. Anna sniffed and pulled away from Eve. "Let me check my Insta'."

"No. It's just going to be more of the same," I told her.

Anna glanced at Eve. She nodded in agreement. Anna let out a long whine then collapsed against Eve. Eve gazed at me over Anna's shoulder. God damn, it was so tempting to let her tear loose into Tucker and his friends.

If I had the power, would I do it myself? I wasn't sure. I've never been Mr. Macho, but it did make me feel a bit shitty I had to rely on my girlfriend to fight my battles for me. Even though I knew she didn't mind one bit.

I took Anna's phone, laptop, and tablet, so she wouldn't be tempted to look at any of her social media. Eve kept Anna busy, talking with her, while I hid all her tech under my mattress. Eve was waiting for me in the hallway. Anna's bedroom door was closed.

"I sang her to sleep," she said. "It should take this time. The rest will do her good."

I nodded, feeling pretty wiped-out myself.

"Tommy, say the word, and I'll take care of this," said Eve.

Those words made me shudder. I was so tempted to say yes, right there on the spot, but then I started to think. "Even if you killed them, that wouldn't stop all this harassment. They'll be dead, but they won't have been punished."

Eve answered with a tight smile like she begrudgingly understood. My phone buzzed. My first reaction was people were going to start trashing me online, but I didn't have social media for personal uses. It was all about promoting the band.

I let out a sigh of relief. It was a text from Gloria. She said things were looking good and included a "thumbs-up" emoji. I showed Eve. Her smile broadened.

"So we wait then?" she asked. "A little while longer?"

I thought for a moment then said, "Will you keep an eye on Tucker, just in case?"

Eve nodded. Mist started gathering around her. "Tommy, are you upset at all that you aren't able to take matters into your own hands?"

My breath caught in my throat. How does she do that?

I sighed then said, "A little bit."

The mist retreated a little. Eve offered a comforting smile and stepped closer to me. "Tommy, my love, you weren't made for violence. You were made for much, much better things. That's one of the many reasons why I love you."

I smiled back. "Thank you."

Eve leaned in and kissed me. She stepped away as the mist rose around her once again and carried her away.

Anna was still asleep when Mom and Dad got home from church/brunch/shopping, I said she still wasn't feeling better.

"What a bummer," she said. "I'm dying to know how the Winter Formal went."

I cringed inside when she said that. I kept to my room, and like any good musician I took what I was feeling and started turning it into a song. It was all about holding on to hope. It wasn't just for Anna. But for everyone going through tough times. Hopefully, this song would comfort them and empower them to be brave enough to overcome whatever problem they were facing. There was a nice rhythm in my lyrics, and I started hearing guitar chords in my head that could go with them.

"Oh, my God!" Mom's voice volleyed throughout the house. "Are you serious?"

I bounded out of my room. Anna opened her door and peeked outside, still looking half-asleep. She followed me down the stairs.

“Rick, turn on the TV!” Mom yelled to Dad. “Find some local news!”

Anna and I got downstairs. Dad was talking to someone on his cell too. He’d found some local news. Mom was still on her cell.

“We just turned it on,” she told whoever was on the other end. “Dear Lord!”

Anna and I stared at the TV screen. There, in stunning 4K resolution, police marched Tucker out of his house in handcuffs, while his parents followed. His head was hung low. He looked like he was about to cry. Since he was eighteen, they weren’t bothering to conceal his identity or withhold his name.

“The police have picked up Bobby Kincaid and Cooper Aldridge too,” said Dad, turning away from his cell phone.

The story continued. Gloria was questioned. She mentioned her “anonymous source” who handed them a load of “damning evidence” that they brought to the police. She added that girls mentioned in the texts and identified in the pictures and videos had already been approached and were sharing their stories.

Anna and I stayed standing, while Mom and Dad hovered near the TV, still talking on their phones. I let out a contented sigh. Anna too. Eve sent me a text before stopping by the house. She, Anna, and I — our little secret cabal — met upstairs in my room.

“I watched them like you said,” Eve reported. “The other two deleted the pictures, videos, and texts they had. But from what I understand, those kinds of things don’t ever truly disappear. You were right to handle it the way you did. This is definitely more complete, and all of their victims will find some sort of closure now.”

We both looked to Anna.

“So is this really over?” she asked.

“For Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper, yeah,” I said. “But I have a feeling even more’s going to come to the surface.”

That turned out to be a serious understatement.

Over the next few days, more boys were named as being involved in a number of assaults. Along with that, some girls who had been harassed at school, who had been groped or had their clothes torn, named names. They also mentioned the teachers and the admin’ they went to for help — who blew them off and did nothing about it.

Those boys pretty much disappeared from school. There one day, gone the next. The admin' and teachers who'd been turning a blind eye were all suspended and had subs in their place. The school's whole climate changed for the better. There was no more air of tension. People breathed freely. Finally, this school belonged to all of us.

Chapter Fourteen

Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper all made bail, no surprise there. Their parents were all rich AF. But the case never made it to trial. The three of them ended up killing themselves.

It was all over the news, how they got in Tucker's car and drove on the freeway at over one hundred miles an hour until they lost control and flipped it. Witnesses said the car bounced a couple times before finally landing. None of them were wearing seatbelts so they died instantly. According to a reporter, all three of their blood alcohol levels were through the roof.

A note was found on Tucker's computer. He tried to make it sound like they were the victims, how they were being persecuted, and were going to go out on their own terms. What assholes! They could have killed people while going out in their little "blaze of glory."

At least everyone knew them for what they really were now. Their families would have to continue to pay the price for their crimes. Every one of their victims filed claims against them in civil court. Gloria was happy to represent them.

Like I'd said earlier, our school, good ol' "Hellhole High" actually became a decent place. You could breathe easier walking down the halls. Everyone treated each other with more respect. The admin' and teachers who'd been letting Alpha Squad get away with murder were "asked to resign." Most of their jobs were taken over by women too, coincidentally.

Anna was a lot different now. Word got out that Tucker had made up all that crap about her. Not everyone had the guts to apologize, but that allowed Anna to find out who her true friends really were. Sadly, Vanessa wasn't one of them. Anna started looking up old friends that she'd been tight with in elementary and middle school but stopped talking to them,

because they were “no longer cool.” She hoped to renew old friendships. Lucky for her, these old friends were very forgiving.

Anna became fascinated that she might have a connection to the Otherworld like I did. We discussed it with Eve one day at the house, while Mom and Dad were out.

“It’s faint, but brighter than most,” said Eve. “It flickers in and out. Once it steadies, we might be able to do something with it.”

“Is there any way I can, I don’t know, work on strengthening it?” Anna asked.

Eve shared with her the same guided meditation she’d shown me. I did it on a regular basis and was becoming more aware of that little ball of energy inside me that connected me to the Otherworld. Sometimes, I even felt its presence when I wasn’t meditating. It would just come out of nowhere. It was so cool.

“Work on being in the moment and more aware of what’s going on around you,” Eve told Anna. “Pay attention to your instincts and don’t be afraid to follow them. And don’t dismiss moments that might seem to be a coincidence, like when you think about someone, and the next thing you know they’re calling or texting you. It might be your influence at work.”

Eve had given me the same advice a while back. Since then, I’ve felt more connected to what’s going on around me. Eve said that would not only strengthen my connection to the Otherworld but could also allow me to enter the Flow even when I wasn’t writing or making music.

Eve still needed to take regular trips to the Otherworld to recharge. I missed her like crazy, but she always came back to me as soon as she could. That particular night was one of the night’s Eve usually had dinner with us. Mom and Dad were of course disappointed. She had made her special lasagna and everything.

But it was all good. It had been a while since just the four of us had dinner together. It was nice. Our past dinners, when it was just us four, always seemed so forced. This time felt more real.

“Prom’s coming up,” she reminded me and Anna at the table. “Any plans, you two?”

Anna and I glanced at each other.

“You mean, like together?” I chuckled. “As a couple?”

Anna burst out laughing. Mom looked to Dad, who just shrugged.

“You did kind of make it sound that way,” he said.

Mom huffed. “I mean, each of you — do you each of you, on your own —?”

“We know. We know,” I said.

Mom shook her head. “Anna?”

“I don’t know,” Anna murmured. She’d probably been planning on going with Tucker. It took a moment for Mom and Dad to reach that conclusion.

“Oh well, there’s still plenty of time,” said Mom, trying to sound encouraging. “There’s nothing wrong going with a group of friends. I heard your cousin Matt did that last year.” She then turned to me with an annoying little twinkle in her eye. “Can we assume you and Eve will be going?”

My face felt warm all of a sudden. “I don’t know. I mean, we haven’t talked about it.”

“Our Tommy’s a rock star now,” said Dad. “He’s too cool for that kind of thing.”

I grinned and made devil horns with both hands.

“I think it might be nice,” said Mom.

“I’ll ask her.” The more I thought about it, I imagined Eve thinking it would be kind of sweet. It was something a lot of young couples did.

“The two of you will be going to college at the same time,” said Mom. “She’s still at ASU, right?”

“She’ll be finishing up this year.”

Truth was Eve didn’t take any classes. She’d used magic to get her job at the hospice. I wondered if she might “magic-up” some sort of degree too.

“And you’ll be moving in together,” said Mom.

This was true. Eve and I were looking for condos together. She already had a place of her own to help maintain her human identity. But instead of just moving in there, she insisted on finding a place together. That we could make it a home. Together.

“That’s a huge step,” Mom continued. “Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Are you ready to start sharing a bathroom with someone? That’s a real eye-opener.” Dad grinned at Mom. “The ultimate test of true love.”

Mom scoffed and threw a piece of her garlic bread at him. Dad just chuckled.

I glanced at Anna. She still looked a little down.

“It can’t be any worse than sharing a bathroom with this one,” I said, hiking my thumb at her.

She chuckled and gave me a playful shove. “Shut up. I can’t wait to get rid of you.”

“Well, all I’ve got to say is,” Mom started, “as far as babies are concerned, there’s no rush —”

I just about choked on a bite of lasagna. “Jesus Christ.”

“— We’re in no hurry to be grandparents.”

Dad nodded in agreement.

That bit of conversation planted a seed in my mind. I started thinking about what kind of life Eve and I could have together. A goddess and a human. A mortal and an immortal. Up until then, I had just been caught up in all the excitement. Now I felt like I’d been given a serious reality check.

All that was still weighing on me as I headed back to my room. The moment I walked through the door, I noticed the mist gathering inside. I smiled, thinking it was Eve.

But something was different. The mist swept all around me. It was pulling me.

I tried standing still, but that didn’t work. Trying to pull away didn’t help either. The mist continued drawing me forward. I had no choice except to go with it.

I walked for I don’t know how long. After a while, I no longer felt pulled anymore, and the mist started to clear. I guess I’d arrived. But where?

The last of the mist cleared. I was in an old Irish cottage. It had white walls and a tall thatched roof with fishing nets hanging from the rafters. Sun shone through the windows, and the front door was open. Outside, dogs barked, and ocean waves struck the shore, sending the smell of the sea wafting into the cottage.

A smile took over my face. This wasn’t any cottage. This was the cottage Nana grew up in. I recognized it from old pictures. I was standing in the parlor, a room only used for entertaining special guests. Through the

doorway, into the main room, I could hear “In the Rare Auld Times” by The Dubliners playing on a record player.

A fire burned in the hearth. The scent of burning “turf” gave me a warm welcome. Someone sat in a tall rocking chair singing along to The Dubliners while reading — my guess was Yeats.

It was indeed Nana. She lowered her book into her lap and smiled at me. “Well, are you just going to stand there or are you going to come over and give me a hug?”

What — how was this happening?

You know what. Never mind.

I’d experienced so much craziness lately, maybe it was best to stop questioning and start accepting that this was my life now. And if it meant I could see Nana again, why not lean into it?

I raced over and hugged her. It definitely felt like one of her hugs, soft but secure, like love was supposed to be. She smelled pure too, almost like a newborn baby.

I wiped away a tear as I gazed at her. This was really her. “How is this possible?”

Nana lifted the arm of the record player so it stopped playing. I pulled over a chair from the table.

“Do you mean how did you get here?” she asked. “Not quite sure myself to be honest. I’ve been watching you and Eve and Anna. I could feel you were troubled by something. Next thing I knew, I was using the mist to bring you here.”

“Eve said when you were alive you had a connection to the Otherworld,” I said. “Maybe that’s what did it. Maybe it’s even more powerful now that you’ve crossed over. Eve says I have a connection too. So does Anna.”

“I know.”

“And where is this?” I asked, looking around. “I mean, I know what it is, but ...”

“It’s my own little slice of Heaven. So, what’s troubling you love? Forgive me for being blunt, but I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep you here, and I can tell you’re in need of my sagely advice,” she added with a cheeky grin.

“I’m just thinking about my relationship with Eve.”

“What about it?”

“It’s the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me, but it’s not without its drawbacks.”

“You’ll find all things are like that, love.”

“Anna knows about Eve, and that’s nice,” I continued. “But I still have to keep Mom and Dad in the dark, which sucks, because we’ve been getting along so well lately. I hate keeping this a secret from them.”

“I understand,” said Nana. “All I can say is don’t give up hope and be patient. Before you know it the perfect moment will present itself for you to tell them. It might be difficult for them to accept at first, and I doubt they’ll be cross you kept it from them. But they love you and Eve, and it’s so clear how happy you make each other. They’ll understand.”

I smiled. That made a lot of sense.

“What about when time passes, and people notice Eve doesn’t age?” I asked.

“You do recall Eve has magic at her disposal that alters her appearance?”

That’s right, I forgot.

“What about kids?” I asked.

Nana sat back in her chair and reached for her teacup on the nearby table next to her record player.

“Now *that* you really need to talk to Eve about yourself,” she insisted.

My throat started tightening up, but I managed to force out what I wanted to say. “What about when I die? She’s going to be all alone again.”

Nana gazed at me. “Oh, my Tommy. My sweet, sweet Tommy. You know I never thought I’d outlive my dear Jack. It hurt a lot, but I managed to go on. We made so many wonderful memories together that he still lived on in my heart.”

“Do you think it’s possible for you to see him again? Here?”

“Jack?” Nana chuckled. “He’s actually in the boat right now, bringing in a catch.”

“For real?”

“My little slice of Heaven wouldn’t be complete without him.” Nana sat her teacup back down. “No one can predict the future, love. Not even Eve. So don’t overly concern yourself with what could happen and when. Just live in the moment, love Eve, your family, your friends, make

your music. And if Eve does have to go on without you, make sure you give her lots of lovely memories to look back upon.”

“I will. Thank you.”

I gave Nana another hug. Only she started slipping away from me, as the mist gathered around us. I fought against the urge to cling to her and not let go. It felt like, if I did, it would somehow ruin this beautiful moment together. And who knows? Who was to say this would be the last time I’d ever see her?

The next morning, before school, I told Anna all about my encounter with Nana. I caught her right after she’d gotten dressed. She didn’t take so long getting ready in the morning anymore. She chose clothes more for comfort than style and just pulled her hair back with a scrunchy. She didn’t bother with makeup either. She didn’t really need it. My little sister was a natural beauty.

Anyway, back on topic, she was thrilled and so happy I got to see Nana again in the Otherworld. I told Anna what Nana and I had talked about, and she agreed I needed to talk about some things with Eve.

“Besides, we’ve discovered we live in a world full of magic now,” said Anna. “Who’s to say Eve doesn’t have something planned to make sure you two stay together forever.”

“Like Nana and Big Jack?”

“Yeah, like Nana and Big Jack.”

I smiled and stared at Anna. My wise little sister had just made a pretty good point. She held out her arms, and I went in for a hug. We separated only when we began to smell bacon cooking downstairs.

Mom had been making a big deal about having breakfast together more often, not just dinner. I was all for it, especially if she continued cooking the spreads she’d been making lately. The other day was breakfast burritos. Today was her famous Belgian waffles with crumbled bacon added to the batter. Dad was already downstairs too, pouring coffee and freshly-squeezed orange juice.

We all sat at the table, talking about what we had planned for that day. It was nice, a lot more satisfying than choking down a bagel and a cup of coffee before rushing out the door. We finished and cleared the dishes.

Dad was driving Anna to school now. I was invited to join them whenever I felt like it, but I still liked that walk to school. I didn’t listen to

music anymore. I just tried to be present with the world around me like Eve had taught me. It was during these walks that I came up with new song lyrics and melodies. I always made sure to record them using the Voice Memo app on my phone.

That morning, I was on fire. As I recorded a new lyric, more came into my head. I was so absorbed in what I was doing I didn't notice the rising mist, until it had choked out all the color around me and turned everything gray. This wasn't Eve or even Nana for that matter. This mist carried an ominous chill that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, stiff with fright.

A vision hit me. More than one. It was like a movie montage. I saw Eve, from different periods in history, judging by her surroundings and other people's clothing.

In each scene, she faced off with more of Crom's worshippers. She attacked temple after temple. They were all hidden in remote homes, glens, or in underground tunnels. She used her mournful wail to incapacitate large groups of worshippers, and her piercing shrieks destroyed altars and idols and caved Crom's temples in on themselves.

Was Eve giving me these visions?

No. It wasn't her.

My vision ended with a dark shape slithering through a void. A giant worm-like creature raced toward me. It got closer. It had a man's face, with long matted hair and a beard. The crazed look in his eyes made me shudder. His mouth stretched open. He was about to swallow me whole. Was that Crom?

The last vision ended. Everything around me was still gray. The mist surrounding me was thicker now. The clopping of horses' hooves echoed in my ears. I couldn't pinpoint where they were coming from.

I then realized it was coming from multiple directions. There was more than one rider approaching me. They were silhouetted by the mist. Three of them. Tall men on top of large horses. I could turn and run away. But on their horses, they could easily run me down.

The riders steered their way through the mist. My breath caught in my throat. I thought I was going to choke. They were Dullahan. Crom's horsemen.

Each Dullahan held their severed head by the hair. I recognized their faces. Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper. Was it really them? Or some

illusion? Had Crom resurrected them as Dullahan and sent them to kill me?

“The Dark and Crooked One.” The words seeped from Cooper’s swollen lips. “He came to us in our time of need.”

Bobby was next. “He told us what you did. How you destroyed us.”

Then Tucker. “But he offered us an escape from our troubles and the power to get our revenge.” He chuckled. “How could we refuse?”

“It might have been a good idea if you had.”

That was Clio’s voice. I turned to see her and Eve step through the mist. The breath that had been caught in my throat finally released itself. I smiled at Eve, who broke from her game-face just long enough to give me a quick look of reassurance.

They positioned themselves in front of me. I stepped back, knowing Eve and Clio stood a better chance against the Dullahan than I ever did. It still stung that I had to have my girlfriend protect me.

“Last chance,” ordered Clio. “The three of you, fuck off and we’ll pretend this never happened.”

All three severed heads — Tucker, Bobby, and Cooper laughed.

“There are four of us, bitch,” said Tucker.

That was when we heard hooves clip-clopping behind us. A fourth Dullahan stepped through the mist. Eve let out a tiny cry when she saw the face of its severed head.

“Sean,” she murmured.

Clio stepped to her side.

“I’ll handle him,” she told Eve.

Eve’s shock and sadness quickly gave way to rage over Crom turning her last lover into a monster.

“Beg to us, bitches,” said Tucker. “And perhaps we’ll give you a quick death.”

“I would address us with more respect,” said Clio. “We are no mere banshees.”

“We are queens,” said Eve. “And we each have two dozen banshee in our service.”

The surrounding mist burst as if struck by a powerful wind. Out flew banshees. A lot of them. I couldn’t count them all.

Clio and Eve must have summoned every banshee that served them. They swarmed all four Dullahan, swirling through the air around

them, wailing away. Their horses snorted and reared onto their hind legs. The Dullahan swiped at the banshees with their whips made from giant animal spines.

Clio and Eve each formed a silver sword of Otherworldly energy. They charged the nearest Dullahan. Clio took on the one that had been Sean, just as she'd promised Eve. Both of their targets were still so distracted by the banshee horde they had no time to respond to Clio and Eve's attacks.

Clio severed the Sean-Dullahn's arm at the elbow, the same arm that held its whip. She then leapt into the air and drove her sword through its chest. The Sean-Dullahan toppled from its horse.

Clio pounced, but the Sean-Dullahan chucked its head at her. She tried to block it with her arm, but the head sank its teeth into her flesh. Clio grunted with pain and tried to shake the head free, but its grip was fierce. She finally had to batter it with the pommel of her sword until it finally let go of her.

Clio growled and ran her sword through the head. She lifted it with her blade then flung it off like it was garbage. The Sean-Dullahan's body continued to fight on its own, lashing out with its whip.

Clio moved slower than she had before. There was a pained expression on her face. I then noticed her cradling the arm the Sean-Dullahan's head had bitten. The flesh was turning black, like she'd been poisoned.

Eve cried out. I turned to watch her get clipped on the side of her head by the front hooves of the Cooper-Dullahan's horse. She fell. The Dullahan was about to trample her, but Eve stayed low. She wove, in and out, tumbling between its legs, until the horse lost its balance and threw the Cooper-Dullahan to the ground.

Eve met it when it fell. She leapt and drove her sword through its chest, piercing the heart. The Cooper-Dullahan's body shuddered and shook. Its head screamed. Eve sliced the head in half with her sword, silencing it for good.

I smiled. That's my girl.

All that was left were the Tucker and Bobby-Dullahan. They charged, swatting away Clio and Eve's banshees. The Sean-Dullahan laid in a busted heap. Clio had finished it off and stepped forward to join Eve. Her

poisoned arm glowed and looked less black than before. She must've been using some sort of magic to heal it.

Clio faced off with the Bobby-Dullahan. Eve took on the one that had been Tucker. The Tucker-Dullahan snapped its wrist. Its whip straightened and became as stiff as a spear. I now saw that each vertebra was razor sharp.

The Tucker-Dullahan swung at Eve like he wanted to take her head off. She got her sword up just in time to block it. This went back and forth. The battle edged toward me.

The Tucker-Dullahan swung at Eve with his spine-spear. She blocked and side-stepped. The Tucker-Dullahan tossed its head at her. It landed at her feet.

Eve glanced at the head for just a second. It spat a stream of black mist into Eve's face. She choked and gagged, doubling over. The Tucker-Dullahan came up from behind. It raised its spine-spear like it was about to run her through.

I moved without thinking, racing toward the Tucker-Dullahan. It turned and chucked its spine-spear at me. It pierced my chest and came out through my back.

I stared down at the giant hole in my torso. Shock rescued me from the pain. I dropped to my knees then fell flat on the ground.

Eve let out a fearsome roar with enough sheer force to send the Tucker-Dullahan's body reeling. She let out another roar that sent it flying into the mist.

She shrieked at its head this time. Its mouth fell open in a silent scream. Blood poured from its eyes, ears, nose, and mouth as it shriveled like rotten fruit.

I coughed and spat out blood. My vision blurred. Eve was there. She lifted me onto her lap, cradled me, and smoothed my cheek. I struggled to form words.

"Save your strength, love," she whispered. "Try not to talk."

Eve appeared to be fighting a losing battle against her tears. Clio summoned her birds. They fluttered and landed near me. They started singing. Their song went to work on my wound. But it wasn't enough. Clio and Eve could tell. They concentrated and appeared to be adding their energy to the birds' song increasing its power.

But it still wasn't enough. I felt so tired. Almost lifeless.

I realized what was happening. And I was okay with it.

I looked up at Eve and smiled. I'd saved her. That was what mattered most.

I wanted to tell Eve I loved her.

But my last breath left me before I could.

Epilogue

I woke all at once, drawing a huge breath. Before I knew it, I was back on my feet. I felt amazing. In fact, I couldn't recall ever feeling better before in my life.

I touched my chest. My wound was gone. That giant hole in my torso was completely closed up. There was no trace of it

Eve moved to my side. She smiled, but her eyes were still red from crying. I looked to her for an explanation. Instead, she threw her arms around me and smothered my mouth with kisses. As much as I was enjoying myself, I gently released myself from Eve.

I needed to know what was going on.

Clio stood nearby. She smiled, looking just as happy and relieved as Eve.

"I'll leave you two alone," she said then slipped into the mist.

I turned my attention back to Eve, who wiped fresh tears from her eyes.

"What happened?" I asked. "Were you and Clio able to heal me?"

"It was a group effort," she said. "But you ended up doing most of the work. I always knew there was something special about you, Tommy Kennedy."

I touched my wound again. "I thought I died."

"You did die, but you were reborn," Eve explained. "Your connection to the Otherworld increased immensely. It brought you back. And then some."

I felt warm all over. I was glowing. I held up my hands. They shone with silver light. I concentrated, and the light faded, but I could still feel the power inside of me, ready to emerge when I needed it.

“What am I?” I asked.

“Something new. Something that’s never been seen before.”

“What does that mean? What can I do?”

“We’ll find that out together.” Eve held out her hand. “Oh my love. I have so many wonderful things to show you.”

I took her hand. “What about my mom and dad and Anna? Will I still be able to see them? Will I be able to go home?”

“Of course. Anytime we wish.”

My head swam with excitement. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what wonders waited for me. Best of all, I would experience it all with my Eve. We held each other and kissed, as the mist wrapped around us and carried us away.

THE END

Irish Pronunciation Guide

NOTE: These are not the only Irish words in the story. They are just the ones that do not sound like how they are spelled.

Aibheall (EE-VAHL)
Bodhran (BORE -EN)
Cinnédidh (KENNEDY)
Clíodhna (CLEE-O-NA)
Clonmacnois (CLON-MAC-NWAH)
CuChulainn (COO-CUL-AN)
Currags (KER -EK)
Diamrach (DEE-AM-RACK)
Donal (DOO-NAHL)
Donough (DUN-UH)
Eabha (AY-VA)
Emer (EE-MER)
Fionn Mac Cumhail (FINN-MAC-COOL)
Gaelic (GAY-LIK)
Leitrim (LEE-TREM)
Liscarroll (LIH-CARE-OL)
Luceni (LOO-SEN-EE)
Lugh (LOOG)
Mahon (MAN)
Padraig (PAY-DREEK)
Seanachí (SHAWN-A-KEY)
Slainte (SLAWN-CHA)
Sluagh (SLOO-AH)
Thomond (TOM-OND)
Tuatha Dé Danann (TUA-DE-DAN-ON)

Dia dhuit (DEE-A-GWITCH)

Dia is Muire dhuit (DEE-IS-MEER-A-GWITCH)
Go raibth maith agat (GU-RAV-MAH-A-GUT)
Ta me go maith (TAW-ME-GO-MAH)

About the Author

The man known as Dan O'Mahony was born in a library and raised by a pack of wild fantasy novels who brought him up as one of their own.

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