

Prologue

According to ancient Irish history, a tribe of god-like beings, along with four magical items, arrived in Ireland in a cloud of mist. Others believed they were druids from some far off place. Some believed the beings had been exiled from heaven due to their extreme gifts in magic and were actually demons. Evenmore, others believed they were not actual gods or supernatural beings, just humans gifted in magic and necromancy. The Tuatha De Danann, or “People of the Goddess Danu,” predate Christianity and are said to be the ancestors of modern-day fairies and elves. In fact, the modern name “Ireland” originates from the name of the goddess, Eriu.

The mother goddess, Danu, is thought to have created this race, although very little information is known about her. She is thought to be an Earth goddess of wisdom, abundance, creativity, fertility, sexuality, and maternity. She and her husband, Donn, had many children. After his own son killed him, Donn became the first king of the Otherworld, a realm of deities. The Dagda, considered the chief of the Irish gods, held the power of both life and death, fertility, the seasons, and agriculture. Some historians believe the Dagda is actually Donn. The Morrigan, the shapeshifting goddess of life and death, war, battle, fertility, protection, destiny, and witchcraft, is considered guardian of the dead and wife to the Dagda.

Danu, the Daghda, and the Morrigan are just some of the Irish gods known today. Many others also reigned, such as Brigid, one of the Daghda’s daughters. It is no consequence that her

name is similar to Saint Brigid of Kildaire, the patroness saint of Ireland. With so many invasions and influxes of people, the history and tales of the Irish became quite Christianized as time went on. During the medieval period, the retellings were scribed by Christian monks to explain origin stories, perhaps weaving in their own Irish culture with that of the Bible teachings. Although that seems unfortunate, if it weren't for the Christian monks and their excellent record-keeping, much of the history would be lost. The Annals, or Irish Chronicles, are invaluable to Irish history.

Unlike many other religions and folklore, Irish gods and goddesses did not hold domain over just one area; they were each gifted in many ways. The Tuatha De Danann were extremely gifted in magic, art, and science. Also unlike many religions, the people of Ireland did not worship or sacrifice to the Tuatha De Danann. This could very likely be due to a lack of written history outside of the monks and the advent of Christianity and subsequent religious conversions.

According to the *Book of Invasions*, or *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, although powerful, the Tuatha De Danann battled (and bred) with other mythical migratory tribes, such as the Fomorians and the Fir Bolg, eventually defeating both. The Fomorians, considered a more monstrous mythical race, actually inhabited the land longer than any other group. The Tuatha De Danann ruled Ireland for 169 years until being driven out by the Milesians, ancestors to the modern day Irish.

It is not entirely clear what became of these gods and goddesses due to a lack of written Irish history, possibly having been destroyed during Roman invasions or from the original stories of these gods and goddesses being written from a Christian lens. Even among historians, Irish folklore varies. Did the gods and goddesses escape to the Otherworld, or perhaps some other parallel realm, to avoid humans? Did they reincarnate as something else? Were they destroyed

altogether? Or, did they transform themselves into what we now know as the Fae? No one can be entirely sure, from both a religious and folklorish perspective. What we do know is that the emergence of religion and mythology has been passed down orally and makes up the Irish folklore we know today. Irish history is rich and vast, rooted in multiple invasions through the millenia. From those early mythical settlers, to the Gauls and Celts, and even on to the Vikings, Ireland has always been a hotbed for magic. Do the Sidhe, or The Fairy Folk, inhabit this land today? Some would say yes. Fairies, and the Fae in general, are still prevalent in modern culture. How did the powerful and magical warriors of the Tuatha De Danann become the often troublesome, sometimes malevolent, pesky creatures of today responsible for kidnapping human babies and switching them with Changelings?

Culture evolves but many still believe in the Sidhe. It is still a common practice to leave milk and honey at the door as a peace offering to the Fae. The line between myth and religion is thin and ever changing.

*Come Fairies, take me out of this dull world, for I would ride with you upon the wind and dance
upon the mountains like a flame!*

-William Butler Yeats

Chapter 1

Rose rocked in pain as the warm water lapped around her. With each intensifying contraction, the urge to push grew stronger. She whimpered in agony with the all-consuming pressure, then laid her head on the lip of the tub as each died down.

“Why in the hell did I say I wanted a homebirth?”

Her loose, strawberry blonde hair clung to the damp skin of her face and neck. Celeste, her midwife, swooped Rose’s hair up into a bun to keep it out of the way.

Celeste was the quintessential hippie. Her beautiful gray-tinged-black locks fell down her back like small snakes in a bunch, flowing from her batik dyed silk headwrap. Her smooth caramel skin did not reflect her actual age. Although Celeste was technically a senior citizen, Rose would have never guessed she was a day over forty-five.

“Oh honey, you’re doing great,” said Celeste.

Rose gritted her teeth, rolled over, and tucked her knees into her large belly. She gripped the side of the tub, holding on for dear life, knuckles turning white.

“Celeste, please turn the shower head on,” said Rose.

Her head hung low between her arms. The water washed over her neck, the back of her skull, and then cascaded off her lightly freckled nose and full lips.

“This is the worst pain I’ve ever felt in my life.”

“But the reward will be worth it.”

Rose sighed. “Celeste, I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can. You’re almost there. Ten centimeters. You’re almost ready to push.

Celeste turned off the shower. The tub was already halfway full of warm water. Rose moved into a squatting position, causing the water to swish back and forth. She pushed her wet hair away from her face with the back of one hand while she grabbed the lip of the tub with the other.

“Oh my god, I need to push, now!”

Celeste kneeled on a towel next to her. She propped herself up on her forearms as she leaned on the lip of the tub. She nodded and squeezed Rose’s hand.

Rose pushed through several contractions, feeling only pressure and fire. After another agonizing contraction, she laid back in the tub, making a small splash as her back hit the water. Right as the pain subsided, another contraction began to climb.

“The baby is coming!” yelled Rose.

“This is it. Just a couple more pushes and your baby’s head will be out.”

Rose pushed, but every muscle in her body ached with fatigue. The end had to be near, or at least she hoped. Her sea-green eyes brimmed with red from strain as she pushed. She seared with pain as the baby’s head came out. Her pelvis separated to make room for the healthy-sized babe. With the next push came the shoulders. Celeste guided Rose’s hands to the baby’s head.

“Here, you can catch your baby yourself.”

Rose pushed one last time and the baby was born into a cloudy mess of water in the small tub. Rose pulled the slippery baby girl onto her chest. Celeste rubbed the baby with a towel. She let out the smallest cry, just enough to let the world know she was there and okay.

Celeste gasped.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“My god, Rose, that’s the most beautiful newborn I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen a lot of babies come into this world!”

“You scared the daylights out of me! I thought something was wrong with her!”

“She’s perfect. What will you call her?”

“Amaryllis,” said Rose.

She leaned down to look at the newborn, checking for any signs of distress. Celeste inspected the baby girl.

“Special name for a special girl. There’s something special about this one,” said Celeste.

Rose replied, “You probably tell that to all new mothers.”

“No ma’am, I don’t. My intuition tells me this baby is one of a kind.”

“She certainly is beautiful.”

Rose looked down at her pink, squishy little baby. She had only lived outside her womb for a few minutes at most, but this little baby was now the center of Rose’s world. At least in this moment, she wasn’t thinking about lost love. Little squinty newborn eyes stared up at her.

Rose looked over her shoulder to ask, “Do newborns usually make eye contact?”

“They can sense and smell their mother, but their eyes aren’t developed enough for that.”

Celeste continued cleaning up the room and Rose went back to staring at the baby. Her mind trailed off as she looked into her otherworldly baby’s knowing face.

At 25 years old, Rose knew she was old enough to care for a baby...that's not to say she wasn't concerned about the logistics of raising a child alone. The mystery around her conception was another issue. A fling, even pregnancy excluded, was not something she'd ever done before.

Ten months prior, she set out to start over in a new place, with new people, and new opportunities. She wanted adventure, or at least a change of scenery. With her old Mercedes and a pocketful of cash, she left.

Rose drove with no destination in mind. She drove more than thirty minutes from home without consulting her trusty Rand-McNally map, which was completely out of character for her.

She drove for two days, only stopping to eat or use the restroom, not knowing exactly what she was looking for. Maybe God, or her mom, would send her a sign from beyond. Or maybe, she would drive to Florida, swim in the Gulf, get back in her car, and head home, giving up on the whole idea.

After a while and a thousand miles or so, she passed through a historic town with a name that grabbed her: Seven Pines. Although not a self-proclaimed spiritualist, her intuition screamed for her to stop. Maybe it was her mother and this was the sign she had been looking for.

As right as rain, she thought, hearing her mother's words echo in her mind.

Rose drove through the old town, with its cape cod and craftsman style houses dotting the street. Several old Victorians caught her eye. The detailed old homes looked busy, even chaotic, but charming and splendid, with their odd color combinations and ornate finishes. Deep purple wouldn't be her first choice for a home exterior, but paired with black and aqua it just seemed right. Unlike modern suburbs with one, maybe two home styles, this place had it all. A town developed over hundreds of years held the evidence of ever-changing human needs and wants, particularly in its architecture. As time went on and population grew, lots were purchased and

homes were built. More trees were cut down for more lots and more homes were built, creating a small, yet bustling, town.

For summer, it was warm but not stifling. Black-Eyed Suzies smiled at her as she drove past in her mother's 1978 Mercedes-Benz. The car was the last gift her mother, Betsy, gave before her death the year before.

During Rose's last year of grad school, her mother had become terminally ill. As her mother's only caregiver, she often had to choose between sleep or school work. She juggled graduate-level classes and a dying mother. Time for friends or outside relationships was out of the question as all her energy was spent. Her mother's last wish was to see her "intelligent and progressive" daughter graduate with her masters in psychology.

Her mother attended her graduation in a wheelchair. Rose thanked her lucky stars she had lived long enough to see the ceremony. Her mother exuded pride as Rose walked across the stage in her blue and gold regalia. Betsy was beautiful, even if her grin was framed by an oxygen cannula. Her flaming red hair gave the impression of eternal life, or at least that's what Rose had always thought. The Monday after graduation, hospice nurses told Rose to prepare herself as her mother would not make it another week.

She died that Wednesday, in her own bed, in her own home, with Rose by her side.

Rose's life outside of her mom and school had all but faded away, and their home was a constant reminder of her mother's absence. With no other living relatives to tie herself to, Rose left.

She parked her car, hopped out, and felt a zing of energy in the air. Goosebumps danced across her skin as the energy caressed her skin. For the first time in well over a year, she felt something other than fading hope and sadness. There was magic in the air here. She could try to

justify the thought with logic, but the promise of something new made her feel alive. And after all, the mountains of North Carolina had a reputation for the otherworldly, or at the least, the unexplainable. In high school, Rose read a book titled, “Ghosts of the Carolinas” by Nancy Roberts. The small paperback sat atop a cardboard box of free books her English teacher had left outside her classroom door. Rose read the book during math class, instead of finishing her practice quiz on graphing equations.

If something calls your name in the woods, don't answer.

Regardless of any preconceived ideas of folklore, the town felt...unusual, but in a warm, comforting way. It wasn't just the old houses or the tall tales; it was the trees. It seemed as though half the old town was still covered in woods. Pines, evergreens. Even in winter, Rose would get to see green. She considered Florida, but it was too hot and too humid for any sane person.

Rose drove around looking for “For Rent” signs. If this was meant to be, something would pop up. As if she manifested it herself, she found an old house for rent on the edge of town. A small stream trickled across the backyard just feet before heavy woods. Rose stepped barefoot into the cold stream, feeling tingly and alive.

The woods made a silent plea to her. Still barefoot, she tread softly over to the trees. The light barely dappled the ground. She was in a new place completely. Rose didn't necessarily believe in magic, but if any existed in this world, it would be right here. She laughed.

The old pines towered over her. She spun in a circle, static flowing through her. She stopped and watched as two bluebirds fluttered around their nest.

“Yes, this is the place!” she shouted to no one.

The ache of her mother's absence still burned in her chest but in her gut she knew this was the right choice.

She walked out of the woods, stepped over the small stream, and walked up to the little old house. She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered into a dirty window. The abandoned house needed work. If she needed a distraction from her loss and loneliness, this place would occupy her for the foreseeable future.

The small house's chippy white appearance gave it a vintage charm; its layers of paint exposed decades and layers of white and off-white enamel. The glass windows looked original with their tiny bubbles forever trapped inside. Rose tapped on the window with her pointer finger. The wood fascia and window casings had rotted away in several areas and would need to be replaced. She picked at a piece of loose paint and scratched it off. She guessed that it was probably lead-based paint and not the best idea to disturb.

She found the distress of the home charming. Other people might have been scared off by the obvious abandonment of the cottage, maybe even finding it spooky. It could have been the scene for a murder mystery given its frozen-in-time appearance.

Rose wrote down the number on the for rent sign on the edge of her newspaper, got back into her car, and drove to find the nearest motel.

She didn't find a motel, but she did find a quaint bed and breakfast. The old Victorian style house turned B&B dripped with antique charm.

A little white sign in the front yard read "Whispering Pines Inn, established 1832." There were, in fact, several pine trees in the yard, but they looked unfamiliar to her and were probably native to this part of North Carolina.

With more confidence than she could remember ever having before, she walked up the creaky, wooden front steps, opened the solid wood door, and went straight to the front desk. The floor creaked in protest with each bouncy step.

The host smiled and said, “What can I do for you young lady?”

“I need a room. I’m hoping I’ll only need to stay a few days, although this place is so charming I might not want to leave!”

Still smiling, she scanned the room from one side to the other, admiring the antique furniture and wall hangings. An oil painting of a beautiful young woman adorned in ruffles from head-to-toe, cinched at the waist with what must have been a very tight corset, hung on the wall. Her face framed with dropped ringlets and only the slightest hint of a smile marking her nobility. She looked fairly young, beautiful, but her eyes had a depth to them that reflected sadness, maybe even pain. She pulled her stare away from the painting.

She walked up the stairs, stopping to admire yet another painting on the wall. Dense trees faded into a dark backdrop. The artist had used just the right paint to create an ethereal luminescence: a mint mixed with a hunter green, a dab of yellow ochre, and a pale lemon. She turned away from the painting to finish her ascent to the second floor when something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She squinted back at the painting. This time she noticed two little fireflies. No. There were eyes peering out from the trees. Goosebumps pricked her skin. Rose reached out but hesitated before touching the frame, fingers paused in trepidation just an inch from the gilded wood. She swallowed, reached the frame, and gingerly turned the painting over.

“1878. Woah.”

A cursive “F” was signed next to the date. She felt a connection to both paintings in Whispering Pines, and she wasn’t sure why.

Once in her room, she strode across the red antique Persian rug and nearly threw herself on the old four post bed. The wood was polished to a sheen but had evidence of time and wear. She rubbed a deep, yet smooth, scratch and wondered how long it had been there. She rolled over and grabbed the room phone to make her call. She dialed the landlord’s number and an old woman with a sweet voice picked up on the first ring.

“Hi, I’m calling in reference to your rental, the cute white cottage. How much are you asking monthly?”

Rose heard a lilting giggle and then the woman responded, “Four hundred a month, all utilities included.”

The rent was more than manageable, almost a steal really. Rose paused. Had a horrific accident caused the house to be abandoned? Was it now so haunted that everyone in the town knew to stay away? The old woman sensed her hesitation and spoke again.

“Call me Ms. McKinley. No one has lived there in over thirty-five years. The house is fine. I just don’t feel like playing landlord. Now I’m older and retired and don’t have much else to do!”

Rose and Ms. McKinley struck a deal: she would paint and fix up the house in exchange for the first three months rent. The old woman agreed to leave the keys under a pot by the back door.

“Should I meet you to sign a lease?” asked Rose.

The old woman just laughed and said, “Oh dear, you don’t need to worry about that. The house is yours as long as you want to stay there.”

Ms. McKinley never asked to meet Rose face-to-face, check references or income...nothing. Rose's excitement over the deal pushed away any feelings of skepticism.

The next morning she went to the little white cottage. She pulled up the gravel drive and parked her old Mercedes in the back. The single skeleton key was under the pot as promised. Rose rubbed her finger over the old, cold key admiring its design. She hadn't seen a skeleton key and lock in actual use. The bow of the key was in the shape of a filigree-style heart. Rose closed the key in her hand and lovingly held it to her chest.

She took a deep breath of renewal, walked up the steps, put the key in the door, turned the lock, and opened the creaky, paint-chipped wooden door.

Rose gasped as she opened the door and was greeted by a cloud of dust. She coughed several times before catching her breath. The house hadn't been aired out a single time in the last thirty-five years, or so she assumed. Reality shook her newfound confidence.

She walked around the living room, stopping to stand in its center. She paused. Her shoulders sank as she looked out the dusty windows. At least the view was nice. The front window was picturesque with its rolling hills dappled with trees in between small fields of summer crops. A heavily wooded area sat off to the left of view. The stream, with its shallow water and earth-toned pebbles, created a sort of boundary before the woodline. Actually, the view was downright gorgeous.

Step one: open all the doors and windows. They squeaked in protest as she lifted them. She strained and grunted as she attempted to open the largest window. Dust covered her tongue and contaminated her spit. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and kept going. With one final grunt, the window was open. She leaned back with her hands on her hips and admired her progress.

“Not bad!”

She wore the same old shirt she had worn every time she painted or cleaned. It had since become a multipurpose uniform and was at least five years old.

She scrubbed the vintage appliances with a will of something greater than the hope of cleanliness. The old pastel yellow Chambers Stove looked brand new after the thick layer of dust and dirt were removed. Rose guessed it was from the fifties and had never actually been used. The inside of the oven looked untouched by use or time.

Rose scrubbed and polished the original hardwood floors. Just like the oven, they showed very little wear for their age. The house still felt...old, and had probably been constructed sometime around the mid 1800s. Each room housed a fireplace with beautifully built, Georgian style accents. The woodwork was intricate and splendid, especially for a small, modest house. Almost each room contained built-in cabinets. Someone had put love into the making of the old cottage. The appliances, of course, were not that old but still reflected an earlier era.

Rose deep-cleaned for the first several days. There was no question this had to be done before she could break out the paint. She wasn't sure paint would stick to the walls, given the amount of dust layered onto them. Multiple buckets of sudsy water and two raggedy towels later, Rose was ready to head to the hardware store to pick out paint.

She chose a different color for each room. Perhaps it was her degree in psych or just plain common sense, but she knew different colors evoke different feelings and wanted this cottage to lift her spirits. The bathroom would be pale yellow, reminding her of summer days and lemonade. The living room would be an earthy green or sage to bring the outdoors, indoors. The hallway to her room would be a light aqua blue, just like the swimming pool she and her mother

would visit each summer. The color choices were a little eclectic, incongruous even, yet it would be warm and inviting and just right. Rose planned to bring new life to the old place.

With the profit she made selling her mother's home (after the mortgage was paid off and agent's fees were dealt out), she would have enough money to survive several months before finding a job. It was a good thing she had made some profit because the house would need a small fortune to turn it into a functional living space.

Staying with the longstanding tradition of the white exterior, she bought white paint, specifically Benjamin Moore "Simply White." She bought wood to repair the rotting fascia, tools, and a saw. The local hardware store manager knew her by first name by her second week in the house. She busted her butt to make the house liveable again. It already felt like home.

One particularly warm afternoon, Rose walked to the little stream to cool off. Her fingers were sore and blistered from her near constant handling of a paintbrush or scrubber. She massaged her hands and groaned in discomfort. Her hair, wet with sweat, plastered itself to her face which had now become a canvas of green, blue, and yellow paint.

She scooped the cool water up with her hands and splashed her face. As she opened her still-wet eyes, she noticed a strange little light glowing near the edge of the woods. Some sort of firefly she guessed, although it wasn't quite the time for the little bugs to put on their summer show yet. Out of pure curiosity, she headed over to inspect the tiny bug, but the light twinkled away into the woods. Rose followed.

She chased after the little pulsing light, not noticing how far into the woods she had gone. As she stopped, so did the little pulsing light. Unlike other lighting bugs she had seen in her lifetime, it froze midair as if suspended in time. Through pinched eyebrows she squinted at the odd glow.

I'm losing my mind, she thought.

In an instant, the glowing speck zipped away and disappeared behind a very wide and tall tree.

Without a second thought, she slid around the large trunk, following the eerily glowing ember. Instead of a small, winged insect though, she stood face-to-face with a man. A beautiful, otherworldly...man.

Startled, she stumbled backwards hitting a tree root with her heel. She stumbled back and fell to the ground, skinning both elbows as she halted to a stop. Her butt was going to be bruised. Her heart pounded with excitement and a logical dash of panic.

“Damn it! Both of my elbows are bleeding. You scared me.”

The man walked over, put his hands out, and lifted Rose to her feet. She yanked her hands away, wiping them off on her clothes.

“You shouldn’t go around hiding in the woods like a creep.”

Rose was surprised at how easily the words slid out of her mouth.

“I live nearby. I walk these woods everyday.”

Rose examined her bloodied elbows. She probably should have been more frightened by a strange man lurking in the woods behind her home. Instead, she felt unexplainably calm. The man’s features were striking and beautiful, but also somewhat extraterrestrial. Rose couldn't pinpoint how they differed from other men’s, but somehow they did. His hair was long and brown, sleek and smooth, covering his ears. His amber eyes set in his face like those of a cat. His nose was straight. His lips a cupid’s bow and red as the inside of a black plum. His clothes fit perfectly on his long, lean body, but they weren’t a style she recognized.

Rose's words caught in her throat, probably because she didn't know what to say next. She stared, open-mouthed but quickly, and awkwardly, adjusted her posture.

"You can call me Tarron."

He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

Rose embarrassedly squeaked out, "My name is Rose," as she lifted her chin up in mock confidence.

Tarron liked her awkwardness and her beautiful face.

Tarron said, "You live in the old cottage. I saw you pull up the driveway when the sign was still in the yard. You stepped into the stream and walked into the woods that day. So what are you?"

"What do you mean? I'm American, of European descent."

Tarron laughed with amusement, "No, are you part fairy? You're fae of some sort I reckon."

Rose was seriously confused. Was she dreaming? Had she had some sort of break from reality? She pinched herself. Nope, not a dream, and she hoped she hadn't lost her mind.

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

She knew there was something different about this place, but she had thought something along the lines of cozy, eclectic small town, not gnomes, trolls, and fairies.

As she stood across from Tarron, she recalled the uncanny sense of wonderment she felt since the day she arrived in Seven Pines. When she stepped into the stream she felt something. When she entered the woods she felt something. An intangible something. More of a feeling maybe. But fairies? That seemed far-fetched, although here she was, face-to-face with a beautiful man, who looked human, but not quite.

“What about your parents?”

“Just me and my mom, always. I have no other living relatives. My mom is gone now, too, so it’s just me.”

Tarron looked down at her and smiled. A warm, kind smile with an edge of mischief.

“Let me see your arms.”

Rose snapped back to the current situation. “What?”

“Let me see your arms. You’re hurt.”

He placed both of his palms just slightly above her still-bloodied elbows. He closed his eyes and from his palms a glowing light radiated into her broken skin.

“Oh my god, it’s tingling.”

Rose felt tingly all over, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

“It’s healing.”

Rose observed her skin in disbelief and gasped, “The blood, it’s gone! There isn’t even a hint of a scrape. No scab. No scar!”

Tarron replied, “I know, I used my own energy to heal you. Actually, if we’re being technical, I used my energy to stimulate your own body to heal itself. It’s the healing process...at high speed.”

“Holy shit.”

Healing wounds with some kind of supernatural ability was anything but normal, but Tarron acted like it was as commonplace as putting a bandaid on a cut.

“I don’t understand. That’s impossible,” said Rose.

“Says who?” asked Tarron.

“Says normal life. Have you done some demonic ritual on me or something?”

Tarron threw his head back and laughed, “No, we do this all the time.”

“We?”

“Yes, my kind. Should I have left you with bloody elbows? I can see you’re uncomfortable.”

“I’m not as uncomfortable as I should be. For all I know you’re a psychopathic killer who has somehow drugged me causing hallucinations.”

“No, I’ve never killed anyone, human or fae. I travel these woods all the time. You aren’t supposed to be able to see me.”

“What do you mean, be able to see you?”

“Humans. They can’t see us in true form unless we set that intention. Not sure why you can. Maybe I should be scared that you’re a psychotic fairy killer and you plan to turn me to dust.”

“Very funny,” laughed Rose.

This was far out of her comfort zone. She had never even been on a blind date. What had gotten into her? First, she moved away to a new place where she knew no one. Now, she was standing here with some semi-human man feeling a little too cozy with him. As she eyed him up and down, she felt a bit more than cozy with him.

Their eyes locked. Rose smiled from ear to ear as a blush crept up her throat and across her cheeks. He smiled back.

He licked his finger, reached down, and wiped paint off of her cheek. It was an odd thing to do to a grown adult woman you just met, however, she let him do it and felt a wave of excitement course through her body.

Tarron knew he had no business talking to Rose, but he wanted to touch her skin again. His kind were bound to their own realm for a reason. The woods were a kind of neutral area that existed between both his own realm and the human realm. There was something special about Rose. He was drawn to her. He really couldn't help himself. Maybe some humans had the same magnetism as fairies. This attraction caused his judgment to lapse.

He grabbed her hand with a gentle tug.

"I want to show you something."

"Okay...I guess."

Hand-in-hand, they trekked deeper into the woods. Tarron gently pulled her across what must have been the same little creek that ran behind her house. Her feet splashed in the cold water. The water glowed like an iridescent blue soup around her feet. She slowed down, but Tarron urged her on.

"Umm, uhh, the water..."

"Come on," said Tarron.

The two hopped up the shallow bank.

"This is not the same world," said Rose.

"Not really, no," replied Tarron.

Her jaw dropped in disbelief as she studied her surroundings. These were the same woods behind her house, but they weren't. They were the same beautiful woods but they were now glowing with an iridescence as if illuminated by a blacklight

"This is the most beautiful place I've ever seen. This isn't real. This can't be real."

"It is real."

She looked around, searching for the words to describe it. She could not put the beauty and wonder of this place into words.

“Am I dead? Is this heaven?”

Tarron laughed, “No Rose, you’re very much alive! This is the Otherworld. The realm of the Fae.”

Rose touched the plants around her. They softly vibrated with her touch. She caressed a silky green and purple leaf. It was softer than the velvet of her mom’s old fainting sofa. Her finger tingled with warmth. The leaves were alive, and not just from the science class knowledge of plants as living things. Tarron’s heart quickened as he watched Rose experience his favorite place for the first time. He wished they could stay forever. Just the two of them; no outsiders, no rules separating their kinds.

“Have you heard of the sidhe?”

“Nope.”

“Leprechauns, Banshees, fairies, mystical beings...the Fae.”

Rose snorted, “Yes, of Leprechauns and fairies. Who hasn’t?”

“The Tuatha De Danann?”

“Nope.”

“The Goddess Danu?”

“Not that one either.”

“Danu is the mother of all. These beings were ancient settlers of Ireland: an actual race of gods. They had extraordinary magic powers. It is believed that thousands of years ago they came from the sky in a cloud of mist. This is where things get tricky. The Milesians, ancestors to

modern day Celts, supposedly drove them out. Some say they retreated underground to a place called the Otherworld. That's only part of what happened though."

Rose sat pensively listening to Tarron.

Tarron asked excitedly, hoping to strike a commonality with Rose, "Have you heard of the goddess Brigit?"

"Yes, I have! Saint Brigid!"

"Well, sort of, I guess. I assume you were raised as a Christian. Brigit was a goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Her father, The Dagda, was the chief of gods."

"Interesting."

"What do you know of fairies?"

"All children grow up on folklore, especially fairies. They're tiny, winged creatures who sleep in flowers."

"Well, they aren't tiny little creatures with tiny wings who sleep in flowers. They are descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann. The Gods were tall and beautiful. They looked similar to humans but not quite. Most escaped to an invisible world, deep in the mounds of the Earth. Those mounds are entryways to the Otherworld. That's where you are now. There are forests and islands where we are invisible to humans. All of these places are connected by several series of portals. My people are dark Fae."

"Are the dark fairies evil?" asked Rose.

Tarron laughed. "No, our energy comes from the earth, the moon, and nature itself. The light fairies get their energy from the Sun. We aren't much different from humans. Just as some people are cruel and some are good-natured, but most are a little of both, it's the same with fairies. Well, hopefully more good than bad!"

As unbelievable as it seemed, here she stood in an unexplainable place with this unexplainable person.

“Actually, did you know that Ireland was named after Eriu, a goddess of The Tuatha De Danann?”

“That’s very interesting. I don’t know much about Irish Mythology or Irish history really, but my mom told me that I am part Irish, going back several generations of course. I’m obviously American.”

Tarron laughed. “Obviously.”

“Please go on,” said Rose.

“Alright, light and dark fairies have many powers in common, such as the ability to connect with nature, draw others in through magnetism, communicate telepathically, and manipulate water, as well as many other gifts,” said Tarron.

Rose found herself crossing from skeptic to believer.

“I’m rambling. Just know I’m not a demon or a monster or anything like that. We are basically a species similar to humans, but we have extra senses and abilities. Most of all, we still have the same wants and desires as humans...just add some magic.”

Tarron raised one eyebrow and winked in mock-sexiness at Rose and they both laughed.

Rose felt light-headed, but jubilant as she listened. She swayed a bit, and Tarron steadied her by wrapping his arms around her waist. She gazed up into his large eyes. Her heart quickened but her body felt even lighter, euphoric even.

“I feel strange, like I had one too many beers.”

“It’s probably because you’re human.”

She sat down, ankles crossed the way a school girl would.

Tarron leaned down and asked, "Can I kiss you?"

Rose nodded.

"Why are your lips so warm? They're warmer than any other lips I've kissed."

"Rose, how many lips have you kissed?!" asked Tarron, jokingly.

The intense energy between them was palpable. She reached up and put her arms around his neck, pulling him down for another kiss.

Is this some weird Fae persuasion or a genuine connection?

Rose gave the thought a mere second before Tarron pulled back, kissed her softly on the forehead, and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"I feel it too."

"Did you read my mind?"

"Sort of. I felt your doubt for a split second. I can communicate telepathically with those I'm connected to. It was more like you reached out to me and asked if this was real...with your mind instead of your voice."

"That's... a lot," Rose answered.

Rose rarely showed emotion. She had always wanted to be strong for her mother. Tarron's ability to read emotions unnerved her but it also forced a freeing vulnerability she wasn't used to. She kind of liked the idea of truly getting to know someone and someone truly getting to know her. She pushed the doubts out of her mind. She was a chronic planner and an over-thinker, so she told herself not to ruin the moment.

"I don't mean to sound daft, but what is your life like? Where do you actually live? So how did your people come to live in North Carolina if they're from Ireland?" I have never met a non-human person. Sorry for the questions," Rose asked.

Tarron said, “My tribe lives here in this forest. We can visit others of our kind just about anywhere on this planet, but it is not the planet as you know it. You take a plane, I take a portal. We can actually travel from this forest to Benbulbin or the Hill of Tara in a matter of seconds. It’s another realm, a dimension, that is invisible to the human eye.”

Rose retorted, “So then why can I see it?”

“Good question, I don’t know. You are able to see part of the forest we call “The Veil.” It’s kind of part of both realms. You saw me in a different form and followed. Then you were able to see me in my true form. You shouldn’t have been able to see me.”

“That’s strange.”

“Yeah, it is. You must have Fae blood somewhere down the line.”

Rose scoffed, “Yeah, okay.”

“No seriously, there’s no other explanation.”

A second later and with an enormous smile on his face, he grabbed her hand.

“Come with me.”

Any reluctance Rose felt before vanished as he pulled her into a different direction. The woods practically danced around them as they ran. The colors seemed to move and shift, like watercolors on a piece of paper. The trees were illuminated as if by invisible spotlights.

Tarron found the curtain of moss concealing his favorite hideaway. He held the spongy drapery out of Rose’s way so she could enter first. She scanned the secluded area.

“Oh my god, I don’t know what to say. This place is...unreal.”

She reached out a hand as if to grab some invisible lifeline on reality. She couldn’t tell if the light dappling through the trees was sunlight or moonlight, or how much time had gone by.

“The light is different here. It casts a shimmer on everything,” she said as she wiggled her fingers around studying them as if they were no longer connected to her own body.

“What is this place?” she asked, not bothering to conceal her amazement.

“This is my favorite place to be alone. I wanted to share it with you.”

She squinted and stared at the flowers to get a better look. She leaned closer. The flowers looked like daisies, but their colors were opalescent, no, iridescent! The pinks, reds, and oranges had the glow of the sun. The blues and purples looked like the sky at dusk, just before sunset. The colors were not just vivid though; they glimmered and moved. The center of all the little flowers were white. Not just any white, bright white, so bright that it practically popped up from the surrounding petals. She lightly poked the center of the little flower and gasped as it vibrated with the touch.

Tarron laughed, and the sound relaxed Rose and loosened something in her chest. She watched the smile stretch across his face and wondered if she’d ever seen something so magnificent in her life.

“I’m honored,” laughed Tarron.

“Get the hell out of my head. How embarrassing!” snorted Rose.

She never let loose like this...ever.

Tarron picked several of the most beautiful, tucking them in her strawberry blonde hair just above her ear. His fingers lingered there for a moment, causing Rose’s heart to race.

“This is my favorite spot to be alone. It’s not quite a cave, more of a small ridge I guess. This place has a feeling of intense energy, or magic, even by my standards,” said Tarron. “I come here to recharge, or just be alone, which is more often the case.”

An unexplainable, carefree happiness washed over her.

Tarron asked, "Can I kiss you again, Rose?"

He barely finished the sentence before Rose pressed her lips to his. Their bodies melted together and the heat between them went straight through Rose, causing her to feel weak in the knees in the best way.

Tarron wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her even closer. He nuzzled her neck before kissing the sensitive skin below her ear. She shivered pleasantly and let out the smallest moan as his breath caressed her skin. Tarron was obviously enjoying himself just as much. She could feel the evidence of his arousal pressed against her.

Tarron gently bit and sucked the skin of her neck as he lifted her hair. Her eyes fluttered closed as she let her head fall back to give him more access.

"Rose, I, I don't know if we should be doing this, but I want you so bad."

"Me too. Kiss me again."

He kissed her again, casting any hesitation to the wind. Their lips pressed together with near painful urgency. He swiped his tongue across the seam of her lips and she opened her mouth to him. He gripped his hands across her ass, lifting her into his arms, never breaking the kiss. He took a few staggered steps before pinning her to the stone wall of the ridge. Tarron's arms cushioned her body as he pressed her into the stone. He traced his fingers down her throat and chest and gently squeezed her breast.

At no other point in Rose's life had she done anything like this...even with steady boyfriends. None of them had ever made her feel like this.

Tarron slid a hand between her thighs, only stopping when he reached her apex. He gently gripped her sex, rubbing her clit with his thumb. She was surprised at his accuracy through the fabric. He unbuttoned her pants and slid them down. She shimmied out of them as

quickly as she could. He hoisted her leg up, hooking his elbow behind her knee. She balanced on one leg and wrapped her arms around his neck as she bit his lip and kissed his mouth. He used his freehand to unbutton his own pants. Rose couldn't help but notice his hand shake with desperation as he fumbled over the button and fabric. Tarron looked to Rose but her eyes were still on his hands. Once she looked up, he smiled shyly. Rose smiled back. This was not the usual for him either.

He backed away from her, pulling her hand to guide her down to the floor.

She woke at the edge of the woods. There was no sign of him. She stood up, her head still spinning. She paced the woodline with panic.

Had she fallen and hit her head? Had she been dreaming? What was happening?

Rose walked into the woods, but there was no sign of him.

"Tarron! Tarron!" yelled Rose.

The euphoria she felt a moment prior vanished and in its place was an empty hole. The memory of her time in the woods was fading quickly. It was just like waking from a wonderful dream with the feelings still there but the actual dream fragmented to the subconscious. She tried to hold on to her time with Tarron, but the holes in her memory were choppy and distorted. A man, an otherworldly man, kissed her, she kissed him back. She rubbed at the ache in her chest as her eyes filled with tears.

As confusion and unexplained heartache filled her mind, she walked back to her little cottage, tears streaking her cheeks.

Was this a psychotic break? Should I go to the hospital where they'll surely admit me?

She didn't exactly have someone to tell. Any friends she had were long gone. People only stay around when you can give something of yourself, even if that something is just a bit your

time. Caring for her mother and finishing school occupied all of that. She had been too exhausted to do much of anything else.

She chose to tell no one. Eventually the episode would pass. Perhaps the full memory would come flooding back and she would have answers. Or maybe she had suffered a mild stroke. There was no one waiting for her or needing to be taken care of, so she abandoned the risk and chose to do nothing.

She barely ate, barely drank. Whether it was suppressed feelings about her mother and her isolated life, or whatever had happened in the woods, the depression she was falling into threatened to consume her. Even her favorite meals lost their flavor. Her beloved grits were sand to her tongue. Rose spent a good deal of her time staring into the woods. She thought maybe the man would come, just show up, and take her away with him or at least explain why he left her and why her memory was broken. Would she be angry if he came back or just be so happy to see him that she'd forget that he left her?

The hours turned into days, the days turned into weeks. She hadn't left the cottage. Unexplainably heart broken and alone, she sat in her mother's old chair each day hoping to feel comforted by memories but all she really felt was her loss. The chair had been her mother's favorite spot for coffee and reading. Its floral pattern worn from its frequent guest, Rose nuzzled into the chair's soft fabric. What a shitty substitute for her mother.

After weeks of wasting away, Rose decided that she couldn't die there alone. No one, except for Ms. Kinley, the homeowner, knew she was there. God forbid she did die in the house, only the mice would find her.

So she made the choice to shower and move on as best she could. She scrubbed herself hard enough to expose a new layer of fresh skin. As she stepped out of the shower, she glanced at the bathroom sink. The stack of feminine pads sat there undisturbed and realization hit her.

“Fuck.”

She looked at the calendar: she was about two weeks late. In all of her sadness, she hadn't noticed her missing period. She quickly dressed in the first outfit she picked out of her drawer. She grabbed her keys and drove her car on autopilot. Had she had sex with him? The feeling of happiness and subsequent heartbreak were no good indication of what had happened in those woods. She didn't think she was forced into anything although she had no real recollection of the day. Her instincts and pieces of the memory pointed to the opposite. From what she could grasp, she was a more than willing participant.

As she drove, the same reel of memories played in her mind. A beautiful man. His shy smile. His kiss on her neck. A tiny flower vibrating under her touch.

Please God, let me remember,” she cried in desperation, squeezing the steering wheel. But nothing new was revealed. She cried and hit the steering wheel.

She pulled into the convenience store and parked. She looked at herself in the rearview mirror and wiped the tears off her face. She straightened her back and forced herself to get out of the car and walk in to buy the pregnancy test. She paid the cashier without looking her in the eye. She didn't feel like making small talk with a stranger.

“Thanks.”

The cashier said, “You have a good day, shug’. It'll all work out.”

Rose's face must have given something away. She smiled at the cashier, meeting her eyes this time.

“I hope so,” said Rose as she walked out of the store.

She rushed to the bathroom. She had drunk a whole bottle of Coke on the way home and was about to burst. Her heart pounded as she peed on the little stick. She waited a few minutes then picked it up. Reluctantly, she lifted it into her line of vision and gasped. It was glaringly positive.

The only man she had spent time alone with was the man in the woods and she only remembered kissing him. Obviously, they had done much more than that. There was also the issue of his otherworldliness. She was embarrassed to even think the thought: *was he even human?* For some reason, her gut told her he was something...more. She couldn't tell anyone this, even if she had someone to tell.

Their time together felt like a blissful, yet incoherent, dream. Now she was pregnant with his baby, and he was gone.