Soul

A novel inspired by the short story collection, One Night with the Fae. Soul is the first in a brand new series by Claire Farrell.

Cara Kelly’s life is going nowhere when she’s lured to a faery festival. There she sees darkness and magic, madness and lust, and she comes out the other side with new eyes and an addiction to the fae.

When the faery who saved her life returns to her, Cara knows there’s something wrong. Two souls exist in one body, and both need her, but to help one, she’ll end the life of the other. At first, her mind is made up, but both souls know how to charm her.

As the days pass, it becomes clear that the faeries need a leader, and Cara finds herself sucked into a world where morals don’t exist. The truth of her past is hidden in the magic, but all Cara needs to do is survive the king’s coronation, then the fae will let her go forever.

But that’s not what she wants anymore, and it’s getting harder and harder to tell the difference between a king and a half-blooded solitary fae. Cara’s losing her way, and her heart, to the fae, but there’s still her life, and her humanity, left to lose.
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Chapter One

My best friend slapped a stranger’s arse so hard that she shook her hand with the pain. I was surprised she could feel anything after all the alcohol she’d consumed. But she deserved to drink herself into oblivion after an argument with her boyfriend of three years had ended in him saying he needed “a break.”

The guy laughed and kept walking, but his girlfriend whirled around and asked, “Are you for real?”

Beautiful, belligerent Zoe grabbed my arm for support while waving her fingers in front of the woman’s nose. “Pinch me and find out.”

The young woman scowled and pushed her boyfriend ahead of her on the path. “Waster.”

Zoe’s grip tightened. “What was that?”

The woman stopped, shook her head, and turned back to face Zoe with an ugly expression. “I called you a waster. Got a problem with that?”

“Jesus.” I stepped between them and glared at the woman who looked as if she wanted to slap my best friend silly. I did, too, but I wasn’t about to let anyone else go there. “She’s drunk. Don’t be stupid.”

“She just—”

“I know. Now jog on.”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds. She obviously saw the same thing most other people did in my eyes because she linked arms with her grinning boyfriend and walked away.

I turned to Zoe with a sigh. “Go home, Zoe. You’re drunk.”

Her mouth widened into a dopey smile. “I like peachy bums. What can I say?”

“No, you like bugging Darren.”

As if on cue, her on-again, off-again boyfriend roared something incomprehensible at us. He and a group of our friends had somehow managed to get roughly half a mile ahead of us while I tried to shepherd Zoe to a taxi rank. In her state, it was no easy task.

She stuck out her lower lip and glanced around. “Should I have slapped her for calling me a waster?”

“You are a waster.” Hiding my grin, I urged her toward our friends. “Taxis are this way. Move, please.”

“How do you do that, though? Get people to just… back off? The look. Teach me it.”

“I’m just charming. It’s a natural-born gift that can’t be taught. Now keep walking.”

She tottered for a few steps until a passing car beeped at her. She whooped and made a move to lift up her top and flash them.

I grabbed her hands just in time then readjusted her clothes. I knew I should have hidden those extra shots she’d ordered right at last call. “You’re a disaster. I hope you know that.”

Her pale blue eyes filled with tears. “A break, Cara. What the fuck is a break?”

“It’s drunk talk for I want a night out with the lads.”

She grinned. “I fucking love you.”

“If you loved me, you’d hurry up before I freeze to death.”

She made a face at my goose-bumped legs. “What are you waiting for? I’m starving!”
She ran surprisingly fast. I followed as quickly as possible, waiting for her to fall. She didn’t, and the others slowed enough for us to finally catch up with them on Conyngham road, away from the brittle winds blowing over the River Liffey.

I reached the group just in time for Zoe to burst into tears because Darren refused to acknowledge her. Ignoring the inevitable argument, I folded my arms in a vain attempt to keep warm. On a December night in Dublin, I should have been wearing something ugly and heavy.

“It’s the longest night of the year,” Eoin said, slowing to walk next to me, his arm bumping against mine.

I sucked in a breath. “Yeah. Coldest, too, or is that just me?”

He gave my bare legs a pointed look. “I can warm you up.”

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

He slipped an arm around my waist, the tips of his fingers finding their way under the waistband of my skirt. Shrugging him off, I stepped neatly out of his reach.

“Now what’s your problem?” he asked through clenched teeth.

I had put in a full shift at the supermarket, and then Zoe had been weepy and juvenile all evening; I was exhausted and tired of being diplomatic. “Still not interested. Learn to take no for an answer, and maybe we wouldn’t have to suffer through these awkward moments, Eoin.” I shook my head. “Go bother somebody else.”

“You weren’t saying that when we—”

“Trust me, that mistake was more than enough.” I gave him the look.

He stormed ahead, muttering something about “cold bitches.” Looking past him, I noticed some lights. They hovered over the Phoenix Park before darting about as if they lived and had purpose. I stopped and stared, a weird feeling gnawing at the pit of my stomach. Beam after beam burst through the leaves, flooding the night sky with colour.

“Come on, Cara,” Fiona said, tapping my arm as she and Erika passed.

“Think it’s a rave or something?” I asked, moving toward Zoe but still watching the sky.

Zoe stopped arguing with Darren long enough to stare at me. “What?”

“The lights.”

“What lights?” She launched straight back into her argument as if there had been no interruption.

Her obliviousness didn’t bother me. She was stuck in her own little world, a bubble that consisted mostly of her relationship with Darren.

I kept my gaze on the lights, only half-listening to Darren’s attempt to persuade Zoe to shut up long enough to grab a steaming bag of greasy, vinegar-soaked chips. I willed her to agree. Then maybe I could run across the road and take a quick look inside the park while they waited for food.

But Phoenix Park wasn’t safe at night. I took one last, longing look at the lights and followed the others.

But my skin thrummed with need, my heart raced with exhilaration. It was the first time all night my interest had been truly piqued. All I had seen was a few lights in the sky, but I had a peculiar feeling in my gut, something warning that I would always want to know, that I would miss out on something spectacular if I just walked away.

“Okay, fine,” Zoe said as we reached the chipper, the food smells growing stronger. “I’m hungry anyway.” She pushed open the door. “Come on, Cara.”
I nodded and made to follow, but I couldn’t seem to make my feet step inside the building. I lingered on the footpath. The streets were mostly empty, apart from the groups of drunks wandering around looking for food and transport.

My friends were used to me wandering off. Zoe would look for me… or not. Maybe they would wait. If not, I wasn’t worried. There were plenty of taxis. I could check out the lights for a couple of minutes. The food would probably be ready by the time I returned. The traffic lights turned red, and my heart leaped in my chest as I made my decision.

I ran across the road, weaving through cars, and then crossed another street to get to the entrance of the park. The paths leading in were lit by streetlights, and those other lights still decorated the sky.

Trembling, I took a deep breath and stepped through the gate. I heard music and felt it beating beneath my feet. Maybe a concert of some kind. I would go as far as the monument and then turn back, I promised myself, but when I reached the tall obelisk, I kept walking. I needed to see, to hear, to know. Somehow, the lights had become more important than anything else in the world. A small part of me knew that was wrong, that everything was wrong, but my feet still moved.

The lights danced in the distance, and the music called to me, daring me to come and get it. It vibrated in my veins as if it belonged to me, owned me.

I realised I had already passed Dublin Zoo but hadn’t heard any of the animals. Then again, I hadn’t heard anything other than that music since I entered the park. The air remained strangely empty of normal city sounds.

The lights sparkled, drawing me further along. I shouldn’t have walked into the park alone, but I had never had any sense. I couldn’t make myself see the danger that was so obvious to everyone else. I was the one who walked down dark alleys alone and took everyone to house parties in the worst parts of town. I was the girl who had stared down a wild-eyed scumbag pointing a knife at me with shaky druggie hands instead of just handing over my purse. Zoe often called me crazy, but she enjoyed my unpredictability… mostly.

I looked over my shoulder, and my breath hitched in my throat. Behind me, a growing sheet of hungry darkness had swallowed up everything in its path as the streetlights blacked out one by one. The ominous gloom screamed danger, and for once, I listened.

I hurried forward to stay in the light, but the shadows crept behind me, gaining ground with each of my steps. A small spark of terror triggered deep within me, but left before I could register it properly. A wall separated my mind from my body, and I couldn’t seem to reconnect the two.

The park was well known as a breeding ground for dealers, druggies, prostitutes, and gardaí, but I hadn’t seen a soul. It was as if the rest of the world had disappeared and left me behind. Impossible, yet the fact that I couldn’t stop my own feet from moving was pretty unbelievable, too.

Lit only by the moon, the trees bordering the park leaned malignantly toward the path as if to snatch me up in their barren branches.

Unwanted images popped into my head—things that hadn’t scared me since childhood, memories I had long discarded as fantasy. I thought of dreams my mother promised me hadn’t been real, fears and monsters that might come true on a night when nothing else made sense.

I was afraid to look at the shadows in case I saw movement, afraid to stop running because the darkness would catch up with me. My pace quickened, but my mind remained separate from my body, a spectator waiting to see what kind of
trouble I would find, fed up with my not heeding its warnings.

My feet moved from the path, and I kept walking until I came to a section of the park used by joggers, dog walkers, and the occasional junkie. I moved between thick trunks of ancient, unfamiliar oak trees. Their branches shielded me from the wind but whispered in ways they shouldn’t.

I wanted to go home, but I was lost. The lights finally stopped moving, and so did my feet. The lights glistened, contracted, and spun around me before shooting away to hover above a clearing amongst the trees. Dead leaves and broken twigs decorated barren earth devoid of grass.

The lights dipped and disappeared. Horrified by the idea of never knowing what they were, I ran after them.

I stopped abruptly when I came to a gaping hole in the ground. Sweat trickled down my back as shapes formed before my eyes. Steps led down into the darkness, but the lights were in there somewhere. They tugged at me, urging me to follow.

The music grew louder, echoing from underground.

I looked behind me. The trees were so closely knit that I couldn’t see where I might have walked through. There was nowhere to go. No way out. I took a deep breath and made the only choice I could see.

I stepped down.
Chapter Two

I jumped the last two steps, ran into the light, and skidded to a stop, staring around in confusion. I seemed to be in the middle of a costume party, but that sense of otherness hit me once again.

I stood in a large room enclosed by stone walls. Underfoot, the floor was earthen, and strange scents assaulted my nostrils.

The people… I couldn’t even call them human. A figure walked right by me, and I automatically took a step back at the sight of its scaled skin. It hissed and stuck out a forked tongue before moving on.

I inched back and collided with stone. The steps had vanished. Pinpricks of panic touched my brain, but I was too shocked to truly feel it, maybe because I couldn’t see anything that should be real. Claws, horns, wings: nothing could be explained.

Unless…

Stories my grandfather used to tell me came back in a flash—the old stories I loved, about faery lore and myths, parties and dancing that lasted for hours, humans tempted and taunted and sent back without their wits, if at all.

My heart raced, ready to explode out of my chest. The music changed, and the figures on the dance floor in the middle of the room shifted with it, their movements growing frenzied. A fight broke out, and blood was spilled. I sank to the floor to make myself as small as possible.

Two impossibly tiny winged creatures flitted by, giggling as they pointed and stared. One yanked my fringe before flying away.

My childhood dreams had been about faeries. Many times, I had imagined being taken by the faeries and leaving my family behind forever, but I knew they weren’t real.

The soles of my feet stung, so I slipped off my shoes and wriggled my toes in the cool, damp earth. For some reason, the action grounded me enough to get back some control.

I didn’t belong there. I had to find a way out before one of the creatures decided I wasn’t welcome. Faery or not, they had weapons, and they had shed blood. I was out of my element. Granddad had always warned me never to step on toadstools or mushrooms in case one was really a hidden faery, to never fall asleep in a circle of stones, and to never, under any circumstances, offend one of the fae. He had recited the rules in a solemn voice but with a twinkle in his eye. He hadn’t believed, not truly.

Maybe I had lost my mind. Maybe I was trapped in my own nightmare.

I rose and stepped along the wall, keeping to the edges of the crowd in an attempt to go unnoticed. Some of the creatures cast me sidelong glances, but none spoke or tried to harm me, so my confidence grew. Nightmare or reality, maybe it didn’t really matter.

I gazed around the room, but I couldn’t see a way out. Candles—the only sources of light—hung high on the walls, supported by ornate glass candelabras, like ice containing fire. The flames flickered, sending impossibly tangible shadows darting around the room.

The creatures on the dance floor looked determined and focused; not even the bloodshed distracted them. Some moved elegantly while others awkwardly clomped around, but not one of them paused, even for a second.

I came to some tables covered with food and drink. Black apples bled rivulets of
juice. Sparkling gold grapes dangled from platters. They looked appealing, but right next to them were soggy pulsing berries that bubbled like acid.

None of the nearby figures were eating, but they all held carved silver goblets. I picked up a cup and examined the engravings. I almost dropped the goblet when the tail of a mermaid flicked over the rim. She waved at me before disappearing under a liquid that looked a lot like thin honey. I sniffed. The smell was familiar, so I took a hesitant sip. The first drop tasted like heaven. As the taste faded, I licked my lips, eager for more. I tipped the cup and drank the lot. A delicious warmth settled in the pit of my stomach.

I stared regretfully into the empty cup, and it refilled before my eyes. I eagerly lifted it to my lips, desperate for more, but a strong hand clasped my wrist.

“That’s not for you.”

I stared at the one who had spoken—a pretty male with shoulder-length silver-white hair. He held my arm so tight it hurt, and I couldn’t think straight. His skin was a shade away from transparent, and sparkling silver veins ran under the surface. His features were almost human, but his almond-shaped eyes were violet. He hovered above the ground, his wings moving rapidly. The appendages were as captivating as his skin, shimmering with the same vein-like lines.

He gazed at me as if trying to find something. I stared back, frozen to the spot. I had never seen anyone like him, and yet, he was the most familiar being in the room. The same thing that had pulled me after the lights tugged me closer to him, and my skin burned under his touch.

He frowned and released my arm. “You don’t belong here. Don’t eat or drink anything else.”

He sounded angry. I wanted to trust him, wanted to talk to someone, so I bent to put the cup on the table for fear of offending him further.

“Sorry,” I said, turning back to speak to him.

He was gone. I searched the room, but the silver faery was nowhere to be found. I took a step and swayed on my feet. The drink rushed to my head, numbing my senses, making me feel as though I had been wrapped in cotton wool. The room spun, and I staggered in an attempt to stay upright.

“Wow,” I stage-whispered. “What was that stuff, moonshine?” The words sounded funny, and my tongue felt too large for my mouth.

My cheeks flushed with heat. I fanned my face with my hands, but the warmth from the golden drink rippled through my body, burning as it went. I stumbled farther along the wall. I tripped over a chair but managed to grab it before it fell over. There were some titters, but nobody approached. Instead, they backed away as if I were contagious.

I sat in the chair. Something caught my eye whenever I moved, and I realised it was my own body. I stared at my wrists. Pale green shimmers appeared under my skin instead of veins. I flinched, but the movement was slow, as though I were immersed in water. I waited for the effects of the drink to wear off; walking seemed like a great effort all of a sudden.

My eyes stung, and I rubbed them hard, wincing from the pain. I blinked a number of times, and it was as if a veil had been removed from my eyes. I had never experienced such clarity. I could see fine details at the other end of the room as clearly as if I were standing there.

I focused on the edges, trying to find an exit, but I saw a band instead. I wasn’t sure how I had missed them; they took up a huge space. The creatures played frantically, sweat beads gliding down their faces and blood dripping from their
The music changed, and a movement to the left of the band caught my eye. A woman sat in a golden throne, her haughty gaze roaming the room. A throne. A jewelled throne. Her long hair was red and wavy and glistened under lights that appeared to float above her head. Her eyes were emerald-green, glassy and vacant. Her dark green floor-length gown had a bodice that exposed skin to her navel, barely containing her breasts. The skirt was slashed with deep slits, displaying her legs right up to her thighs. She looked beautiful and arrogant, and everything about her was designed to attract attention.

Her bare feet dangled close to a small bald creature kneeling beside the throne. He cowered, trembling, the back of his head covered by his long, thin fingers. The lights gleamed, exposing pink, puckered scars all over his head. Every time the woman’s leg moved, she kicked him. Many of the occupants of the room had wings or horns or even hooves. The woman had none of these, but I wasn’t aware of normal anymore.

A group of tall, impossibly muscular figures stood around the throne. Most had wings, and some had pointed ears or unusual skin colours, but they all carried an arsenal of weaponry that turned my stomach.

The redhead stiffened, attracting my attention again. She glared across the room, her upper lip curling into a sneer. I followed the path of her glare and saw a silver throne occupied by another woman. The second throne had deep engravings that moved fluidly, just like the ones in the cup. I could have sworn the room expanded around the throne.

The woman in the silver throne resembled the redhead, except her ash-blond hair was short and straight, and her eyes were a cool, icy grey. Jewellery adorned her body. Her dark red corset caught my eyes. A face emerged from the fabric, mouth open in a silent scream.

The blonde’s gang of warrior-like creatures were even more intimidating than the redhead’s. A muscular woman with short brown hair leaned over and addressed the blonde. Neither of them had wings. The warrior woman turned and stared defiantly at the redhead.

The music changed again, and the room grew darker. The atmosphere transformed until tendrils of anxiety and anger crept up my spine.

A scream came from the dance floor. One figure stood a head taller than the rest. He was dark skinned and muscular, his enormous black wings moving slowly. His face was beautiful, and his grin didn’t falter as he unsheathed a sword and beheaded the wizened creature before him.

I sucked in a gasp of shock as blood splattered. The black-winged faery didn’t clean his skin, but he made sure to wipe his sword on the clothing of the dead creature’s companions. None reacted except to bow their heads and avert their gazes, and even then, their feet never stopped moving in time with the music.

I stared at the black-winged faery in horror, but even in my disgust, a strange lust for him crept over me. I wanted to touch his skin, to taste his lips, to…

He turned his head and looked directly at me, that same smile on his lips. But his eyes were full of a darkness that made my blood run cold. Abruptly, he left the dance floor and approached the golden throne. He bowed low before the redhead. She smirked as he moved to kneel by her side and gaze up at her in open admiration.

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My hands shook, and my panic grew. Finally, my self-preservation fought through the haze. I needed to get out. I moved as fast as I could against the wall,
desperately trying to find a way out, to get away from people who stood by while
one of their own was murdered next to them. I needed to get away from the
smiling, black-winged faery before he decided to come after me.

Relief rushed through me when I spotted the silver-haired faery with the
beautiful wings. He frowned and took a step toward me, but someone blocked him
from my sight.

A grotesque old woman smiled at me, exposing toothless gums. She stank of rot,
and her long white hair hung in greasy clumps around her face. “Come with me,”
she croaked.

I shook my head and stepped back, looking around for the faery again. She
grabbed my arm and squeezed, pulling me along with her. I gazed at her wart-
covered fingers in revulsion, wondering how someone so haggard and frail-
looking could be so strong.

She yanked me after her. I definitely wasn’t dreaming—the pain of her grip was
all too real. Suspicious eyes watched as we passed, but nobody intervened, and the
silver-haired faery was gone again.

A doorway opened up in a wall, and the woman dragged me through it, down a
short corridor, and into a bedroom. The walls were covered in nightmarish
paintings and tapestries that intrigued and repulsed in equal measure. The four-
poster bed, swathed in red velvet coverings, looked luxurious and comfortable.

The woman shoved me toward the bed. Startled, I tripped over a rug and fell
onto the mattress, sinking deeply into the material. I struggled to a sitting position.
The old woman picked up a basket of red apples from a side table. She took out an
apple and held it out to me, pushing it toward my hand.

“No, thanks,” I whispered, pulling away.

She glared at me. “Eat.”

I took an apple with hands that refused to stop trembling. The fruit was shiny
and plump, and under the old woman’s watchful eye, I nibbled.

One taste made the memory of the golden drink turn bitter and sour. Another
bite made me forget what was outside the room. I sank against the pillows to take
the third bite, never wanting to get up again. The woman offered me the basket,
and I took it willingly. I took another bite, and another, and another, cradling the
basket in my arms.

I couldn’t find it in myself to care when the woman left and the doorway
disappeared after her.
Chapter Three

I could have been eating apples on that bed for seconds or lifetimes. All I knew was that I had to eat until my stomach bulged, because the very moment I stopped, I would waste away with hunger.

I chomped through the apples steadily, idly tossing away the cores once I had nibbled as much flesh from them as possible. I kept going, focused on my task, my thoughts full of succulent red apples.

I was sucking juice out of an apple only to have it pulled right out of my hands. I moaned, clutching wildly for another, but the basket was knocked out of my reach. Someone pushed me back on the bed, and strong fingers squeezed my jaws.

“Apples. I just needed…

Cold water was poured down my throat. The icy liquid blasted me into lucidity, and I stared at the silver-haired faery in horror. I touched my swollen lips and swallowed hard, feeling an ache in my throat that I hadn’t noticed.

“Don’t eat.” He held my face still and made me drink more water.

I obeyed without argument, unable to look away from him. He studied me in return, his violet eyes flashing with anger. The apples didn’t matter anymore; my obsession had transferred to him. I didn’t snatch an apple as soon as he let me go, and his frown cleared.

“Are you with me?” he asked.

“Yes.” I gazed around the room and wondered how a few apples could have distracted me from everything else. Not even I made sense to me anymore.

“Where am I?”

“Somewhere you shouldn’t be.” He stared at me keenly. “Who brought you here? What are you supposed to do?”

I tried to remember what had happened, but my memories seemed to be funnelled through a kaleidoscope, making them distorted and weird. Clutching at my thought processes was like being drunk and trying to force my body to walk in a straight line. “Nobody brought me,” I said at last, fairly sure that was true. Although I hadn’t been myself since I’d seen those bloody lights.

He shook his head. “Then how did you get here? You don’t just happen upon us on a night like this. Why are you here?” Irritation coloured his words.

I looked away, thinking of the people who were important to me: my mother, my friends. Their faces were hazy and distant, as if it had been decades since I’d last seen them. “I… I followed the lights. And the music. I just wanted to see. But the entrance disappeared, and the people… or whatever they are…” I shook my head.

“They started hurting each other, and I’d like to go home now, please.”

“You heard the music?” He punched the basket, knocking it off the bed. The last few apples rolled across the floor, leaving me bereft. “Why tonight?”

“I didn’t… I didn’t mean it. I just want to go home.”

He ignored me, his eyes distant.

I reached out for his wings, unable to stop myself. They fluttered even faster.

“What are you?”

“Just a faery.” He took my hands before I could make contact and looked me straight in the eye. “Please stop doing that.”

“Are you real? Faeries and magic and whatever. Is any of this real? I’m not hallucinating or having some kind of breakdown?”

He smiled, and my heart pretty much skipped a beat. His smile was sunshine, and I was eager to soak up the rays. “You’re not hallucinating. The Irish fae are
hosting a very important event here tonight. And I was supposed to…” He closed his hands into fists. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s all wrong.”

I bit my lip. “It’s real. Not that I… I mean, wow.” Okay, so I was kind of a faery fangirl. As a kid, my bedtime stories had been dark faery tales, and I left bowls of milk out to thank the house brownies Granddad said helped us while we slept. At Halloween, I was the girl in the slutty faery costume. I even had a faery tattoo on my hip. But none of that was why I felt so relieved. If I wasn’t dreaming, that meant other things might have been real, things I had been shamed into keeping secret.

“Of all the…” He frowned at the smile I couldn’t hide. “It’s not a good thing.”

“But it means…” The shimmers under my skin caught my eye again. “If this is real, does that mean that other things might be real?”

His wings stilled. “What things?”

“Things I… things I’ve seen.” I held out my hands. “Can’t you see my skin? It’s different, right?”

He didn’t look at my hands. “I was afraid of this,” he murmured. “It was real,” I whispered.

“Now’s not the… listen to me.” He held my face, forcing me to look at him.

But the lure of the apples had grown strong again, maybe because I was afraid to think about the things fighting for attention in my mind. I sought out the fruit with my eyes, licking my lips at the thoughts of eating just one more.

He pinched my cheeks. “This is serious, girl. You’re probably going to die tonight. We all are if things go down the way they’re supposed to. The banshee that brought you into this room is not to be trusted. Don’t eat or drink anything she gives you. And don’t agree to anything. Nobody can hurt you unless you say you’re willing. You’re in luck tonight. The rules favour you. Not me, but you might just survive this.”

His hands moved to my shoulders, but I couldn’t think about him when there were fat, juicy—

“Pay attention!” He shook me violently. “He’s going to come for you, and you can’t agree to what he asks.”

Violet eyes pierced through my haze, the overly large black pupils only accentuating the colour. “Who?” I whispered.

His laughter was harsh. “I saw you staring at him before. You watched him kill, saw his smile.” His voice lowered. “And still, still you would have done anything he asked, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded.

“Then beware. Of anyone here, he’ll be the one to take you for his queen.”

A thrill of fear ran through me. The memory of the black-winged faery made me tremble. And a banshee had touched me. Did that mean I was going to die? Oh, no. Wait. That was if I heard them wailing. But I’d always thought they were beautiful young women who liked to comb their hair. The woman who had led me into the bedroom had been repulsive. And the silver-haired faery was threatening my life. Probably going to die. Everything my grandfather’s tales had ever warned me about had come to fruition.

And yet… the night was the most exciting of my life. After years of feeling numb, I finally felt something… else. Even the fear was better than the nothing I was used to. But I wasn’t ready to die.

“Why are you going to kill me?”

He let go. “Not me,” he said impatiently. “I wasn’t planning on killing random
humans tonight. You’ll probably be sacrificed to a queen. It’s a great honour.”

An honour to die? Yeah, right. My brain kicked into overdrive. The people there were supernatural; they had different rules. So the only way to survive was to figure out as much as possible. “How many queens are there?”

He paced to the wall. “Just the two. Azarel of the Unseelie, and Mirela of the Seelie.”

“But why would they even want to kill me?”

“Azarel is the queen of bloodlust. Any blood spilled would make her happy. Her sister might rule with a different kind of lust, but she’s sadistic for the sake of it. On nights like this, a willing sacrifice is honour, and they constantly try to outdo each other. You don’t want to meet either of them, trust me.”

“They’re sisters? I thought Seelie and Unseelie hated each other.”

He glared at me. “How would you know that?”

I gave him a scornful look. “Everyone knows that. It isn’t exactly a secret.”

“Humans talk, but they rarely believe. Although you’ll certainly believe when they hold a dagger to your throat, little girl.”

“Someone will come looking for me, for my murderer.” I wished that were true.

“And if you can’t get out, then how will they get in?” His gaze turned pitying.

“You’re on your own. Trust nobody.”

“Including you?”

His laughter was a surprise, seemingly even to him. “I’m the only one around here who doesn’t believe in human sacrifice.”

“Why don’t you?”

Fear flitted across his face. “I’m not…” He shook his head. “If you die, we all do. I’m not ready yet. There’s too much to do still.”

“Why would everyone die?”

“The rules are important. More important than anything else. Tonight is the death of this year but also the death of an age, and the night the queens are at their weakest. Anything can happen on a night like this. Your death will spark something. I have to find out what exactly. I’ll be back.”

“Wait! Don’t leave me. Please.” If he left, I would succumb to the apples again. I would lose myself completely if no one kept me anchored.

He took my hand. “I promise to try to get you home. If I can’t… be brave. Sacrifices are normally quick. Painless, they say.” He slipped away from my grasp before I could stop him, passing through an invisible exit that I would never find until the faeries decided I could.

I knew people didn’t find themselves among the fae unless the fae wanted someone there. One didn’t leave unless they allowed it. I was trapped and outmatched. I couldn’t even trust my own mind. I had never thought of myself as desperate to live, but faced with death, I wanted to survive.

The apples called to me again, so I sipped some water and tried to focus on my problems to keep from getting distracted by juicy, plump, delicious… concentrate.

Okay, problems.

One. I was trapped underground in fae central and being held up as a sacrifice.

Two. I couldn’t see the exit no matter what I did.

Three. Everything I ate or drank was enchanted, and faeries were more than capable of forcing me to consume it all.

Four. The only faery even slightly willing to help me had just disappeared through an invisible door.

Problem five interrupted my thoughts by stalking into the room and scaring the
life out of me. The handsome faery smiled, but his obsidian eyes were dead and cold. If I ever needed to be in control of my actions, that moment was at hand.

He strode to the bed with a brazen leer. I tried to appear dumb and confused, hoping underestimation would help me. He licked his lips in mock lust, but revulsion was clear in his eyes. My cheeks burned under his judgement, as if I had never seen that kind of expression.

“Sit up,” he commanded.

I blinked a couple of times, wishing I could drink some more water but not daring to show anything other than confusion. He roughly pulled on my arm, ripping the sleeve of my top. I recoiled with a gasp of horror—partly from the frigid coldness of his hand, and partly because my very expensive top belonged to Zoe. If he didn’t kill me, she definitely would.

He laid his palms on my cheeks, and a dizzying lust shot through me, burning me from the inside out. The switches between clarity and intoxication gave me a headache, but at least the silver-haired faery’s explanation of the queens’ “gifts” helped me understand why I could want to wrap my legs around a creature who terrified me.

My heart pounded in my chest as he leaned closer. His pupils were eerily large, adding to his creepiness. His eyes had appeared black from a distance, but up close, his iris was a thin line of white.

My body arched toward him, despite the fact that I had seen the unprovoked murder he had so casually committed. His nose brushed against mine, and his hand skimmed my breast. He licked my cheek slowly and deliberately with a dry, cat-like tongue.

Something about the sensation broke the spell, and I shrank back, rolling across the bed to get away from him. His laughter was humourless, and I feared looking into his eyes again.

He called out something in a language I didn’t recognise. An elderly woman scuttled into the room and tugged at my clothes with fingertips that had been cut off and replaced with needles. Her faded blue eyes held my gaze, telling me everything her sewn lips couldn’t. I took off my clothes, unable to bear her touch. I covered my body with my arms as she took humiliatingly intimate measurements, but the dark faery refused to look away.

The urge to stare him down almost overcame me, but the woman pricked my side with her needle fingers and drew my attention. She shook her head almost imperceptibly, and I rethought any idea I might have had about challenging him. What worked in my world wasn’t going to cut it with the fae.

The woman finished and pressed my clothes into my hands. I dressed as quickly as possible, but my fingers kept fumbling. She left as I turned to face the dark faery again. His expression sent ripples of anger through me. I couldn’t respond to his arrogance with mildness.

“Who are you?” I asked defiantly, surprised by the steadiness of my voice.

“I am bodyguard, lord, and defender of the one true queen.” His response was robotic and automatic, as if I had triggered a switch.

“I thought there were two queens,” I blurted.

He frowned. “Lady Mirela is the One True Queen of the One True Court. All others are unimportant.”

Lust. As I thought.

He circled the bed. “I wish to present you as a gift to my lady. You will tell her you are willing. You will beg her to take your life. Your blood will anoint the
Winter Solstice and bring Lady Mirela good fortune.”
“I’m not willing,” I said sharply.
“You must be willing.” His eyes narrowed. “You must agree.”
“I’m not, and I won’t.”
He raised his arm as if to strike me. I flinched, too wary of his sword to even attempt any self-defence moves.
A familiar voice interrupted. “Lord!” The silver-haired faery rushed into the room. “Betrayal! Your lady’s in trouble. Quickly! She needs you.”
The change in the dark faery was almost comical. Worry flooded his eyes, even though his constant smile remained. With his hand on his sword, he ran out of the room with the silver-haired faery, leaving me alone again. I couldn’t understand whose side I was supposed to be on. I sat on the bed and chewed my fingernails. All I could do was wait.
The right faery returned.
“You’re back,” I said with relief.
“I made a promise.” He wiped sweat from his brow. “We need to get out of here. You can’t die tonight. We can’t let him return. It will ruin everything. I’ve pitted them against each other, but I don’t know how it will play out. We need to leave before—”
“I can’t even see the door!”
“I know.” He ran his hands through his hair, a curiously human gesture. “I’ll try to…” He raised his hands as if pressing against the very air. “Tell me if anything looks different to you.”
I moved to his side, staring at the solid wall. I clutched his arm. “The door! I see it now.”
“Maybe they died,” he whispered, gripping my hand and pulling me through the door.
We ran down the corridor and back into the great hall. The music had stopped, and groups had gathered around the black-winged faery, who was battling the ferocious-looking wingless brunette who had stood by the silver throne. She jerked her head in our direction, distracted, and my companion dragged me back into the room again.
“What the hell?”
“We were seen. She’ll look for us as soon as she wins. She can’t find this room either, but if the one who holds the magic dies… Hold on a moment while I think this through. Perhaps she’ll lose.”
That would mean the black-winged faery won. I didn’t like the sound of that.
“And if he comes back for me?”
“Right now, if we try to leave, both of them would hunt us down. It would be a great sport for their kind.”
I sat on the bed. “I’m going to die here. I can’t believe it. I’ve been in the worst places with terrible people. I’ve been attacked with a knife! And now I’m going to die in a place that doesn’t exist. I’m going to get killed by something that has wings. Wings!”
“You won’t. Stop panicking. Look at me. What’s your name?”
“Cara.”
He gave my shoulder an awkward pat. “I’m Drake. Listen to me carefully, Cara. There are important things I have left to do. I’m not ready to die yet, and I’m certainly not planning on dying here tonight, so I’m going to make sure we both get out of here.”
I stared at him. “Why are you really helping me?”
“Neither of us should be at this festival tonight. Neither of us had a choice. And if the queens’ bodyguards are killing each other, then this is the beginning of a war. Maybe the Irish fae are trying to claw back their glory days, but they’re definitely up to something. Your death would make life more complicated for everyone who isn’t royalty.”
“But how?”
“Human blood spilled unwillingly at a festival like this would invoke ancient laws. If one queen defeats the other, there will be one court, and that would mean bloodshed and a dictatorship. There are so many reasons why this shouldn’t happen.”
We sat in silence for a couple of seconds, listening to the fighting on the other side of the wall.
“You said ‘their kind’ before,” I said. “Not our kind. Their kind.”
“We’re not all the same,” he said fiercely, looking older than I had first gauged him to be.
“You’re not a boy, are you?”
He looked at me quizzically.
“Never mind. Can I touch your wings?” If I was going to die, I might as well go out knowing what a faery’s wings felt like.
He sighed. “Go on then.”
I reached out and hesitantly placed the tips of my fingers on one of his pulsing wings. It wasn’t feathery, but it was super soft, like a butterfly wing. I ran my hand down it, curious about the vein-like shimmers under the translucent surface. Something sparked under my fingertips. The wings moved slowly, and Drake moaned a little, his eyes half-closed. I froze, unsure of myself.
He pulled away from me abruptly. “Stop it.”
I leaned back, excited and nervous in equal measure.
He sat on the bed, leaving some distance between us. I had spooked him, and I wasn’t sure why.
“This room is actually a hovel,” he said in a low voice. “Glamours and illusions, all of it.”
“Are you really helping me? Or is that another illusion?”
He didn’t respond.
I swallowed hard. “I’m going to die here, aren’t I?”
He looked at me with pity. “Your chances are not good.”
“If I agreed, would it stop a war?”
“No! You don’t agree. What’s wrong with you?”
“Lots of things.” I inched closer to him. “And this might sound fucked up, but if I’m going to die in the next five minutes, then I’d really like to know something first.”
Apparently startled by my sudden advance, he didn’t move when I kissed him. I closed my eyes and fell into the faery kiss, something even the smallest child knew was foolish and forbidden. Their touch was addictive, but death by kiss sounded better than death by unwilling sacrifice.
After a moment, he returned the kiss eagerly, and my grip on reality loosened. I welcomed the release. Maybe he expected to die, too, and figured we might as well make a memory that wasn’t full of death and darkness first.
Every nerve in my body came to life as we kissed. I had never felt so alive as when I faced the possibility of death, but the sensation was different, more
powerful and real than anything else.

He pulled back slightly, still nose to nose with me.

I smiled. “You look stoned.”

“It’s the queen,” he said, his eyes dazed. “This is the effect she has on people. But you shouldn’t have done that. We’re toxic to you. Dangerous. For a human, you take a lot of chances.”

“We’re not all the same.”

“No,” he said. “You’re not.”

An awful wailing wrenched us apart. The sound seared through my eardrums and pierced my brain, making my blood run cold. Banshee. It had to be.

“Now’s our chance,” he said, “while they’re distracted.”

He led me back into the great hall. Some beings were fighting, while others were running away, screaming. Gore stained the walls and floor, and even the thrones were blood-splattered. We had left the safety of the bedroom to run right through a massacre.

Drake gripped my hand and led me across the room. I thanked every deity I had ever heard of in my relief.

I heard a shout and turned to see a faery running after us. His black wings were dotted with scarlet blood. We broke into a sprint, but he was on our heels when we reached the exit.

Drake half-pushed, half-threw me toward the flight of steps. “Run! I’m behind you!”

I stumbled up the stairs, finally stepping out onto the earth and gulping in cold, brisk air. All haziness vanished, and reality hit me right in the chest.

I turned to help Drake, but another piercing shriek filled the air, sending me to my knees in pain. When my eyes stopped watering, the hole had vanished. The earth beneath my feet was covered in vibrant green grass, and the strange old trees had disappeared. Regular night sounds filled the air; everything was back to normal. I had escaped, but Drake was still trapped inside.

I clawed at the soil, but I remembered the old stories. I would never make it back into the land of the fae twice. I knew the rules. I had spent my one night with the fae. And the faery who had saved my life, the one I could still taste on my lips, was lost to me forever.
Chapter Four

I sat on the frosty ground for close to an hour, huddled up until the chill of the earth seeped so deep into my bones that I couldn’t ignore it anymore. A void had been dug inside me that was far worse than the nothing I usually felt. It was less than nothing yet so much more. My heart had torn in two, and being away from the fae felt like dying. I had felt strong, true emotions: fear, anger, desperation, and even lust. I was terrified I would never feel anything so powerful again.

Because even though there was nothing left, I still knew what was possible, and I yearned to feel again, just for one more second. Only the chill remained, and that had more to do with the careless disregard for life I had witnessed rather than the cold of an Irish winter. And the reminder of the careless disregard I had always had for my life scared me all the more.

Dawn threatened to break, and everything around me seemed perfectly normal except dulled, as if all the colour had been drained out of the world. Life was muted after the fae.

Voices and laughter echoed from somewhere nearby. I got to my feet and limped away, my shoes still with the fae. I folded my arms across my chest and hurried out of the park to begin the walk home. I had no money, no bag, no phone, and no other choices.

I glanced over my shoulder often, feeling that creeping sensation of someone watching my back. A garda car slowed as it passed, but it didn’t stop. The trip home passed quickly because I was so absorbed in my memories of the night before. My experience had shaken me, but I began to explain it away, thinking of times in the club when my drink could have been spiked, something plausible that could have caused me to see so many impossible things.

How could I have survived a night with the fae when they all seemed so hell-bent on destroying each other? Except for Drake. A tear rolled down my cheek, surprising me. I hadn’t cried since my brother’s death, hadn’t shed a tear for myself no matter what happened, yet the floodgates were leaking, threatening to unleash a torrent.

I snuck into my house without waking my parents. They slept in on Sundays, but I’d have to face them later. I was close to my twenty-first birthday and paid my own way, but that didn’t mean my father had let his control over me slip. But at that moment, I was too weary to deal with anything but getting into bed. I grieved for Drake, a stranger, and felt sure I had lost my mind.

I hid under the duvet until my body stopped shaking. I tossed and turned, too wound up to sleep. Memories became reruns, playing over and over in my mind until I wanted to scream. I had been so determined to escape, but all I could think about was getting back in. I wanted the apples and liquid gold, the four-poster bed and the faery kiss, even if none of it had been real. An ache in the pit of my stomach drew me back to that spot in the park, an ache that made me think I would never rest easy if I didn’t see the fae again.

It was the food. I shouldn’t have tasted their food. I would never forget. I would pine away with longing. The kiss had been worse. The kiss would kill me.

No.

I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut. I wouldn’t let those thoughts take me. I would sleep. I would forget. I would move on. They couldn’t hurt me. I had gotten away. They wouldn’t come back for me.

I wished I could ask my grandparents’ advice, but I hadn’t seen them since Darragh’s funeral. They’d fought loudly and angrily with my father. My mother stood
by her husband’s side, even after he struck her father. My grandparents hadn’t come back for me; they were as lost to me as my brother was.

I fell asleep with tears in my eyes, too tired to dream. At one point, my mother’s nagging voice woke me, but I pulled the covers over my head until she went away. I slept until late afternoon, but even then, exhaustion overwhelmed me.

I showered for too long, hoping the hot water would wash away the invisible stains. My legs shook as the memories flooded back. No haze protected me. My mind was clear and ready to deal with the reality of what I had seen: death, blood, mayhem.

I wanted to throw up when I remembered how out of it I had been, how I hadn’t even reacted to the casual violence. I relived how it felt to touch Drake’s wings, to lose myself in his kiss, how adrenaline had coursed through my body when I escaped, only for Drake to remain trapped underground. He had been determined to survive, but he was as good as dead if that black-winged faery had reached him.

Shivering anew despite the humid heat of the room, I stepped out of the shower, dried off, and got dressed, readying myself to face the music downstairs.

In the kitchen, Mam’s petite body was turned away from me as she scrubbed the counter. She cleaned all day, every day, whether the surfaces of the house were dirty or not. I mooched in the press and found some chocolate to nibble on.

Mam turned to glare at me. “If you’re going to stay out all night long, doing God knows what, then the least you can do is eat a decent breakfast.”

I grinned and met her gaze, but started with fright at the sight of her. Her dark brown eyes were tinted with a colour I had never seen. The shade was off the spectrum; I couldn’t name it. Something glinted, and I grabbed her arm, ignoring her bewilderment. I peered at her glistening skin. I held my arm next to hers, but the shimmers from the night before were gone. Her skin was almost transparent. Blinking fast, I backed away from her, unsure of myself. Was I seeing things? Was I still intoxicated from the fae food? Was she even my mother?

Her nose wrinkled the way it always did, and I sighed with relief.

“Are you still drunk?” she asked, sounding bemused.

I shook my head. “I’m just… I thought I saw something. Never mind.”

She shook her head. “You’re a walking anti-alcohol advertisement, Cara. Avoid drink, or you’ll end up like this poor soul.”

“Hilarious,” I said, moving past her to scrounge in the fridge.

“If you’re not going to eat breakfast, at least have some fruit. I filled the bowl yesterday, so no complaining about brown bits.”

I glanced at the fruit bowl on the table, caught sight of an apple, and dry-retched over the sink. Mam tutted behind me, but she rubbed my back.

I sucked in a breath. “I’m fine. I… my stomach just turned.”

“Hmm, so what happened last night then? Too drunk to remember where you live?”

I didn’t respond, gripping the edge of the counter with white-knuckled fingers as I tried to breathe past the nauseated feeling.

“It must have been a good night. Zoe’s been ringing all morning. She’s starting to sound a little desperate.”

I groaned. I had completely forgotten about Zoe. I didn’t have a clue how to explain why I had been on the missing list all night. I ran upstairs to find my mobile before remembering I no longer had my bag. I had a strange sense that I had lost something very important.

I spent the next hour slouched in front of the television, hoping Sunday morning reruns of reality shows would distract me from forming actual thoughts of my own. Dad grumbled when he saw me, but I was pretty good at drowning him out in my
head. He and Mam sat close together on the sofa. Her skin was still shining. Maybe I was suffering from some kind of ongoing hallucination, but a growing part of me didn’t want that to be true either.

Dad caught me staring at Mam and frowned. “I hope you don’t think you’re going to make this a habit, Cara. Drinking all night and sleeping all day isn’t going to help you pass any exams. I’m not paying your way through college when you decide to flake on your course and try another that actually has the potential to get you a job. If you fail your exams, you’re out of here.”

I didn’t bother answering. Experience told me that wasn’t the way to go.

The house phone rang, so I ran for it. I would take any excuse to get away from Dad without looking as though I had backed down. He might have enjoyed making life as uncomfortable as possible for me, but I refused to let him make me feel as though I didn’t belong in my own home.

As soon as I answered, Zoe’s irate voice shouted in my ear. I held the phone away from me in exasperation.

“Will you ever shut up?” I said at last.

Her voice toned down to a more coherent level. “Cara Kelly, where the fuck did you go last night? We looked everywhere for you.”

Zoe’s search parties generally consisted of her looking from left to right and then saying, “Ah, forget them.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I lost my bag, so… no phone.”

“Yeah, I know, you idiot. I have it. It was on the ground outside the chipper. I thought you had been abducted by aliens or something.”

“Oh. Thanks for finding it. No alien abduction, I’m afraid.”

A pause. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Who was he?”

My breath hitched in my throat. “What?”

“The bloke, you eejit. Who did you go off with? Poor Eoin was devastated. He really thought he was in there last night.”

I made a face. “He wasn’t in there, Zoe. He’s never going to be in there. I had a bad day and made a mistake with him. Never going to happen again, okay? So stop getting his hopes up.”

“It would work out so well, though. My best friend with my boyfriend’s best friend. Double wedding.”

I made a gagging sound. “Seriously. I might be sick.”

She giggled. “He’s not that bad. So are you going to tell me who it was or not?”

I hesitated. Maybe a partial truth would get her off my back. “Um, nobody you know.”

“I know everybody. Tell me. Oh, no. Cara, he doesn’t have a girlfriend, does he?”

“No, but—”

“A boyfriend?”

“Will you let me speak? He was just visiting for the night. I bumped into him and lost track of time. That’s it. No big deal.”

“Doesn’t sound all that anyway. But listen, you’ll never guess what happened after you vanished. You remember your one from…”

I leaned back against the wall and let Zoe’s voice drift over me. She wouldn’t notice if I didn’t reply. She was too engrossed in her own retelling of the latest gossip.

I used to enjoy the morning-after gossip, but after the fae, it seemed so empty. What I really wanted to do was tell Zoe about my night, about that other world, but she
would never believe me. I wouldn’t have believed her if she’d told me that story. I might have wanted to, wanted a world I’d always dreamed of to be out there, ready to explore, but real life dictated it to be only a myth. So I would have laughed and judged and felt a little better about knowing that life was meant to be what it was meant to be. No anomalies.

Once Zoe had gossiped herself out, I ran upstairs and pulled a box out from under my bed. Inside were things my grandfather had given to me, things I didn’t want to look at but couldn’t work up the courage to throw away. The books he had given me were there, stories about the fae. They weren’t the watered-down, sugar-coated versions either. Those books held the real stories, the exciting ones, the ones that gave me nightmares.

I flipped through the pages, looking for something familiar. There was plenty, but there were also things I didn’t understand. I found stories about Irish fae royalty and the fae united under one court, one king. Other stories were about different kinds of fae, but the pictures weren’t recognisable.

The books made my room smell like my grandfather’s pipe, which in turn made me sad enough to put the stuff away. I hadn’t even seen a pipe since childhood.

I went online and tried to delve through the millions of hits to find something worth reading on the fae, but most of the stories sounded tame and made up. Plenty of roleplayers pretending to be fae, but few said anything familiar to my experience. I didn’t know how to sort through the truth and the drama. I could have had a field day in the college library, but the idea of getting caught seeking information on faeries filled me with unease.

I read up on the Seelie and Unseelie courts, trying to remember everything Drake had told me about the two queens. What I read didn’t exactly fill me with joy, but again, how could I tell if any of it was the truth?

One thing stood out: the stories from those who had escaped and the after-effects they suffered. A sort of faery madness could occur if one spent time with a large number of fae, particularly during a festival, and even more so if someone ate of their food. If a person kissed or slept with a fae, he or she would be lost forever.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I had made almost all of the mistakes. Maybe that would explain the strange things I was still seeing, even away from the fae. It explained why I wanted to return, why I longed to be there again, why I was consumed with a need to go back, and why I pined for a creature I barely knew.

Eventually, the addiction would wear off, and everything I was feeling would go away. But then I would be left with nothing but emptiness, and I wasn’t sure if that was really any better.

No matter what I learned, no matter what I decided, one question still bothered me above all else. Why me? Why had I been drawn to the festival? Why had I been chosen as a sacrifice?

And why did I survive?
Chapter Five

I hopped from one foot to the other, my hands shoved inside my sleeves in a vain attempt to warm them. “Come on, Zoe.”

She strolled after me, expertly applying eyeliner with one hand, her compact in the other. “I’m moving.”

“Why couldn’t you have done that before you left the house?”

“I did. Now I’m doing it again.” She paused to stick her tongue out at me.

“Very mature.”

“‘Tis why we’re such a good match. They’ll wait for us. Relax.”

“I don’t care about them waiting,” I said, running back to her and dragging her alongside me. “I care about getting in from the cold. It’s going to snow. I just know it.”

“It’s not that cold. You know what we should do for the summer? Become holiday reps somewhere scorching. Drink all day, get a nice tan. It’s like getting paid to go on holiday.”

“I don’t think that’s exactly how it works. Besides, I’m going to ask for full-time work at the supermarket.”

She stopped walking to stare at me. “Not again! You hate working there. Why don’t you look for something less soul-destroying?”

“There are no jobs out there right now. I’m lucky to have this one,” I shrugged. “I need the money for college. And to get out of the house.”

“That is definitely still the plan, right? No freaking out and giving up?”

She knew me too well; hence the concern. School had always been tough, and I was struggling with college. But if I gave up, my dad would have the biggest I-told-you-so smirk on his face. I had to push through it to have a reason to be proud of myself.

“No running. I’m a good girl now, don’t you know?”

“I kind of like that colour on you.” She put away the mirror and eyeliner and linked arms with me. As we walked, she bumped her hip against mine. “So please don’t self-sabotage.”

“Moi? Never.” I grinned. “So are we on again or off again?”

Her lips curled upward. “Very much on again. I was going to wait until we met up with the girls, but fuck it. You should be the first to know.”

“I kind of like that colour on you.” She put away the mirror and eyeliner and linked arms with me. As we walked, she bumped her hip against mine. “So please don’t self-sabotage.”

“Moi? Never.” I grinned. “So are we on again or off again?”

She made a weird sound. “Hold up a second. Nobody’s talking marriage. Just, like, a commitment to be engaged for a very long time.”

“Right.” I disengaged from her grip and thought about it. “So what you’re saying is, you bitched at him, and he proposed an engagement to shut you up. With no ring or any intention to get married?”

“Well, when you say it like that…”

I sighed with relief. “Thank feck for that. Plenty of time to talk you out of it.”

“That’s just mean.”
“Nobody appreciates honesty around here. Seriously, Zoe, he’s a loser. I can’t wait for you to grow out of him.”

She snorted. “You’re such a judgemental bitch sometimes, Cara.”

Grinning, I followed her to the coffee shop where we had arranged to meet our friends. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so hard on her. After all, the only male I had been interested in lately had wings. At least she was in love with a human.

“Cara!”

I flinched and met Zoe’s curious gaze. “Huh?”

“I said, do you want me to get the usual?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s fine.”

Erika and Fiona were already holding a table for us when we arrived. I sat with them while Zoe ordered. When Zoe returned with our coffees, I braved a sip, but the burn I expected didn’t happen. The drink tasted bland and weak in comparison to a certain fae concoction. I sighed and stared out the window.

Zoe nudged me. “See? Told you she was loopy today.”

“What?” I turned to see all of my friends grinning at me.

“So what are we obsessing over today?” Fiona asked. At first glance, she appeared plain, but she had amazing brown eyes and the most endearing smile I had ever seen. Guys fell all over themselves to spend time with her.

“I don’t obsess,” I said. *Much.*

“It’s a boy,” Zoe said, sounding oddly proud.

Fiona and Erika exchanged a surprised look. So maybe Zoe wasn’t the only one who knew me well.

“Who?” Erika asked. While the rest of us had known each other since playschool age, Erika had immigrated to Ireland four years ago. She had beautiful Nordic features that terrified the local boys. Despite owning a dry wit I would have killed for, she garnered the least attention, which only made me despise the males we knew.

“Nobody we know apparently,” Zoe said. She was the curvy brunette that boys flocked around, while I was her skinny sidekick. We both openly envied each other’s bodies while secretly preferring our own.

“Interesting.” Fiona leaned her elbows on the table. “Tell me more.”

“It was nothing,” I chewed on my thumbnail, more than ready for them to get magpie-ish about somebody else’s love life. Or lack thereof.

“She disappeared with him on Saturday night. *That’s* where she ran off to,” Zoe stage-whispered. “Her mam told me she didn’t come home until eight the next morning.”

“How would she know?” I said. “She was asleep.”

“Is he a scumbag or something? Or a complete wretch?” Fiona asked. “I mean, are you embarrassed about it?”

“No!” I shook my head at the delighted looks on their faces. I was digging myself deeper into a hole. “I got into a bit of trouble, and he helped me get out of it. That was all. Nothing remotely sexual happened, so get your minds out of the gutter.”


“Give it a rest. I have to go.”

“I thought your shift doesn’t start for another couple of hours,” Zoe protested. I stood. “Yeah, but I want to get some shopping done. Christmas in two days, remember?”

“Oh, well, get me something nice.”

I patted her shoulder. “I’ll get you a nice top to replace the one that got ripped on Saturday night.”
She slammed her hands on the table. “You what!”
“Told you I got into trouble. Gotta run!” I waved and jogged out of the café.

On the sidewalk, I thought I saw something silvery-white out of the corner of my eye, but when I looked, no one was there.

I shivered and headed into the local second-hand bookshop. I had already bought all of the presents I planned on buying. I wanted more literature. The need to know more drove me, but I could control it. I wasn’t obsessed. I was just... lost.

The bookshop was empty, as usual. The young woman at the counter ignored me and painted her nails as I perused the shelves. Every genre was jumbled together, so it took me an hour, but I found two books. One was an ancient-looking book of lore. The cover was falling off, and it stank of mold, but it might come in handy. The second was a novel. Fiction wasn’t what I intended to buy, but something about the cover looked familiar. I had to buy it.

***

“Heading out?” Mam asked as she dried a plate.
Nodding, I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. “Legs are restless again.”
“Nothing’s worrying you?”
I smiled. “Nope. I just need some exercise before the mountain of food you call Christmas dinner.”

She grinned back. “Well, be careful out there. It’s dark, and there could be ice patches, and—”

“I’m a big girl, Mother.”
She shivered. “Don’t call me mother. It’s creepy.”
“Then don’t act like I’m still six years old,” I teased.

She cupped my cheek. “You’ll always be six years old. Take your phone, hold your keys in your hand, and don’t run anywhere that doesn’t have streetlights. Humour me.”

I gave her a quick hug. “Stop worrying so much. I’ll see you later.” I left before she could think of a reason for me not to go.

I put in my earbuds, set my playlist to an obnoxious volume, and headed out on my usual route. My mind cleared as I outran my problems. Nothing existed but the tempo of the music, the strain of my legs, the wind whipping against my ears, and the steady building of my pulse.

Without thinking, I turned off the roads I usually took and headed to the park. I ran through a different gate, but I found the way with ease, as if my body knew the route well. I stepped off the path and jogged through the trees with anticipation.

Maybe. Maybe.

I pulled out my earbuds and slowed as I came upon a petite woman walking a dog, not wanting to spook either of them. The dog turned its head suddenly to look in my direction, and all of its hair stood on end as if it had gotten shocked. It began barking ferociously—no, in terror.

I sped up, giving the dog a wide berth, but when I passed, it was still barking in the direction I had come from. The woman’s face flushed as she tried to control the animal, but the dog kept barking even as I ran farther into the trees.

Finally, I came upon the place where I thought the fae had been. The ground looked normal, and there were no lights, no music, and no sensation that something magical might be happening. It was truly over.
I swore under my breath and took off again, running as fast as I could and ignoring how dangerous my speed was on such unfamiliar, uneven ground. I didn’t care. I needed to outrun my addiction, to leave the fae behind for good.

I raced toward the monument, my breathing growing irregular and harsh, and my stomach clenched with pain. I heard mocking shouts coming from a group of men sitting at the foot of the monument. They all held cans that probably contained beer. I should have kept running, but I didn’t. I slowed and stared at each of them until they shut up and looked away. Only then did I feel better. Only then did I head home. But I felt hidden eyes on me every step of the way.

***

On Christmas morning, I got up early and headed downstairs, where my parents were locked in an embrace. Dad saw me, and instead of letting go of Mam like he usually did, he held her tighter, and glared at me.

“Ouch,” she said, pulling away from him. “Are you—” She followed his gaze to find me. Her face fell for an instant before she covered her reaction with a smile.

“Morning, sweetheart. Happy Christmas.” She came over and hugged me. My father gave me one last scowl before storming into the living room.

Mam released me and brushed my hair behind my ear. She had tears in her eyes.

“So close to twenty-one. I can’t believe you’re so grown up. Want to help with breakfast?”

I nodded. Anything to avoid Dad when he was in one of his moods.

In the kitchen, she handed me a small box. “Got you a little something,” she whispered.

I wanted to ask her why it had to be a secret to do anything nice for her only daughter, but it was Christmas, and she was already weepy. I knew why, though. My brother, Darragh, had taken his life one Christmas. It had been over a decade, but his memory permeated the holidays every year. Christmas was no longer a celebration, but more a punishment, forcing us to sit at home and relive every awful memory together.

I made to open the box, but she clasped my hand. “Make sure you don’t show your father.”

I nodded and opened the box. A silver locket with a butterfly engraved on the front lay on the small cushion. “It’s beautiful.”


I clicked the tiny clasp. The picture was of my brother and me. He had been my champion, the one who protected me from Dad’s anger. I loved him, and he had left me. “It’s…” The words caught in my throat.

“He always called you Butterfly,” she said, wringing her hands.

I stared at her. Did she really think I had forgotten? I had another box hidden under my bed, full of butterflies my brother had made or bought for me for Christmases and birthdays.

“When you were in the crib, he swore you had wings. He said you were an angel, but your father… well, you know how he is, so Darragh called you butterfly instead. He adored you, no matter what. I thought you’d like it.” She hesitated then, frowning.

I turned away to wipe a tear that threatened to fall. “I love it.” I put on the locket and tucked it under my shirt.

Mam nodded and patted my arm. “Good girl.”
She went to work, her skin glistening in the sunlight from the window. She wasn’t the only one who looked different. At work, I had spotted two others with shimmering veins. I had no idea what that meant.

We made everything Dad liked and expected for Christmas breakfast, but at the table, his mood didn’t lift. After we ate, the three of us sat in the living room, the television blaring. I spent the day reading the faery novel and ignoring my father’s attempt to drink himself to death. The book held my attention though. I had never heard of the author, but a lot of the details inside were bang on. The author, V.G. Love, had so much right that I grew convinced he knew something. He wrote about automatically refilling drinks, golden grapes, and black apples. I looked up the bio in the back of the book, but there was only an email address and a website. I figured it would be worth taking a look later.

Mam moved into the kitchen, leaving me alone with Dad. He glared at me over his whiskey glass, but I kept my eyes on the book.

We ate Christmas dinner in silence. Every morsel of food felt dry and tasteless in my mouth. The light hit my mother, reflecting off the shimmers under her skin. I forgot to eat and just stared, relishing the memory of Drake’s skin, his wings, and how they felt under my fingers.

Dad slammed his hands on the table. Mam and I both jumped, and I forgot to ignore him.

“Stop looking at her like that,” he said to me.

I turned back at my food. Mam spoke in a loud voice about what they were going to do together after dinner. I took the hint. I cleared my plate when my mother did and waited until Dad left the room to escape upstairs.

He was waiting for me, pacing in the hallway. I hesitated, put my head down, and started to move past him, but he blocked my way, cuffing my shoulder as he stretched out his arm.

He pushed me against the wall and gripped my throat, glaring at me as if I were made of everything on earth he despised. He was drunker than I thought. He hadn’t always been so bad. Darragh had been the buffer we both missed.

“It should have been you,” he hissed. “Not him. Never him. You shouldn’t even have been born.”

I avoided his eyes, staring over his shoulder at a spot on the wall. I thought I saw tiny fluttering wings.

He shook me, tightening his grip. “Did you hear me? Did you hear what I said? You little—”

“Hon! Our film’s on.” My mother sidled up to my father and wrapped her arm around his waist. “Let’s grab some snacks before we sit down.”

His fingers loosened, and he shook his head as if confused. He let her lead him away, as meek as a lamb. Behind his back, she signalled for me to leave, and I did, feeling guilty for ruining her evening yet again. That was our family cycle: hate, confusion, pretence, guilt.

I didn’t get why my father hated everything about me, and I didn’t understand why my mother let him bully me. I definitely didn’t know why my brother had taken his life that Christmas.

I trudged upstairs and traced a fingertip across the faery ornaments that took up an entire shelf. They crowded together, many of them with insipid smiles and childish friendly demeanours. Real fae were nothing like them, even in the books, but I had collected them anyway. Underneath that shelf were books on tattoo designs and sketchbooks full of my own ideas. I was no good at drawing, but I liked to plan. The
rest of the shelves were full of my obsessions, right down to the nail art supplies on the bottom one. I didn’t dare look at the boxes under the bed again.

I touched the locket as I sat down to check out V.G. Love’s website. The banner had a scarily realistic bunch of faeries heading the page. Some were warriors, just like the bodyguards, just like the black-winged faery. I shuddered at the memory of his smile.

Checking out the site led me to more of Love’s faery novels. I chewed on my thumb as I composed a message in my head. I needed to make contact. Just in case.

*I’ve read and enjoyed one of your books. I wondered where you got your ideas from – things like refilling cups and golden grapes. Ever seen fruit that bubbles like acid?*

*Cara*

I deleted and rewrote the message numerous times before I pressed Send. I doubted I’d hear back, but maybe I had found someone who knew the truth. Maybe that someone could help me make the longing to go back leave for good.
Chapter Six

On New Year’s Eve, I awoke with a start. It was pitch black outside, apart from fireworks in the distance. Alone and bored, I had fallen asleep long before midnight. A voice called my name. I climbed out of bed and looked out the window. Two people were at my front door. Bleary-eyed, I assumed my parents had forgotten their keys.

I ran downstairs and opened the door. “How did you—”

I stopped and stared. A beautiful young woman with black hair stood on my stoop. I didn’t recognise her, but next to her was a pale shimmering creature I thought I would never see again.

“Drake?”

He touched my arm, and a shudder ran through me.

“What are you… how…?”

He stared at me with cool green eyes. Wrong. All wrong.

I narrowed my gaze, brushing away his hand. “I don’t know who you are, but leave me the hell alone.”

I slammed the door and leaned against it, waiting for something to happen, the house to burst into flames or something. The pair exchanged murmurs, then they went away. I ran up to my room to look out the window, but they were both gone. Whoever they had been, I couldn’t help feeling they would be back.

I sat on my bed and chewed my nails. He had looked exactly like Drake… except for those eyes. But why? Drake had warned me about illusions and glamours, but the guy had seemed so real. The wings, the shimmering veins, it had all been Drake. But the eyes were a dead giveaway.

And he had touched me, which renewed the longing I had felt since leaving the fae. That hadn’t been accidental.

When my parents returned, I pretended to be asleep. I could give my mother one decent night without an argument. But more importantly, I needed to think about what I would do if Fake Drake returned.

Seeing the fae pair had unleashed everything I had been trying to outrun. The need and the yearning burst out of their hiding hole and set me aflame all over again. I wanted to go back. I needed to spend a little more time with them. But Drake hadn’t saved my life for nothing. I couldn’t repay him by playing fae games again, no matter how much I desperately wanted that.

***

Zoe and I had plans to eat out on New Year’s Day, but she was late, so I sat in front of the television while I waited for her to show. Mam had gone shopping since Dad had been hungover all afternoon.

I was already getting impatient when Dad came into the living room, took one long look at me, and changed the station to some boring golf game. He didn’t even like golf. I sensed his anger, felt it bristling in the air, so I decided it would be better to avoid the inevitable confrontation.

I rose and strode toward the door. He stretched out his feet as I passed, almost tripping me. I kept walking, but my fists squeezed tightly by my sides. One day, I would reach my limit. One day, he would be sorry for every petty thing he had done to me. And one day, I’d lose my mother because of him. I didn’t want one day to come any time soon. I pulled on my jacket and went outside to wait for Zoe.
Five minutes later, she came rushing down the street, her oversized bag bouncing in her hand. “Sorry, sorry! I’m not that late.”
I had to laugh. “You’ve made me wait for longer.”
“Come on then. I’m half starved.”
We strolled toward the bus stop. My hands kept shaking—partly because of Dad, mostly from the fae visit the previous night. What had they wanted? I kind of regretted not finding out more. Maybe they would never return.
I shook my head. I didn’t want them to return. Or rather, I wanted it, but I definitely didn’t need it. The fae withdrawals had been fading. The visit had brought them back with a bang. Fake Drake touching me had been like taking a drag and triggering a weird addiction.
“You okay there, Cara? You look like you’re having an argument with yourself.”
I looked at Zoe. “Sorry. Dad was just his usual pleasant self before I left.”
“Ah, I see. That’s why you were outside, freezing your arse off. You okay?”
“Of course,” I said as cheerily as possible. “He doesn’t bother me.”
She gave me that look, the one that said she didn’t believe me, but she wasn’t going to force me to talk about it. That was why we were best friends. For all the things she did that annoyed me, she did the right things when it counted most.
“You can stay at my place if you want. Anytime. You know how scared I am of the dark.”
Grinning, I linked arms with her and did my best to actually pay attention to what she wanted to talk about: Darren.
“I know it’s kind of cheap and tacky, but that’s why I love it,” she lied, holding up the ring he had managed to dredge up from somewhere.
I shook my head. “I still don’t get why you even want it.”
“That’s what we’re supposed to do. You go out for a few years, get engaged, buy a house, do all of the wedding and baby stuff, and then…” She sighed.
“What then?”
She looked away. “And then I live unhappily ever after and moan at my own children until they do the very same things that make me miserable.”
“I’m pretty sure being exactly like our parents isn’t a strict requirement.”
She raised her face to the sky and smiled. “This year will be our year, Cara. I feel it in my bones. It’s getting closer, you know.”
“What is?”
Her face was stricken when she looked at me. “Adulthood. We’ll have to grow up. Time’s running out to have fun and be free.”
“You’re warped. I hope you know that.”
She pouted. “Stop judging my life. You know I hate that.”
“What do you really want to do? I mean, seriously.”
“Keep a good, clean house that a man wants to run home to,” she said in a tight voice. Her dad had run away, but that never stopped her mother from spouting that line. He made up for the desertion by throwing money at Zoe when all she ever wanted was his time.
“Zoe,” I said softly.
“I want to run away,” she said. “Just like him. But he got there first, so I’m stuck with her forever. Getting married is the only thing that’s good enough to let me go. I’m going to live in that house, terrified of spilling crumbs, until I’m too old to do anything else with my life.”
“We could go. Leave together. Be roommates or something.”
“Then who will put her to bed at night?” She smiled wryly. “I’m just bitching because it’s another new year with feck-all to look forward to. Except Darren, and she actually brought up the idea of him moving in.”

I laughed at the thought of Darren’s scruffy runners on her mother’s spotless rug. Zoe caught my eye, and we both giggled until we had tears rolling from our eyes.

We had a long therapeutic chat over dinner, and afterward, Zoe persuaded me to wait with her outside for a lift home from Darren.

“He’s worse than you for not showing up,” I complained after forty-five minutes had passed.

“He has to pick up Eoin first.”

I groaned.

“I told him not to,” she insisted. “I’ll sit in the back with you, so he keeps his hands off.”

I let out a snort. “He’ll lose his hands if he puts them where they aren’t wanted.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but her gaze drifted over my shoulder. Her eyes widened.

I turned to look and jumped. “Jesus!”

Fake Drake stood right there, too close. I hadn’t heard or sensed him. He looked different. His hair was shorter, though it covered his ears, and more blond than silver. His face was less angular and even more human looking. His green eyes were unreadable.

We stared at each other in silence until Zoe cleared her throat.

“Introductions, Cara?”

Fake Drake didn’t break eye contact.

Unsettled, I found I couldn’t look away either. “This is Drake.”

“We need to talk,” he said. Even the timbre of his voice was different. He wasn’t Drake, and yet, as I stood there, I imagined he could be a human version of Drake, one I could maybe get to know in the light where nothing was trying to kill us.

“Sounds ominous,” Zoe said. She touched my arm. “Darren’s here.”

I looked over at the car and saw Darren and Eoin. I turned to Fake Drake again. Zoe cleared her throat, waiting for me to make a choice.

I hesitated, holding my breath, but there was no choice. “Can I call you later?” I asked Zoe.

Disappointment flashed across her face. “You better. Nice to kinda meet you, Drake.”

He was still staring at me when my friends drove off.

“What do you want?” I asked, unbalanced by his silence.

“I’ve been watching you.”

“Well, that’s not creepy at all.”

He frowned for a split second. “I needed to see if you were a sympathiser.”

I waited for him to explain. When he didn’t, I pushed past him. He grabbed my arm and pulled me off the main street and down a deserted side street. I let him, my heart racing in anticipation of finding out something that most people would never know. The secrets called to me, made it worth the risk. Or maybe I was addicted to taking risks. More likely, I was addicted to fae magic. He pushed me against a wall and leaned close, blocking me from passersby.

“Is this a glamour?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “Making yourself look like him?”

“Making myself fit into your world is a glamour. Looking like him wasn’t my choice.”

“Who are you?”
“It’s complicated.”
“I’m not stupid.”
“I’m sure you’re not.” His lips twitched. “But it’s hard to explain. I need your help. I need to know you’ll help me.”
“I don’t even know who you are or what you want. At least try to—”
“The Winter Solstice,” he interrupted. “You were there, with… him.”
“Not by choice. Not really.” Sometimes I wasn’t sure.
“You were a witness. You played a pivotal role in what happened. So did he.”
“I don’t even know what happened,” I said. “Drake got me out of there, and I couldn’t get back in.”

He hesitated, flickers of emotions crossing his face in waves. “The queens are dead. The courts are lost. I can bring them back together, but I’m not the only one making a claim for the throne. To be sure of my chances, I have to be absolved of all blame. I need you to tell them what happened, that I didn’t draw first blood, that I didn’t taint the Solstice, and that the queens brought their own downfall upon themselves.”
“How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t know what happened!”
“The queens’ bodyguards threatened you and fought each other over you. They broke ancient laws by spilling blood on sacred ground, but all you need to do is say how you got there and what happened after that.”
“I don’t care about any of that! What happened to Drake?”

He sagged against the wall, wrapping his arm around me for support. His face paled, and he shook his head. He looked as though he wanted to vomit. He blinked, and when he looked at me, his eyes were violet and familiar.

“I need to… sit down. The magic takes a lot out of me. I don’t have long. Don’t trust him, Cara, no matter what he says.”

There’s a café around the corner. You can rest and have a hot drink, something sugary and—oh, wait. Will you be able for the iron and pollutants and whatever?”

He snorted derisively, and relief flooded through me that he wasn’t going to pass out or anything. I helped him to the café and bought us both a coffee. I was almost as shaky as he was.

“So?” I said when he began to look a little less nauseous.
“Are you all right?” he asked, surprising me.
“Um, yeah. I got out, but…” I shrugged. “You know more than me.”
“They planned it that way.” He took a sip of his drink and grimaced.
“Who did?”
“The king, the banshees, all of them. I don’t think I was part of the plan, but you certainly were.”
“What king?”
“The queens were murdered that night. It was all a big scheme, a trick. The banshees resurrected their king. He’s the one who needs your help.”
“I don’t get it.”

He slapped his chest. “He’s in me. They sent his soul into my body. We’re soul bound. Something went wrong. I was supposed to fade away, but I can’t. We’re both in here, fighting for space, and that’s what he really wants your help with. He thinks you’re keeping me here, that we knew each other already. He thinks that’s why I helped you because he can’t see any other way. He wants you to help him get rid of me.”
“I won’t do it,” I said firmly. “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything that will—”
“You don’t have a choice.”
I stared at him in surprise. He sighed heavily. “The fae need a leader. There’s mayhem right now, and it’ll only get worse. The worst kind of fae are running free, no longer afraid of consequences. Until the king’s power is restored in full, nobody has the power to contain them all. You can help him, and he can help me do what I need to do before I fade. You can never trust him, but you can help prevent someone worse from taking the throne.”

“But I—”

“People will die if you don’t,” he said in a low voice. “We can’t be free, no matter how much we want to make it so. He’s been king before, and he’s of the old blood. He can’t be any worse than the tainted queens. But don’t tell him anything about me. And never trust him. I’m asking for your help, too, just for a while.”

He blinked again, and his eyes turned green.

“I need you,” the king said urgently. “So does Drake. I’m weak with him here, and that makes me a target. They’ll come for me, and if I die, he does, too. You don’t want that, do you?”

“You’re already hurting him. Look at you.”

He was shaking again.

“It’s this body.” He gave me a wry smile. “He’s not even pure faery. He’s tougher than he looks, but they brought the strongest soul back into the weakest body.”

“I still don’t get why you need my help.”

“Every little piece of the puzzle helps. You’re in danger, too, you know. And if something happens to you, this one’s rage might help him weaken me further. If he saved you once, he’ll want to save you again. Even I know this much.”

“How am I in danger this time?” I asked scornfully. “Unless the danger is you.”

“You can keep my hands clean. That might be the only thing stopping me from taking the throne again. My enemies are numerous. Some come from blood, others from ambition. Many want this throne. Many helped end the reign of the tainted sisters. Most would do the same to me in a heartbeat. You’re an easy target. You’re human, weaker than I am, with no magic or allies. No protection.”

“You’re an arse.”

He grinned, looking less like Drake. “I’ve been called worse in my lifetime.”

“So… what? You were dead and brought back to life?”

He shook his head. “I was sent somewhere much worse. Death means peace. This wasn’t peace. This was… limbo. I watched and waited and learned. My second reign will be far greater than my first. Watch out, Cara. The fae are restless, and if you don’t help me, they may be permitted to do worse by the next successor to the throne.”

“How can you stop them?”

His expression turned cruel. “I have my ways.” He leaned forward to touch my hand across the table. “Will you help contain them?”

I sat back in my chair, pulling my hands out of his reach.

“Maybe if you understand more. My name is Brendan. When my family ruled, we had peace.” He cocked his head to the side. “As much peace as the fae can manage. But I was betrayed and cursed and trapped for centuries upon centuries. My faithful ban sidhe kept my memory alive while they worked to restore me.”

“They sound loyal.”

“They are. The right night came. The Winter Solstice was held at the disgraced Irish court on the most sacred of grounds, on the most sacred of nights, the end of an age. A boon granted to the Irish fae, but it was intended as a mockery. Reliving the glory days. My banshees cast out their magic and used you to test the queens until they
broke the peace treaty. When enough blood was shed, the ritual could begin. They lined up all of the males and performed the ritual.”

He laughed. “The only unwilling subject was too stubborn to leave me alone in his body. You were on his mind, and that was likely his connection. His anchor, if you will. I haven’t figured out all of the details.”

“Could you fade away?”

He looked surprised by the question, as if he had never considered it. “He’s a stubborn little solitary thing, but I’m a king, Cara. Royal blood is the strongest blood. This one has morals, a sense of pride and fairness. I would accept his fealty if he could give it, but his destiny isn’t to live on instead of me. His destiny is to sacrifice himself in service to his king, whether he likes it or not.”

“Screw destiny. I didn’t ask to be dragged into the middle of any of this. I don’t owe you anything. If I can help Drake, I will, but you? You’re the body thief who screwed up everyone’s lives.”

“Watch,” he said. “See what happens when the fae are without a leader. You’ll beg to help me.”

“You wish.”

He allowed me to walk out of there as if I had won something, but I knew he wouldn’t let me go so easily.
Chapter Seven

“It’s terrible.” Mam’s worried voice broke through my reading and drew my attention. She stood before the television, furniture polish in one hand and cloth in the other, shaking her head.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Watch.” She pointed at the screen. “The world’s going mad. We can’t escape it.”

I focused on the news anchor’s voice. She was talking about some sort of crime wave in the centre of the city. “Just your average cokeheads acting the fool.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But the Dunphys and the Hoolihans around the corner had a bust-up over a hedge yesterday. Windows were smashed, and the police were called. And Mrs. Murphy’s house was burgled last night. The poor woman was locked in her garden shed until this morning. She almost froze.”

“What’s that got to do with this?” I gestured at the TV. The screen flashed to a reporter standing in front of a vandalised school.

She shrugged. “Just seems like the world is going to hell lately.”

A key in the front door made her flinch, and she dashed out of the room like a terrified animal. Sighing, I headed upstairs. I skipped dinner and fell asleep. I dreamt of winged angels that turned into devils and set the country on fire. I awoke abruptly and lay in the dark, trying to figure out what had happened.

I heard voices. Someone was in my room. Frozen in my bed, I stared until my eyes adjusted to the darkness, but then a blast of light blinded me for another few seconds.

A lightning bolt flew around my room, shifting from red to orange to gold. When the light dimmed, a small, perfectly formed faery appeared. A book fell, and my attention was drawn to her companion. He was small and bald, and when the tiny faery flew over his head, I saw the scarring on his skin and recognised him as the Seelie queen’s living footstool.

I sat up straight. “You were there! At the festival with one of the queens, right?”

He fell to his knees, his head bowed.

“Sorry,” I said softly. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

He looked up at me with a mixture of awe and fear.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said. “You surprised me is all.”

The other faery flew down and landed on the floor in front of him. His back instantly straightened as if he drew strength from her. She puffed out her chest and danced toward me, her light turning bright red. The light emanated from her hair and skin, red and gold all over. Even her eyes were red beads that might have appeared evil if she didn’t wear a mischievous grin.

“I am the sprite, Realtín,” she said. “This is Grim. We have been ordered by the king to stay with you. To protect you.”

I made a face. “Go tell your user of a king to leave me alone. I don’t need any protection.”

“Oh, but you do.” Grim shrank back.

“Do you dislike our king?” Realtín asked.

“He stole my friend’s body. Of course I dislike him.” Maybe it was a stretch to call Drake a friend, but he felt like more than the word friend could cover.

She flew into the air and patted Grim on the head. “See? This job won’t be so bad.”

“I’m not your job,” I said. “You have to go before my parents hear you.”

“Oh, they’re both deaf,” she said airily, flitting about my room and staring at the faeries on my shelf. “So ugly,” she muttered, despite the fact at least a few of them looked a little like her.
“We’ve been ordered to stay with you, but we can remain outside your house if you wish,” Grim said hesitantly. He looked ready to flee. “If it makes you more comfortable, we can cloak ourselves so you do not have to see us. But we must protect you with our lives. We don’t have a choice.”

I glanced at the window. It was pretty cold outside. I couldn’t in good conscience leave them out there just because some bossy faery king had given them a few crappy orders. I wasn’t that heartless. “He’s not even a king,” I muttered.

“Once a king, always a king,” Grim rattled off.

I heaved a sigh. “You can sleep here tonight, but nobody else can see. Not my family, not my friends. Understand?”

Grim nodded solemnly, but I didn’t trust Realtín’s dark smile.

“And tomorrow,” I continued, “you can go back to your king and tell him I said, ‘Hell, no.’”

Realtín giggled, but sweat rolled down Grim’s temples. He was so anxious, like a dog who had been beaten every day since it could walk. I pulled out one of my drawers and made a makeshift bed for the two fae. Grim reached my knee, but he curled up neatly in the drawer and was joined by the tiny sprite. I gave them an extra blanket, but they looked at me like I was crazy.

“Sorry about this,” I said. “I don’t have anything else.”

They exchanged a glance, but I couldn’t tell what they were thinking. I heard them whispering to each other as I fell asleep, and all I could do was hope they weren’t planning on murdering me before morning.

***

I awoke to two red jewels sparkling in front of me. The jewels became eyes a couple of inches away from my face.

“Mother of…” I sat up abruptly, my hand on my thudding chest. “You scared the absolute crap out of me.”

Realtín gave me a lazy grin. “Whoops. We’ve been waiting for you to get up for ages. There’s a man snoring down the hall. I wanted to ask for your permission to suffocate him.”

I stared back at her. “I need coffee for this,” I said. “Wait here,” I added when they both made to follow me out of the room. I ran downstairs, wishing I had been dreaming the night before. Two miniature fae were living in my room. Did things like that happen to other people?

And yet, little tendrils of glee curled around my body with every moment that passed. A secret that nobody else knew, danger that nobody else experienced, it was all for me. Mine.

I made some tea and toast for the faeries, unsure of what they ate. Even the smallest cups were too large for Realtín to hold, so I made do with the lid from a bottle of mouthwash and hoped to God I didn’t poison either of them with human food.

I brought them my offerings. The sprite kept nudging Grim, who nibbled at his toast like a wild animal, glancing around fervently as if someone were about to steal it out of his hands.

I ignored the resulting lump in my throat and sat on my bed with a cup of coffee, ready to get some answers. “So you work for Brendan. Why?”

Realtín choked on her tea in her hurry to answer. “We’re slaves, human. We don’t have a choice.”
My mouth dropped open. “Are you serious? He’s only just been brought back, and he already has slaves?”

She nodded. “A long time ago, the Irish fae were the most powerful. When the king was overthrown, many fae were captured and made slaves to the new courts. Grim and I were unfortunate enough to have been born from the Seelie queen’s slaves, but when she died, the king claimed us as his own servants. We thought we were free, that’s why we—”

Grim nudged her into silence.

“What?” I asked. “What did you do?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Grim said. “It was all for nothing. We’re still slaves.” He gave Realtín a strangely hesitant smile, as if smiling had never been allowed. “At least we’re together now.”

I smothered the aww sound that threatened to pop out of my mouth. “So you’re a couple?”

Grim’s expression changed to one of worry. “Please don’t tell.”

“I won’t,” I said, disliking Brendan more and more every minute. “Realtín’s a sprite, but what are you, Grim?”

“I’m a brownie,” he said quietly.

My cheeks burned. “When I was a kid, I used to leave bowls of milk out for brownies. That’s… that’s what the stories said to do anyway.”

He bowed his head, treating me with a small smile. “You honoured us, my lady.”

“I’m not a lady, Grim. Call me Cara. So you’re faeries, but just different kinds?”

“Yes. We’re all fae, but some of us have more power than others, such as the royal fae. My kind are generally solitary fae who live in your world. I was just unlucky.”

“So solitary fae are the ones who are free? They don’t have a king or whatever?”

“Sort of.” Grim hesitated. “Your Drake hadn’t sworn fealty to either throne, which made him solitary, but he wasn’t free. None of us are truly free. We’re all tied by ancient laws and traditions and the whims of those with more power. The solitary do have more freedom than the rest of us, but they also have less power. That’s the trade-off.”

“You know Drake?” I asked.

Grim gave me a shy smile. “He’s shown himself to us several times. He’s headstrong enough to appear whenever the king tries to punish someone.”

I smiled back, strangely proud of the faery I barely knew.

“I like him,” Realtín said. “He’s angry. It’s lovely and chaotic.”

Grim sighed. “A peaceful life is so much more satisfying.”

“What would you be doing if you weren’t slaves?”

Grim frowned at Realtín. “I would live in a quiet home with a nice family, helping them in the shadows. I would teach Realtín how to be good.”

“I would teach Grim that being bad can be fun.” She pulled his nose then kissed his forehead before flying dizzyingly fast around the room.

“Sometimes she forgets that isn’t her job anymore,” Grim explained as the sprite filled the room with colour and light.

“She was one of the lights over the queen,” I said. “You were her footrest, and Realtín had to provide light.”

He shrugged. “I was there to be kicked whenever the queen felt an urgent need. Realtín was there to make the queen glimmer like the sunset. She was a vain, cruel woman. I’m glad her reign is over.” His fists tightened, his knuckles turning white.

I remembered that the fae had different rules and ideas about life and death. “What are you supposed to do with me, Grim? Will he leave me alone?”
“We’re supposed to keep an eye on you,” he said, “make sure nobody hurts you, and watch out for enemies.” He cleared his throat. “And we’re to tell you how wonderful the king is.”

I spat out some coffee. Realtín fell from the air, giggling hysterically.

“Wonderful, my arse.” I checked the time. “I have to go to work. I take it you’re both going to follow me?”

“Sorry, but yes,” Grim said.

“You can’t let anyone see you,” I warned.

He shrugged. “They couldn’t even if we wanted them to.”

“Then why can I?”

“Your eyes must have been opened,” he said. “That’s beyond our magic. But you have taken all of this quite well, as if you aren’t surprised at all.”

“Oh, I’m surprised. I’m just… it makes sense to me. Like I’ve been waiting for something like this to happen.” I grew uncomfortable under his unreadable gaze.

“Um, Brendan said he needed me to get his throne back, that the fae would keep messing up until someone took control. Is that true?”

He hesitated. “It’s technically true.”

“Is that all there is to it?”

He lowered his voice. “Nobody knows what he’s thinking. Not even the banshee. The king is not himself, in more ways than one. They’re trying to keep quiet about Drake. People think the problem is that the king wasn’t brought back into a warrior’s body, that the weakness of Drake’s body threatens the power of the throne, but it’s far more complicated than that.”

I leaned forward with interest. The alarm on my phone went off, causing all three of us to jump with fright. “I really need to get to work,” I said, regretting that I had to go while Grim was in a talkative mood.

He clammed up, as if realising he had said too much, and while I got ready, Realtín decided to wreck my room. The pair followed me to work, and for a while, they were good, but then Realtín grew restless.

“She doesn’t like to be trapped inside for so long,” Grim explained.

I gave a quick nod, smiling at my manager while I restocked a shelf. The fae could talk to me, but I couldn’t speak to them unless I pretended I was on my phone so people wouldn’t think I was an absolute nutter. Phones weren’t allowed on the supermarket floor, so I had to wait until my break to chastise Realtín about knocking over a display of chopped tomato tins.

“I have to clean that shit up,” I hissed.

“If you played nice with the king, he would send slaves to do it for you,” the sprite said smartly. “And then we could go back to his house, where the warriors would watch over you.”

“Hey, I’m not thrilled about your mission either,” I said, lowering my voice when I heard footsteps nearby. My manager poked his head through the doorway, gave me a funny look when he saw I was alone, and left.

“You really are in danger,” Grim said.

“But why?”

“You helped change things that weren’t meant to be changed, and the king has been oddly insistent about keeping you safe. This makes you a target. His allies will want to kill you as soon as you’ve helped him in order to permanently silence you and to… make sure the king continues to make good choices. His enemies will want to kill you before you can help him. When word gets out about Drake’s soul lingering with Brendan’s, and that it’s because of you, then it will only get worse.”
Drake’s lingering didn’t have anything to do with me. It was because Drake had unfinished business of some kind, but I would let them all think otherwise.

“The death threats don’t bother me so much. The wings will be a dead giveaway,” I joked.

Grim’s expression didn’t change. “You won’t see them coming. You won’t hear them unless they want you to. You will die before you even realise there’s a threat. You must take this seriously.”

“And if I die?”

“Your friend won’t have you to anchor him to his body. The king will grow in strength, but his word might not be enough when it comes to the final vote. Many fae will turn against him in a heartbeat, and the next leader might be worse than the queens.”

“Is that even possible?”

He stared at me solemnly. “You haven’t seen what creeps in the dark, Cara. You don’t know, and I hope you never have to learn.”

My shoulder blades itched. My dreams were bad enough.

“The king will win even if he loses you,” Realtín said, sounding confident. “He’s paranoid because of the betrayals that sent him away. He needs everything to be perfect now. I think he’s lost his mind.”

Grim looked around nervously. “Hush, Realtín.”

***

Later in my shift, Zoe, Fiona, and Erika came to visit me under pretence of shopping. Fiona and Erica argued over the benefits of Greek yoghurt, giving Zoe an opportunity to pull me aside.

“Well?” she asked.

Grim stared up at her, and Realtín flew around her head, but she saw neither of them. But she screwed up her nose when Realtín got too close.

I returned to the shelf I had been stacking. “Well, what?”

Zoe made a face. “Well, Drake. That’s what! I thought you said he was only around for a night.”

The fae both perked up at the mention of Drake.

I cleared my throat. “That’s what I thought. Turns out he’s around for longer than we expected.”

“And he came to see you again?”

“Nope,” I said, slamming a box onto a shelf. “We bumped into each other randomly.”

“This place isn’t that small. I hope he’s not a stalker.”

“I don’t know him that well, Zoe. We’ve talked, like, twice. I probably won’t see him again.”

“He’s plenty hot, though. You should bring him out this weekend.”

Realtín snorted and threw a raisin at Zoe. Zoe glared at Fiona and Erika.

“No money to go out this weekend,” I said loudly to draw her attention.

“I’ll pay for you. Come out with us. Please? And put your fun hat on. I’m in the mood for some random.”

I glanced at Grim, who shook his head. “I’ll think about it. But I have to study, and I don’t get paid enough to waste it all on clothes and clubs, you know.”

“Don’t be dry.”
Realtin tugged on Zoe’s hair. She whirled around. “Did you just pull my hair? What are you, five?”

Fiona frowned. “What are you on about?”
“You just pulled my hair.”
“No, I didn’t.”
Zoe made a show of looking up and down the aisle. “Well, I don’t see anyone else around, Fiona.”
“I have to get back to work,” I said. “Talk to you three later.”
I left and went into the bathroom. “Right, that’s it,” I hissed. “Go away, both of you. You can’t just do what you want, Realtin. Just because she can’t see you doesn’t mean you can pick on her. And stop opening shit! I’m the one who has to clean up the mess, remember?”
“But the king said—” Grim began.
“I don’t give a crap about your stupid king. Tell him I said to back off. I don’t need babysitters, and I definitely don’t need fae at my work.” I pointed at the door. “Go!”
Grim made Realtin leave. I felt better, but I still couldn’t concentrate on anything other than the fae.

When I got home after work, Grim and Realtin were sitting on my bedroom floor, looking chastened.
“What’s going on?” I asked.
“King Brendan sent us back,” Grim said. “We are to remember who owns us and to obey his bidding, not yours. We are no longer permitted to converse with you.”
Realtin put her hands on her hips and shot into the air, but Grim shook his head. She flew over to the faery ornaments, kicked one, and settled back beside Grim.
“Just because you can’t talk to me doesn’t mean I can’t talk to you,” I said. “Next time you speak to your stupid-arse king, let him know I refuse to believe he’s wonderful in any way when it’s obvious he’s just an arrogant prick with way too much time on his hands.”
Realtin sniggered until a nudge from Grim silenced her.
“Well, whatever,” I said.
I made a few more attempts to speak to them that evening, but they only stared back, making me feel uncomfortable. “Just cloak yourselves or something,” I said at last. I was sick of trying to study with silent faeries in the room. I looked, but they were gone.
It didn’t help.
Chapter Eight

I was six years old, and I had been locked in my room since dinner time, when Dad had come home from work and given my punishment. I still didn’t understand what I had done wrong. I was the one who had been knocked to the ground. I had only stared at the boy in school, but his screams had gotten me into trouble.

I lay in my bed, listening to my parents arguing downstairs. Their voices filtered upward, full of anger and bitterness. Dad kept saying even children could see the evil in my eyes. He hated my eyes, hated when I looked at him.

But that wasn’t the bit that made my fingers tremble as I gripped my stuffed rabbit. The worst part was the thing in the wardrobe and the one under the bed. They had been drawing closer all winter.

I heard their whispers every night, no matter how hard I pressed my hands against my ears. They were coming for me. I just knew. The one under the bed liked to eat little girls. It had told me so... in its own way.

The whispers were almost as bad as the fingernails scratching the wooden floor. The fingernails were almost as bad as the door that opened all by itself in the dark. The door opening was almost as bad as the red glowing eyes hiding in the wardrobe, faint at first, but growing deeper and darker every night, waiting for the right time. Those eyes were going to take me into the darkness, and nobody could stop them.

Nobody believed me. Nobody saw the eyes. Nobody heard the whispers. Only me.

And it was time. They were ready. The shortest day of the year, my teacher had said. That meant the longest night. The darkest night. That gave them time and power.

The scratches came, louder than ever. The whispers turned into terrible laughter. I heard something shuffle in the dark. I imagined the wardrobe swinging open, and those red eyes growing larger by the second. Coming closer, coming for me.

But the monster under the bed came first.

I couldn’t see it in the dark, but the thing was noisy. It crawled across the floor, as I huddled against the headboard. Something pulled the covers off the mattress, dragging them onto the floor. A hand with grotesque, clawed fingers reached up from the end of the bed.

I couldn’t scream. Only whimpers made their way out of my mouth. The sheet beneath me was yanked, and I was pulled along with it. With a yelp, I scrambled back to the head of the bed.

The monster jumped onto the bed, and I choked on my mother’s name. The thing was worse than I imagined—cracked face full of pus and boils, fangs and claws and the stench of rotting death. It smiled, the cracks seeping. It crawled up the bed, dragging misshapen legs behind it, licking its lips the entire time.

No, no, no, no.

It reached for me, and I was frozen with fear.

The red eyes came into view over its shoulder. Bony hands pulled the monster back by the ankles, and the creature’s screams drowned out my own when I finally found my voice.

The red-eyed monster munched and crunched on bones, and the under-the-bed-monster’s whimpers faded away. Unable to look away, I couldn’t stop screaming.

The door flew open, and my mother ran to me. But the light from the hallway didn’t reach the bed. We still weren’t safe. We were in too many shadows.

I scrambled into my mother’s arms. Her back was to Red Eyes, but I faced the thing, looking over her shoulder.

“Run,” I whispered. “Please run before it gets us.”
“Nobody’s there,” Mam said. “There’s nothing scary in this room, okay?”
I pointed at the monster. My mother’s back straightened as if she sensed something coming toward us.
“Nothing there,” she said under her breath. “Nothing at all.”
It kept coming, ready to take us away, to suck the marrow out of our bones as it had the monster under the bed. Clouds passed in front of the moon, and the room darkened, but those eyes remained. The moon cleared, and Red Eyes reached for us. Mam held me tighter, her whispers as urgent as a prayer.
A bang on the window made me flinch, but Mam didn’t seem to notice. She didn’t react to the hissing or the black cat’s claws scratching at the glass. The cat’s fur smoothed, and the animal looked directly at me. Its tail was straight up as it jumped from the ledge, and when I looked back at my bed, Red Eyes was gone.
“Nothing can hurt you,” Mam said.
“I know,” I said calmly. “Kitty sent it away.”
She kissed my forehead and laid me down on the pillow. She covered me with the blanket. “Black cats are lucky.”
She hummed by my side until I dozed off. I fell asleep wondering how she knew the cat was black.

I awoke with a start, my heart racing. I hadn’t had that particular dream in a long time. I lay there, staring at my wardrobe. Had any of my fears been real? Had I been haunted by actual faeries rather than my own vivid imagination as a child?
“Grim?” I asked in a quiet voice. “Do faeries ever hide under a child’s bed? Or… or in their wardrobe? Do they ever eat each other?”
Silence.
As I stared, I realised I was waiting for the door to open of its own accord. I rolled over and faced the wall, but I didn’t sleep much after that.

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I hadn’t seen Grim or Realtin in days. I wasn’t sure if that made me happy or sad. I’d been having nightmares every night, and my faery ornaments were knocked over every day, but I didn’t hear or see any other trace of fae in my home.
Except for my mother’s skin. The shimmers had faded, but I would never forget them. I just wasn’t sure what they meant.
“I’m going to work now,” I said aloud so that if the faeries were in the room, they would know my plans. I wasn’t sure why I wanted to make it easier for them. “And college starts back on Monday. Just… just so you know.”
When I left my room, I bumped into my father in the hallway. He looked at me as if I were a raving lunatic on the street. I ignored him, said goodbye to my mother, and left the house.
The dream had reminded me that she wasn’t the way I remembered her from my childhood, no longer as loving or affectionate. I wondered why that had changed over the years. Once, she had protected me. Maybe I didn’t need to be protected… except by tiny fae, apparently.
I was early, so I walked, but I regretted my decision when the frigid wind began battering me. Yet the treetops barely moved, despite my hair whipping across my face.
I stopped. Something was very wrong. Passersby walked right past without so much as glancing in my direction. The hairs on my arm stood at attention. The faery magic whirling around me didn’t feel benign.
I barely flinched when the warrior unveiled himself in front of me. I’d had bigger surprises recently. His hair was a shock of red, his wings crimson and white. His skin was milky white with traces of glimmering red where his ember veins peeked through. He was as tall as the smiling dark faery, though not as broad.

He raised a dagger in the air, the blade shining ruby red in the sunlight. My hair was yanked from behind, and someone pulled me backward as a small blur jumped at the hand holding the weapon. Grim and Realtín had saved my life by an inch because, despite all of the self-defence classes my mother had forced me to take, I hadn’t even had the presence of mind to run from a crazy fae assassin.

The faery looked surprised, but he brushed Grim aside and stalked me, never seeing the silver-haired faery behind him. I stepped back slowly, keeping my eyes on the red and white faery, refusing to glance at Fake Drake.

Realtín touched my fingertips, and I ducked as the warrior swung at me. I looked up in time to see Brendan simultaneously stand on the warrior’s calf, yank his hair, and reach around to slit his throat.

Blood spurted everywhere, but mostly over me. I gazed at my clothes in horrified silence. I was drenched in the warrior’s blood.

Brendan and Grim inspected the warrior’s body, while Realtín nudged me in concern. I sat on the ground, too busy falling to pieces to give a damn about anything else.

I shook uncontrollably, unable to take my eyes away from the thick, vibrant blood. It was too much. Everything was too much.

Brendan knelt next to me, but I couldn’t look at green eyes when I wanted violet. He tipped my chin, but my eyes were drawn to the body.

“Did you know him?” Brendan asked Grim.

Grim nodded. “He was one of the Seelie queen’s old servants. He didn’t attend the festival because he was out of favour.”

“So unlikely to take revenge?”

Grim squeezed my shoulder. “I didn’t say that. That’s MacDearg. Kin to Sadler. This wasn’t about vengeance for the Seelie queen’s death.”

“Why is Sadler still alive?”

He was wise enough to stay away,” Grim said.

Brendan sighed wearily. “Find Sorcha and warn her. I’ll take Cara home.”

I wasn’t aware that we weren’t walking to my home until we passed through a gate and my skin began to tingle again. Fae magic, all around us. Getting a grip on reality was hard when there was no reality.

There was a large house, but the gardens drew my attention. Thorny bushes were filled with tiny watchful eyes and roses... so many roses of every colour. Some stables stood in the distance. Pigs wandered freely, and I sensed figures hiding amongst the trees. Drake’s words came to mind when I felt in awe of how picturesque it all seemed: glamours and illusions.

“Is this your house?” I asked Fake Drake.

“Not exactly. A follower offered his home as a base while I gather strength. When this is over, I’ll likely live in my own realm once again.”

“But there’s magic here, right?”

“Enough,” he replied.

If I stayed too long, I might never want to leave. “I should go home.”

“You can’t go home covered in blood.” He pointed at my shirt. “Look at you.”

I swallowed hard. “I’m aware of how I look right now.”
He glared at me. “I just saved your life. Don’t make me do it again. You’re safe with me until I can figure out the threat.”

“You could have sent him just to scare me into agreeing to help you.”
He looked around. “That’s true, little human. Very true. And once, I might have. Clean yourself up, and you can leave. But you’ll have more bodyguards this time. I choose to take this attack personally.”
He led me into the house, which was guarded by warriors. They towered over Brendan and barely looked at me. I couldn’t tell the difference between them and the queens’ bodyguards. They were all terrifying.
Inside, everything was luxurious without being over the top, but I didn’t care while I was covered in blood. Brendan showed me to a bedroom decorated in lavender and silver. The window showed a view of gardens that seemed to stretch on forever.
The black-haired woman who had come to my house strode into the room. Scowling, she shoved a fluffy towel and some clothing into my hands before huffing her way out of the room.
“Have a shower, and then we can talk. Don’t worry. You’ll be safe while you’re under this roof.”
I wasn’t so sure, but I didn’t have the energy to protest. I couldn’t go home covered in faery blood. I couldn’t go to work and act normal after witnessing a murder. I couldn’t sleep in my own bed, knowing I could be attacked at any time.
I showered for ages, long after the last of the blood had disappeared. In the mirror, I looked pale and drained of life. I was exhausted, and my pupils had dilated until they were almost as strange as those of the fae. The body of the faery who had attacked me flashed before my eyes, and I barely made it to the toilet before I threw up. I had another shower just to get some warmth back into my body.

That hadn’t been the first murder I’d witnessed, but it was the first time I wasn’t cocooned in a haze of calm driven by fae magic. Everything felt too real, too close, too dangerous. I could taste death, feel its hands on my shoulders.
I dressed in the expensive clothes the woman had given me. I was just grateful they weren’t bloodstained. When I left the bathroom, Realtín flew at me, making funny little cooing sounds as she checked my face.
I waved her away. “I’m fine. I take it you’re allowed to talk to me again?” I picked up a comb and attacked the tangles in my hair.
“Imagine how angry the king would have been!”
“And here I was thinking you were concerned for my health,” I said drily.
“That, too!” She flew onto the bed and picked up a sock. “They’re so big.” She measured it against herself.
Sighing, I pulled the sock out of her hands. “What now? Can I go home?”
“You want to go home?” Her expression turned worried. “What if they come for you? You were lucky today. Grim spotted the watcher and sent word to Brendan. We were waiting for ages. We didn’t think he’d make it in time.”
“You both saved my life. You and Grim. Thanks, Realtín.”
Her cheeks darkened. “We’re supposed to go downstairs to speak to the king. Sorcha and Grim are with him.”
“So is Sorcha the one with the black hair and grumpy face?”
The sprite giggled. “Don’t you recognise her?”
I screwed up my face. “Should I?”
“She’s the banshee. The one who led you there, who hid you away.”
“Nah. That one was old and gross.” I shuddered, but Realtín raised a brow. My eyes grew wide. “No way!”
“That’s her. When the king was banished, the banshees lost their main source of power, so they all lost their youth and beauty. They became hags.” She spat on the floor. “Served them right. But now the king is back, and so is everything they lost. Well, almost. Once he becomes king for real, everything will go back to normal for them.”

“So he’s not actually a king?”
She opened her mouth to reply when a soft knock at the door interrupted her.
Grim let himself in. “The king wants you to come down now.” He bowed his head and held open the door.
“Grim, you don’t have to bow to me.”
His lower lip quivered.
Seeing his discomfort, I let it go. “Come on then, you two. Lead me into more trouble.”
Chapter Nine

Downstairs, Brendan waited for us in a small ordinary-looking office. He sat behind a desk, leaving me a little disappointed. I had expected fae glitz and glam. The only oddity was the half-naked faery serving tea.

Sorcha stood behind Brendan’s chair, her eyes shrewd and cruel. I shivered under the chill of her glare. Brendan gestured for me to take a seat. I obliged and, in turn, motioned for Grim and Realtín to sit next to me. Grinning, Realtín flew onto my shoulder and sat with her tiny arm around my neck. Grim hesitantly moved to my side, but he remained standing.

Brendan kept his keen gaze on me, as if trying to work me out. I stared back at Drake’s face, knowing I could never trust him but still resisting the urge to just reach out and touch him.

“First, I must apologise for the attempt on your life,” Brendan said. “I’ve been gone for a long time, and I have some catching up to do when it comes to political friends or foe. Still, it was a lesson. It was good to see who made the first move.” He sighed. “And not unexpected at all.”

“So I’m bait now?”

“You’re in danger now,” he said. “And I still need things from you. Help me willingly, and you’ll be rewarded. Have you seen the damage?”

“You mean the crime wave? I heard about it. Doesn’t mean it’s fae influenced though.”

His smile was cold. “You know the truth. It will only get worse. I can bring control back to the chaos, but it would be much simpler if you agreed to attend the ceremony on my behalf.”

“Why me?”

“You were the one at the solstice festival,” he said. “Yes, but why was I there? Why me?”

He leaned forward, his palms together. “I may be addressed as a king, but even I have to adhere to tradition and ancient rules. On the night of my resurrection, certain rules were on hand. They were broken, which gave me the opportunity to return.”

“What rules?” I asked.

“The best way for the Irish fae to regain some control was to have one of their most precious rites threatened. If the blood of a true child of Ireland was forcibly spilled at the Irish fae’s own festival, it would have freed them to act against the queens. Trickery to call this child into the festival, perhaps, but the queens made their own choices. Nobody forced them to desire sacrificial blood, and they should have known better. Even blood can’t fight against the waning of power on one of the most important nights of the year. We could have let this play out, but when the queens turned on each other even before blood was spilled, the way was clear. We needed that child alive to bear witness to events—a pure, unbiased voice to clear any stains from my name over the events that occurred on that night.”

“I hear you wouldn’t have a problem without me,” I blurted.

He glowered. “You hear too much, it seems. We need to be sure. There can be no chances taken. It’s too important an opportunity to waste. Sorcha guided you to the festival that night, it is true, but you were safe. Your arrival merely helped the queens make a choice. Unfortunately for them, they made bad choices. Their tragic ends were of their own making. Now I have to claim the throne and restore my original power. There are pretenders, but I have blood on my side. And you, of course.”
“Wait a minute. You’re saying I’m the true child? What’s a true child of Ireland? And why would I want to speak for you? Sorcha didn’t keep me safe, Drake did. And look what’s happening to him. If you think I’m unbiased, you’re sadly mistaken. You’ve done this. You—”

“If you want Drake to win his body back, you’ll help me.”

Sorcha flinched. Yet I still wanted to believe him. “You can do that?”

“Only if my powers are fully restored. A fae king can do many things. You can help me, help Drake, help your own world. You don’t want the fae running around unchecked.”

“You didn’t answer me about the ‘true child of Ireland’ bit. Or why I was the one led there.”

“You were the closest one at the time,” he said as if that made any sense.

“But what is it? What’s a true child?”

He looked sad. “The old ways truly are long gone.”

Sorcha nodded. “The humans no longer bow to us or even fear us. They believe us myth and legend. There are no longer tributes.”

“Interesting,” he said. “Cara, have you ever heard of changelings?”

“I’m not a changeling,” I said through clenched teeth, although the reasons why my father couldn’t stand me kept coming back to that.

Brendan smiled. “No, you’re not. We occasionally switched faery babies with human ones, for various reasons. We may have intended to keep young royal fae safe from others in line to their inheritance or to stop a particularly strong line from becoming more powerful. We even did it to keep powerful human families in check. Many of the ancient human royalty in Ireland had fae amongst their members, usually unbeknownst to them, but it became a point of pride. A claim of ties to the faeries.”

“Did they stay with those families?” I asked, curious in spite of myself.

He shrugged. “Sometimes we changed back, but often the child was forgotten about. And some of the changelings weren’t changelings at all, but hybrids sent away from the fae world to their human families. The descendents of these forgotten fae became known as true children of Ireland because they held the pure blood of the ancient families, which was strengthened by human blood over the years. One of your ancestors was fae. You have very little fae in your blood, just a drop, but it’s there. You come from true Irish blood, from an ancient bloodline of both human and fae. You are a true child of Ireland.”

I stared at him. “Is that why my mother looks funny now? I keep seeing people who look a little fae. Underneath, their skin is a little like yours, and their eyes are weird colours. Is that why?”

He gave me a curious look. “You see?” He glared at Grim and Realtín. “This doesn’t leave the room.”

“Leave them alone,” I snapped. “Who cares what I can see? I drank your stupid wine, and it screwed me up is all.”

Confusion dulled Brendan’s eyes, then they turned violet.

“He’s right,” Drake said urgently. “Nobody can know this. Tell him nothing more about yourself, Cara. I’m already lost. Help him restore control and then get away before it’s too late. Don’t let him—”

He groaned, and Brendan returned. “I hate when he does that,” Brendan said, rubbing his temples. “Whatever he says, Cara, the real problem is how much danger you’re already in. MacDearg wasn’t working alone, and Sadler has many friends and contacts right now. His claim to the throne is my biggest concern on the surface, but
he would rather see me dead, and if he wins, he’ll get his wish regardless. Until I win, you’ll be safe here, with me.”

“Ha! I’m not staying here. I have exams, a job, family, and friends. I have to go home.”

He quirked a brow. “A family? Your brother died, didn’t he? And your parents… well, there isn’t much love for you at home, is there?”

I clenched the chair arms. “You know nothing about me.”

“We know more than you do,” Sorcha said. “Watch your tone when you speak to my king. Do you want to know the real reason you’re here? The real reason you, of everyone, were drawn to the festival?”

“Sorcha.” Brendan’s voice held a warning tone.

“Yes,” I said, my heart turning into a hummingbird. “Tell me the big secret then.”

Realtín’s tiny fingers pinched the back of my neck, and Grim fidgeted as if he wanted to run.

“There is no secret,” Sorcha scoffed. “But the true child of Ireland who was called had to be someone with nothing to lose. Someone who can’t be influenced by threats of death. Someone who has nothing to live for. Preferably someone with a death wish. You are hopeless. There’s nothing in your future, so why not do the noble thing for your race and achieve one act you can be proud of? One thing that leaves a mark before you give up your pitiful existence and crawl away to die.”

I sat back, open-mouthed. I wasn’t hopeless. I didn’t want to die. There had been dark days, but everyone hit low moments. That didn’t make me hopeless.

Realtín flicked something that hit Sorcha right on the tip of her nose. Sorcha held out her palm and weaved some kind of smoking magic in the air. I watched, astounded, as Grim threw himself in front of Realtín and me like a hero.

With a sigh, Brendan closed his hand over the magic before Sorcha could unleash it.

“Leave us, Sorcha.”

She spluttered something, but he silenced her with a glare. She sent one last hateful sneer my way before storming out of the room.

“I would like to keep at least one servant loyal,” he said, sounding weary.

“She started it,” I protested.

He rubbed his eyes. “What she says is true. I know your sorrows, Cara. I know your despair. I could feed on it for a thousand years if I wished. Your pain is our nourishment. But I also know you want to help me.”

“I don’t,” I whispered.

“I could make you,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “I could threaten everything you hold dear.”

“See? Sentences like that put people off,” I said. “You would get more loyalty by being, you know, nice.”

He laughed loudly. “I don’t remember humans being this brave when I ruled.”

“You killed them back then,” Realtín said.

“It’s true,” he said. “I used them up. But that was a long time ago.” He frowned. “That doesn’t mean I won’t do what I have to.”

I smirked. “Yeah, and I might have to make this whole witness thing a lot more uncomfortable for you, so don’t push it. You’re not in my good books right now.”

His smile widened. He was enjoying himself way too much. “You don’t seem worse for the wear after your scare today.”

“We’re not scared of fae anymore, remember?” I stood, but my knees shook. “And I have to go home. I’ve already missed work because of you. If I get the sack…” I shook my head. As if I could do anything to him.
“At least let me send bodyguards with you.”
“Your creepy servants aren’t allowed in my house,” I warned. “Only Grim and Realtín. And I can talk to them whenever I want.”
“And will you help me on Imbolc?”
I frowned.
“The first of February,” he said. “The festival will be held that week, and the trials and ceremony, too. I’ll do what I can for Drake, and I’ll keep you safe, but you have to help me.”
“As long as you don’t bother me, we’re cool,” I said. Being part of something made me feel good, but he didn’t need to know that.
He got to his feet. “Grim, Realtín, don’t let her out of your sight. Keep her out of trouble. The bodyguards will keep their distance. Send a signal if something out of the ordinary happens. Cara, I’ll see you home.”
“There’s no need for that,” I told him.
He waved his hand. “I want the world to see I’m prepared to protect you, that I’m not afraid of an attack on my own life.”
He walked me out of the house, the others trailing behind at his direction. Amongst the rose bushes, I saw a large black cat. It sat there and stared at me until shivers ran down my spine.
“Is something wrong?” Brendan asked.
I glanced at him then back to the cat, but it was gone. “It’s nothing. You mentioned trials before. What’s that about? Because I’m not sure I like the sound of them.”
“They’re mostly for contenders. They’ll make a big event of the process for entertainment. There will be deaths, but we’ll win in the end.” He hesitated. “I need to be strong, Cara. What is it about you that’s keeping Drake bound here? Is there some promise or agreement that’s tied him to you? Did you promise him your soul or your body to help free you that night? I haven’t found anyone who has seen you two together, and that’s what makes me curious.”
“No your business,” I said sharply.
Our strange procession left the fae magic behind and moved back into the land of humans. People looked at their feet when they passed us as if afraid to look directly at us.
“I’ve been able to watch some of the world,” Brendan said. “Human women in particular had little place in the world when I first ruled, unless they acted like men. Families would give their daughters to the fae as tributes and sacrifices—pretty little virgins who were used until they lost their minds or their hearts. Now, women are educated and aggressive, almost as good as men.”
I choked on my reply. “Almost as good? If you have much contact with human women in future, I’d recommend against using that kind of phrase.”
He laughed. “I’ll try to remember that.”
I realised I was staring at him. “Can I ask you a question?”
“You may ask. I may not reply.”
“Fair enough. If this true child of Ireland thing is true, then do you know who it was in my family? A hybrid or changeling or whatever? And if they were switched back? If anyone knew about it?”
“I could possibly find out. As long as the change happened in the last couple of centuries, somebody must know. Are you interested in learning about them?”
“I’m curious. Was it his choice? Did he know he was different? What happened to him? My grandfather loved telling me faery stories. I knew all of the legends, and
still, I got caught.” I smiled wryly. “That must sound completely lame to you, but it
wasn’t real before. Now though… now it is.”

He looked away for a few minutes. “You might not want to know about this fae. He
might be… dark. There are many fae who like to trick humans into sleeping with
them, and others who do things that make the humans sign away their souls. There are
many things you’ll never know. Be glad of that, Cara.”

“What happens to the fae who aren’t taken back home, though?” I asked. “You and
Drake both said the fae can’t be free, but what’s freer than a creature who doesn’t
know what they are?”

“They might never wake up,” he said. “They’re so convinced they’re human that
they can’t physically manifest in their true form. Others have to be removed because
they become so violent. It’s not their fault. They don’t know what’s happening to
them, why they feel like they want to burst out of their own skins. Those kinds are
noticed. The others fall under the radar. Most are watched throughout their lives by
lesser fae.”

That didn’t make me feel any better. “Do people like me have magic?”

“Magic?” He thought about it. “Rarely. If the blood is strong enough, royalty or a
particularly strong variation of fae, then there may be things that pass though the
bloodline, mostly passive abilities like good luck, but the true children are pure
because the fae is just a trace.”

“What about the human babies? The ones the fae take away.”

He looked uncomfortable. “We either keep them or send them back. They tend to
suffer mental disorders when they return to their human world. It’s kinder if they die
first.” He said it simply and without drama, but for some reason, that was the most
horrifying thing I had ever heard.

“That’s disgusting,” I whispered.

“That’s our way. Humans can do ugly things, too. We have to be strong, Cara. Only
the strongest survive. This body helped you at the festival. Why?”

“Because he’s decent?”

“In your terms. In ours, it was because he’s weak. That’s why we’re in so much
trouble. They see me as weak. If they learn of how I’m tied to you, they’ll come at us
harder and faster. And you can’t help me if you die, so watch out for yourself. It
would be embarrassing if I couldn’t even keep one human alive.”

“I’m not helping you,” I said as we reached my front gate. “I’m helping Drake.”

He followed me to my door. I couldn’t see his procession of followers anymore.

He held my hand to stop me and turned me to face him. “Why?” The way he looked
at me made me feel as though he could read my mind.

“You look so much like him,” I whispered, reaching up to touch his face. I grazed
his cheek with my fingertips, confused by the things I felt. I saw Drake’s face but
Brendan’s eyes, so I closed my eyes and pretended. “He helped me. I owe him, and I
care what happens. A good person, even a fae, doesn’t deserve what you’ve done. I
know he’s—”

He pressed his lips against mine, and my arms automatically wrapped around his
shoulders. I leaned into his cool lips, and his fingers brushed the back of my neck. I
felt dizzy and out of control, as if I could fly away at any second. A warning bell went
off in my head, and I pushed him away, holding my fingers to my mouth in shock.

He was watching me carefully. “Curious. Explains a lot.” His eyes changed from
green to violet.

Drake looked so angry that I automatically stepped back. “Don’t ever let a faery do
that to you.” A flush of colour rose on his pale cheeks. “Don’t let him use you. He’s a
cat with a broken mouse, Cara. Be more careful. Look at Grim and Realtín if you need convincing. They made deals. Look at them now.”

He gripped my shoulders and shook me. Not hard, but his teeth had clenched, and I thought I should have felt fear, but the longing kept clouding my thoughts.

Sorcha barged through the front gate, her anger spitting off her in visible sparks. “Get away,” she hissed. “Before anyone realises. Let him have it, Solitary. It’s for the greater good.”

Drake stood between us, his wings bristling. “Back off, harpy. You did this to us. You alone. I won’t forget it, and I’ll make sure you don’t either.”

She retreated in a hurry, making me wonder what she saw in his face. She threw me one more hateful look before rejoining the others who had come in to view outside the gate. My two tiny fae friends were staring at me, and I felt shamed.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I know,” Drake said, turning to face me. “It’s not your fault. It’s all of the magic.”

He touched my cheek. “You don’t really care, Cara. Not about me. Not about him. The magic just makes you think you do.”

My stomach fluttered its denial. There had been something about him the very first time I saw him that made it through the haze, something about his touch that could never be forgotten. I didn’t care why. I just wanted him to survive. “I’m going to help him. He could fix what’s happened to you.”

“He won’t.” He gazed at me. “If you help him, help him for all of the fae and humans who will die if you don’t.” He gestured at my house. “You should get inside. The other pair will follow you in. Just remember, Cara. Never eat the food, never accept a drink, and avoid their touch.” He touched my face then pulled his hand away as if I had stung him. “Especially mine. He’s fighting me. I’m fading away, I think. Any time could be the last.”

I brushed my lips against his before he could stop me, then I went inside. After all, I had only kissed Brendan to remember how it felt to kiss Drake.

Dad was waiting in the hallway, his arms folded across his chest. “Who was outside?”

I brushed past him. “Nobody.”

He gripped my shoulder and shoved me against the wall. “I asked you a question, Cara.” He made himself look as tall as possible before me.

“A friend who helped me one night, okay? My drink was spiked, and he made sure I got home safe. That’s all.”

“Spiked?” He sneered down at me. “Sure it was. Even you should know better than—”

I wanted to throw up. “You know quite well I would never touch drugs, so don’t even try to make it sound that way.”

“Oh, please. We both know what you are, Cara. A pathetic little girl acting out for attention. If Darragh could see—”

I shoved him. Caught by surprise, he lost his balance and tripped. He reached out to grab my leg, but I kicked his hand away.

“Leave me alone!” I ran up to my room, slammed the door, and locked it behind me. I hid under my duvet as footsteps sounded on the stairs. I ignored the angry pounding on the door. I couldn’t remember if he had been that way before Darragh’s overdose, but no matter how much I struggled, I couldn’t dredge up any good memories of him.

“You should tell Brendan,” Realtín said into my ear.
I jumped with fright. I had completely forgotten about the fae. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, relieved to hear my father stomping back down the stairs. He would wait in the living toom for my mother, grinding his teeth until she returned.

“Tell him what?” I asked the sprite.

“He wants to hurt you.” She flew over and settled on my shoulder, the ultimate little devil. “Brendan could punish him. Make sure he can never make you cry again.”

*And break my mother’s heart.* She had lost enough already. “Don’t tell anyone about this,” I said. “Either of you. It’s nothing to do with the fae, and he’s my family. This is just… the way he is. Nobody can change that.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but Grim shot her a look. She scowled and flew over to take her tantrum out on the faery ornaments. She shoved one to the floor, and it broke into little pieces. Grim cleaned up before I could stand.

That evening, Mam returned, and I heard my father shouting before she trudged up the stairs. I unlocked my bedroom door.

She stepped in, closed the door behind her, and sat on my bed. “Just one day, Cara. Can you not go one day without driving him demented?” She rubbed her eyes, looking exhausted.

“Are you serious? He’s a lunatic!”

“You kicked him.”

“Yeah, but—”

She slapped my face. I stared at her in shock, but she didn’t apologise.

“I’m so very tired,” she said. “You’re too old for this, Cara.”

“Me? I’m too old? He’s always been the adult in this situation, Mam.”

“And you’re the adult now, so stop winding him up.”

“I don’t understand this. You know how he is with me. You see him all the time. You raised me not to be a victim outside of this house, so why is okay to be one at home? Explain it to me, Mam, because I can’t come up with any reason why that would make sense.”

“You’re not a victim! I hope you don’t tell people these things. You blow everything out of proportion and egg him on and—”

“If he murders me, are you going to tell the police that I drove him to it?” I stared at her. “Are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re so melodramatic. Can you not see? Can’t you just…”

She shook her head. “Please try harder. And don’t put your hands on him again.” She stroked the cheek she had slapped then left the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Brendan could deal with her, too,” Realtín said softly.

“Enough!” Grim snapped.

The pair argued well into the night, another relationship I was ruining without trying, and I knew I wasn’t ever going to sleep peacefully again.
Chapter Ten

I stared at my email, chewing on my fingernail.

*I once had a strange night that changed my life forever. The cups refilled themselves, and the drink was so strong that I dreamt of many things. I still do. That night gave me enough inspiration for a lifetime of stories.

V.G.L.*

That settled it. V.G. Love had gone through something like my experience. And it sounded as though he had never gotten over it and had learned to channel what he had seen into something more creative. I decided to reply.

*I had a strange night, too. They’ve come back for me. What would you do?*

I couldn’t sit there, waiting for a reply, so I went out for a run, all the time wondering who V.G. was. What had he seen? Had he escaped like I had? It was hard for me to reach out, even through email. The fae had consumed me, and every day, I felt the pull a little tighter.

I ran faster until Realtín’s constant whining wore me down. I headed back home and spent the evening asking Grim questions, desperate to understand their world, to involve myself in it. As if he realised what was happening, he told me as little as possible and nothing good.

I was due to go back to work the next day. I had gotten into trouble for missing a shift, but it was the first time, so my manager had been fairly lenient. I wasn’t going to give her an excuse to sack me, though.

“Where are you going this time?” Realtín asked as I rummaged for a clean uniform.

“Work.”

“It could be dangerous,” Grim said.

“I have to work. I need the money. And I want to run without you two moaning at me to slow down. My course starts again tomorrow, so get used to me going outside.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Brendan said from right behind me.

“Jesus!” I spun around and slapped his arm. “Don’t scare me like that.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You hit me.”

“Baby.”

He had me pressed against the wall quicker than I could blink. “If I had allowed my bodyguard to follow us in, you’d be very dead by now. If the wrong fae witnessed that, I would have to kill you myself just to prove a point, so watch your mouth.” He glanced at Realtín and Grim. “Even the smallest fae are dangerous, so be more careful around the important ones.”

He let me go and stepped away as if nothing had happened. I leaned against the wall, breathing heavily.

When he turned to me, his green eyes were sad. “I promised not to hurt you, Cara, but you need to learn the rules. My world is far more dangerous than yours. You can’t be seen as an equal in any sense of the meaning.” He looked at Grim. “Instruct her, or loyalty will kill her before a betrayal can get to her.” He doubled over with pain, grunting noisily.

“Are you okay?” I asked in spite of myself.
Drake looked at me with violet eyes. “He’s right. They’ll hurt you for disrespect, or rather, they’ll use it as an excuse.” He reached out but dropped his arm before touching me. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head. “He didn’t try. But why was he even here?”

“Your run caused some drama and angst amongst the watchers. Brendan didn’t realise just how often young human women leave their homes unattended these days.”

He smiled. “He’s pretty old-fashioned.”

“Can he hear us? When he goes away, can he see and hear what you do?”

His smile grew wider. “Only when I let him. Right now, he’s blind and fighting furiously to return. I’ll be gone soon, but it was worth it.”

“Can you two leave us alone for a few minutes?” I asked the sprite and brownie. They looked at Drake for affirmation before leaving. “They know you’re not their king, right?”

He shrugged. “They can plead their innocence. What’s wrong?”

I just wanted an excuse to spend time with him, to get to know him and understand the physical ache inside me when he wasn’t around. I wanted to see past the magic, but I doubted that answer would keep his eyes violet. “I… I don’t know what to do. What the right thing to do is.”

“Keep your head down, get through the ceremony, then run and don’t look back.”

“What if I didn’t want to run?” I asked softly, afraid to look at him.

“You want to run.”

“I don’t know how I can do this, Drake. I have to work. I have to go to school. I can’t be surrounded by fae. It’s distracting. If it was just you and me…”

“Cara, that can never be.”

“Why? Because I’m human?”

“That, and because I’m fading. Do you not understand that I won’t be around in any form soon?”

I bit the corner of my lip. “So make the most of the time you have left then.”

“Is that all you think you’re worth?” he asked sharply.

“Maybe I want to feel something other than pain for a change.”

“The fae can only ever hurt you.” His tone had softened, but he kept saying words I didn’t want to hear.

I looked away, gathering my arms around me. “He said you make him weak.”

“It does him no harm to know what that feels like. I’m not the son of a king or queen, not even a warrior. I’m on my own, and that means less power. When he’s crowned, I’ll be pushed out of my body for good.”

“Unless he can save you.”

He shook his head. “There’s no way to save me. But I won’t waste my final weeks on regret. I have things I need to do first.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing that should concern you. Now it’s just a matter of lasting long enough.”

“I have to survive until Imbolc,” I said, sitting on my bed.

He pulled my desk chair directly in front of me and sat. “I know. Think you can manage that?”

“I’ve survived almost twenty-one years without the fae to protect me.”

“Or despite them,” he said, his eyes unreadable.

I didn’t like where that thought led. “What if I mess up at the ceremony thing?”

“You won’t. Tell the truth, or they’ll know. That’s all you can do. And never speak about me. If I appear publicly, don’t let on.”

I stared at him. “Are you going to fight him?”
“Long enough to do what I have to do.”
“Which is?”
“You’re persistent.” He stared at his hands. “Revenge is the only thing keeping me here.”
I waited, but he didn’t elaborate. “Anything I can help with?”
He gave me a sad smile. “I wouldn’t ask.”
“I offered.”
“Only because you don’t know what you’re offering. It’ll be over soon, and you can move on with your life.”
He always wore his normal face, only keeping his wings retracted, while Brendan tended to glamour himself to look more human. I wondered at that. I reached for him.
He pushed my hands away. “Didn’t I warn you to be careful?”
“Multiple times now.”
He sighed. “Cara, don’t waste your life on something that isn’t real. Fae magic will destroy you if you let it.”
I got up, sat on his lap, and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “It’s not magic, Drake. The other stuff might be but not this.”
He stared up at me. “And what is this?”
“This is real. I can tell the difference between this and what the other fae try to make me feel.”
I kissed him, willing him to feel what I felt, to know what I knew. When I pulled back, I was amused by the change in his expression.
He shook his head. “Stop. There’s nowhere this can go. Even if I didn’t fade, we live in two different worlds. We don’t belong, and it’s just magic that’s—”
“You’re not doing anything to me.”
“Not purposely, but it’s always there. We’re made of it. Magic runs through our veins, seeps through our pores, and you… you make everything ten times worse. I can’t even tell anymore…” He shook his head and gently pushed me off his lap. “I’m letting him return, and I’d rather he didn’t find you sitting on his lap. Take care of yourself, Cara. Do what you have to do. It’ll all be over soon.”
He held on to the chair, his face pinkening then paling as the struggle between two souls began anew. He choked for air, and I prayed one of them would remember to breathe. And then it was over.
Brendan staggered to his feet. “It’s you. I have to… have to get away.” He disappeared, and a few moments later, Grim and Realtín reappeared.
“What’s wrong with him?” I asked, half to myself.
“Drake’s stronger around you,” Grim said in a low voice, glancing around as if someone were hiding in the shadows. “It makes Brendan weak, even though you’re the one who will ultimately make him stronger. If not, you would already be dead. He needs you. That’s the only reason he tolerates you.”
“Sorcha wants him to kill you,” Realtín confided. “She thinks he’ll win the throne without your help. He refused, but maybe… maybe you should be more pleasant to him.”
I frowned. “Pleasant?”
She exchanged a glance with Grim. “Back in the old days, he was known for his dalliances with human girls. Maybe if you entertain him…”
I walked over to my closet. “I’m going to take a shower. I need to scrub a few new mental images out of my head. Stay here.”
I got my things together and headed into the hall, but my father was standing there with a scowl on his face.
“Who’s in your room?” he demanded.
“Nobody!”
He pushed me out of the way and stormed into my room, looking around frantically. He checked under the bed, and for a split-second, I wished a monster would eat him. I tried to push the dark thoughts away, but they whispered constantly whenever my father was around.
He rushed to the window and looked outside. “Who was here, Cara?”
“Obviously nobody.”
“Don’t cheek me! You might pay rent, but this is my house, and you never let anyone in here without my say-so. Do you hear me?”
I stared at him. “I heard you. Can I shower now?”
“Get out of my sight.”
Whatever it was about me that my dad hated, it had been festering for years. I shouldn’t have let him get to me. Mostly, I felt nothing, and maybe that was why the fae had led me to the festival. That constant numbing of my emotions had been the key.
Except Drake had changed me, and my feelings were growing out of control. I knew it was wrong and hopeless, but I couldn’t keep away, couldn’t stop trying to think of ways to entice him to the forefront, to stay with me for a little longer.
After my shower, I went to the kitchen for a quick bite to eat.
Mam came in and went to the refrigerator. “Did you clear out the fridge?” she asked, looking puzzled as she stared into it.
“Nope.”
“I was going to clean it today, but it looks spotless.”
I swallowed a mouthful of food. “That’s because you clean more than anyone else on the planet.”
“And I could have sworn somebody scrubbed the doorstep and varnished the knocker,” she muttered.
“Where the hell is my other shoe?” my father demanded, storming into the kitchen.
I looked at him blankly.
“I left them both at the end of the bed,” Mam said impatiently, dumping a cloth into the sink in frustration. She really liked cleaning.
“Well, there’s only one there now.” His gaze fell on me. “Very funny, Cara. Where the hell is it?”
“How am I supposed to know? I don’t go into your room.”
He leaned his palms on the table and glared at me. “Where is it?”
“She doesn’t know,” Mam said in a high-pitched voice. “Go look for it!”
He looked stunned but obediently turned on his heel and left the room. I really needed to talk to Grim and Realtín about touching things in the house.
“Did you take it?” Mam asked under her breath.
“No! Why would I take his shoe?”
“I’m just asking.”
I shook my head and brushed crumbs from my hands, “I have to get to work. I’ll see you later. I’m going to meet Zoe afterward for dinner.”
“Don’t be too late home and try not to slam the door.”
I kissed her cheek, trying not to notice the way she flinched at my touch. I walked out the front door, pulling my scarf tight across my mouth then yanking a hat down past my ears.
Grim and Realtín soon joined me visibly.
“Can you two glamour me so humans can’t see me?” I asked. “While we walk, I mean.”

“Of course.” Realtín sounded excited.

“Good, because we need to talk. I need you to be good while I work, okay? And afterward, I’m meeting Zoe. Leave her alone.” Realtín giggled, so I gave her a firm look. “I mean it. She’s my best friend. Be nice to her.”

“I’ll try,” Realtín said, rolling her eyes. She slipped her hands into my scarf. “Life with you can be extremely boring, you know.”

“Good. We want boring. Maybe then I’ll last long enough to help Brendan. And please stop winding up my father. I know you’re trying to help, but it’ll just make things worse. And Grim, can you stop cleaning? It’s the only thing that gets Mam through the day.”

“Humans are so strange,” Realtín said.

“I’ll be out of your way in about three weeks,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

“I’ll miss you,” she whispered in my ear, making me smile.

Work passed uneventfully, and I was feeling better by the time I met up with Zoe.

“Chinese?” she asked. “Something spicy to warm us up.”

I nodded, and we strolled down the street.

“Can’t believe the holidays are over already,” she said.

“I’m just happy to have an excuse to spend so much time out of the house. I don’t have many shifts for the rest of the month as punishment for missing one.”

“You missed a shift?”

“Yeah, I flaked. Overslept.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “How’s Drake?”

“Fine.”

She grinned. “So you’ve seen him again?”

“Yep.”

“Interesting.”

“Not really. We’re just friends… barely.”

She looked at me. “Have you slept with him?”

“No!”

“Have you kissed him?”

“Maybe.”

“Interesting.”

“Stop saying that!”

She wrapped her arm around me. “Then tell me something, and I won’t have to make up interesting shit in my head.”

“He’s around for the next three weeks, but then he’s leaving again. I might see him once or twice, but that’ll be it.”

She opened her mouth to say something when a hooded figure passing by grabbed her handbag and tried to run off with it. Zoe was so stunned that she held fast, and the thief pulled harder.

I stamped on his foot and yanked his hood down, revealing his face. I didn’t recognise him, but the desperate look on his face was all too familiar. “Get lost,” I snapped, and his grip loosened.

He threw a punch, but I dodged and elbowed him in the ribs.

“Come on,” I said to Zoe, seeing Grim about to trip the thief, and Realtín aiming her fingers at his eyes. I heard his yowl of pain as I dragged Zoe away.

“What the hell is he whining about?” she said, looking back.

“Forget him. But next time, just let go of the bag.”
“Fuck that. My phone’s in there. Delicate photos in that thing.”
I shook my head. “Idiot.”
The fae rejoined us. Realtín giggled excitedly. “Maybe life with you isn’t so boring after all.”
I laughed, the adrenaline from the confrontation making me giddy.
“Are you okay?” Zoe asked.
“I’m better than ever,” I replied.
Over dinner, we caught up on all of the gossip, and for the first time in two weeks, I was able to forget about the fae. So what if the fae were dangerous? So were humans. I wasn’t going to live in fear, and I wasn’t going to act as though my life was over.
I walked Zoe home before heading to my own house, accompanied by Grim and Realtín. I saw Brendan in the distance, shining in the dark as if he were lit from the inside.
“Following me?” I asked when we reached him.
“Heard you had a problem today.”
I frowned. “The purse-snatcher? That wasn’t a problem. He was more afraid of me than we were of him.”
A strange expression came over his face. “Why is that, I wonder.”
“What do you mean?”
He looked surprised. “Nothing. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t have to deal with some of your more human problems.”
I glared at Grim, who looked back at me innocently. “Everything’s fine. I’m going back to college tomorrow, and I don’t want a million fae there.”
“I know.” He sighed. “I take it this is a provision to our deal. That I don’t have a choice in the matter.”
I smiled and started walking again. “Glad you’ve caught up.”
He kept pace with me but maintained a space between us.
“I don’t have germs,” I said.
He didn’t answer, but when we reached my house, he stopped me at the gate. “Are you sure you have to do this school thing?”
“Positive.”
“My people will be watching, but they won’t interfere unless they have to. Agreed?”
I shrugged. “It’s just until the ceremony, right?”
“I only need you alive until then.”
“That makes me feel so much better. Good night.”
The corner of his mouth lifted. “What, no kiss?”
“You’re lucky your bodyguards are hiding around here somewhere,” I said sweetly and opened the gate.
As I walked up to the house, I saw my father peering out of his bedroom window, his jaw clenched tight. I wondered why Brendan didn’t hide himself like the other fae.
Inside, I heard my parents arguing as I went to bed. I locked my bedroom door, just in case.
Chapter Eleven

I awoke to see him standing over me with a pillow in his hand. I was frozen in the dark, choking on any words I might have used.
He smiled, but there was something terrifying about it. When he moved the pillow close to my face, scratching sounds at the window distracted him.
I screamed long and loud, not stopping until my mother ran into the room.
“What’s going on?” she asked my father.
He held out his empty hands. “Nightmare.”
She sat on the edge of the bed and brushed the hair from my face. “Lie down, baby.
Go back to sleep. There’s nothing to be afraid—”
“She’s too old to be babied,” he said, pulling her to her feet. “Come on. Let’s have a drink.”
She glanced back at me but let him pull her away from me. I hadn’t said a word.
I looked at the window, but there was nothing there except a shadow passing the frame. I stayed awake that night until I heard my father snoring.

Sweat poured down my back as I lay there in the dark, trembling all over.
“. . . so many nightmares,” Grim was saying. “I wish we could—”
“We can’t,” Realtín whispered. “He’ll have our heads. We’ll be free someday, Grim. We will. We just have to be good for a while. Do what he says.”
The fact that I wasn’t alone was sort of comforting, and I quickly fell asleep again.

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My course wasn’t quite the relief I thought it would be. I couldn’t concentrate on the lectures, on anything really, apart from my dreams and the fae. They were slowly taking over my life.
I felt a little twisted high whenever Brendan and Drake appeared. I felt low and down when a day passed without speaking to either of them. I had begun to jumble both souls together in my head, and I wasn’t sure who either of them was—not really.
In my classes, Realtín had fun pulling hair and knocking things over. Her gleeful giggles made it even harder to concentrate. Grim, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying the experience.
“I’ve learned such things,” he exclaimed as I walked to a different class. “The way humans see the world is amazing. Is it like this every day?”
“Pretty much,” I said under my breath. If anybody saw me talking to myself, I’d be mortally embarrassed. I checked my watch and made a decision. “Come on. I’m going to show you something a little different.”
The three of us slipped into the back of an Irish Folklore lecture. In my first year, I had taken the course on impulse, but my father had freaked out, and I dropped it when I had to narrow down subjects in my second year. But I occasionally snuck back in. I found the course matter comforting, and I was curious to hear what Grim thought.
The lecturer removed her sunglasses and stared at me for so long that I swallowed hard, thinking she might kick me out. After an awkward moment, she carried on, and I let out the breath I had been holding.
“They discuss us?” Grim whispered. “This is a part of your learning? I thought we were all but forgotten in your world.”
“You’re a story,” I explained. “A part of our heritage that we try to rationalise.”
A smile spread across his face. “This will certainly be interesting.”
“I thought you might enjoy it.”
I barely listened to the lecture. I was too busy watching Grim’s enraptured expression. He kept leaping up in his seat as if he wanted to argue a point. I was growing fond of the brownie—Realtín, too, even if she was an annoying little troublemaker.
Later, at lunch, I discovered I hadn’t brought the food I’d made that morning, so I decided to buy a roll at the canteen.
“Where’s the lunch you made?” Grim asked, but I had to ignore him in the queue.
I took the roll to my usual lunch table.
Zoe was already there, munching on an energy bar. “How were your classes this morning?” she asked, taking a book out of her bag.
“Not as bad as I expected. Kinda nice to be back.” I jerked my head at the book.
“New assignment?”
“Want to get a headstart. Going out with Darren tonight. You’re welcome to come with.”
“Not in the mood to be a third wheel, thanks.”
She shrugged. “Your loss.” She looked at my roll. “Wow, that looks good. They’ve upped the canteen food, I see.”
I frowned. The roll was soggy and gross, and I was pretty sure it smelled. I lifted an eyebrow at Grim, who shook his head, looking worried. A closer look revealed something rotting in the centre.
“I guess I’m not very hungry today.” I picked up the roll to throw it away, feeling a little weak at the knees.
“Give it here then,” Zoe said, reaching for it.
Realtín knocked the food out of my hand.
“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll just clean this up and be right back. Watch my bag.”
I cleared the mess and ducked into the hallway before Zoe noticed I had gone.
“What the hell is going on?” I asked the fae. “That was bad, right?”
“Glamoured,” Realtín hissed, practically spitting.
“If it was glamoured, how did I see what it really looked like?” I demanded.
“Maybe they wanted you to see,” Realtín said. “Did you smell it, Grim? Queen Mirela’s favourite punishment. Someone tried to poison Cara.”
“Here,” he said. “At her school. She forgot her lunch this morning, but I put it in her bag. Somebody took it out so she would have to eat something else.”
“Who could have gotten close enough to my bag?” I asked.
Realtín flew around my head, flashing red. “Someone here.”
“Are there fae working in the canteen?” I asked.
“No,” Grim said. “The king’s guards should have been watching you more closely.”
He bowed low. “I’m so sorry, Cara. I should have seen. I was distracted by all of the learning. It won’t happen again.”
“It’s not your fault. Maybe it was an accident. A fae causing mischief rather than harm or something. I should get back to Zoe. I’m pretty sure no fae is going to openly attack me here, right?”
Grim didn’t look certain of that.
“Watch over her,” Realtín said. “I’ll go check with the guards to see what’s going on. We’ll have to tell the king.”
“You don’t have to,” I said, but her distressed movements only sped up.
“You could have been hurt,” she said. “He has to know they’re following you around.”
“He might stop me from going to my classes,” I said. “Please, just leave it this time. We’ll be more careful. I promise.”

The fae agreed. I was pretty sure neither they nor the other guards wanted to tell their king that his witness had almost been poisoned right under their noses.

I spent the rest of the afternoon looking over my shoulder. There were enemies everywhere; I just didn’t recognise the faces. I hadn’t mentioned it to my fae friends, but I wondered if Sorcha was the one who wanted me dead. After all, nobody would suspect her of any wrongdoing if she claimed to be watching over me.

I didn’t know who was at the school, or even how many were guarding me, and that made me more scared than the idea of a phantom attacker waiting for me to be alone. Having Grim by my side all day was reassuring. I would miss my fae friends when it was all over… if I lived that long.

“Want to hang out for a while?” Zoe asked as we wandered down the hall after school.

“Yeah, nothing better to do,” I teased.

“Oh, no gorgeous blonds to be barely friends with?”

“I’m all yours until Darren drags you away.” My grin fell when I saw my father’s car parked outside the main entrance. “Shit.”

“What?” Her eyes followed my stare. “Oh. Want to run?”

“I wish. What the hell does he want?”

Dad got out of the car and glared at me. I had no choice but to go over to him.

“What’s wrong? Mam okay?” I asked.

“There was someone in your room,” he said. “I heard them stomping around. Who was it? Who do you have in our house?”

I flinched. “Did you see someone?”

“I heard them. Who is it? Tell me now, or I’ll—”

“I have no idea who was in the house. I’ve been here all day. And now I’m going to Zoe’s house. Goodbye.”

“Get in the car,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I’m going to Zoe’s house,” I said calmly and walked away, even more grateful for the comforting presence of Grim.

“Get. In.”

There was no way on earth I was getting into a car with him when that big nasty vein in his forehead was popping so wildly.

“I’m going to Zoe’s house,” I said calmly and walked away, even more grateful for the comforting presence of Grim.

Dad dug his fingers into my shoulder and spun me around. “I’m not done with you.”

“Are you ever going to be done with me?” I blurted.

He sneered. “You’ll see, won’t you? Now get in the damn car.” Spittle landed on his jumper.

I stared at it, numb again. He said my name, and I looked at him. His face was close to purple with rage, but I was certain he wouldn’t do anything in public. Almost certain.

“I made plans with Zoe,” I said, taking small steps backward. I turned and hurried away from him, knowing all the while I was making a mistake. I should have gotten into the car. I should never have said a bloody word and just gotten into the car.

I gave a little cry of pain as something connected with the back of my knee. I tumbled to the ground, absolutely mortified. I knew everyone was watching with a mixture of horror and glee. Our scene would create the kind of gossip that would never be forgotten, a stain that would last years. I realised too late that he wanted to shame me in public. That was my real punishment.
“Leave her alone!” Zoe yelled, but she didn’t approach. I willed her to stay back. If he raised his hand to her, I would die of embarrassment. I just wanted it to be over, for everything to go away. I scrambled to my feet and tried to walk away again. I didn’t look back, even when he grabbed my hair and pulled me against his chest.

Then I felt the shiver of fae magic and the biggest sense of relief in my life when a voice behind us spoke calmly and clearly. “Let her go. Right now.”

Brendan.

“Piss off,” Dad said, but he pushed me away and turned to swing a fist at Brendan. The faery blocked the punch with ease and knocked Dad to the ground. He gripped my father’s neck, making him gasp for air. I watched in fascination as Brendan did exactly what I had wanted to do. My father’s face turned white then red.

“He can’t breathe,” I said. “Brendan. Let him go!”

But Brendan had turned to stone, his eyes fixed on my father’s face. I desperately tried to pry his fingers away. “Stop it. Please!”

“No,” Brendan ground out. “He didn’t obey. He attacked me for all to see. I promised you safety. I own you for now. I can’t be seen to allow some human to mark my property. The fae are always watching, Cara. This is a lesson for all of us.”

“This isn’t how we do things.”

He looked at me, his eyes a curious mix of purple and green. “Don’t you want him to be punished?”

I took a deep breath, embarrassingly attracted to him at that second. That darkness had wound its way around my heart, squeezing any kind of decency out of it. “Not like this,” I whispered, tempted to stroke his face without even understanding why. Somebody was protecting me, finally, and it was all I could do not to throw myself at him.

I tried to stay calm, but his anger filled the air, and it tasted like mine. I understood it. I had been hiding the exact same feeling for a long time. He was so angry, and he needed to put on a show. I understood his need to prove himself, but he was losing control. I could feel it slipping from him, shifting completely. Drake and Brendan were melding into one, both of them vying for position. That would weaken Brendan in his enemies’ eyes, and if they took him down, I would go with him.

I stroked his wrist. “It’s okay. It’s over.”

He let go of Dad abruptly, confusion plain on his face. He took a few steps away from me before glaring at my father. “Don’t even look at her again,” he said.

Dad held his neck, coughing hard. I couldn’t look him in the eye. I was glad he had gotten a taste of his own medicine, but I knew the taste was bitter and hard to swallow. I felt uncomfortable for him. I should have been happy, but a thread of pity kept tangling up my emotions.

“Come with me,” Brendan said in a cool voice. I obeyed because I knew it wasn’t the time to argue. I left my father there, left the groups of students to their frenzied gossip, even Zoe. Brendan slowed to grab my arm, making me hurry alongside him. We walked for ten minutes until we came to a broken wall.

“Through here,” he said. “We’ll be safe for a while.”

He pushed me through the gap that I couldn’t remember ever seeing before, and I stepped into another world. When I thought about it, I couldn’t remember where we had stepped through.

“Where are we?” I asked, gazing around me.

“Fae realm. My world.”
The place was beautiful, the way I imagined Ireland of old to be, and filled with magic. Multiple rainbows adorned the purple sky. The warmth in the air belied the time of year. I stood on vibrant green grass, and woods and paths were all around. I couldn’t see much in the distance, but one of the paths led through an orchard, while another ended at a large pond. Over the tops of the trees, I could see a mountain range, but I couldn’t tell how far away it was.

Goose bumps rose on my skin. I would be in awe for eternity. Everything looked and smelled a million times better than home. The sun was golden against my pale skin, dancing in shimmers and making me look fae. I liked it.

Brendan went over to a willow tree, ducked under the branches, and disappeared. I ran after him, scared of... everything. He had taken a seat on a bench under the tree, but the bench looked alive. He bade me to sit next to him. The look in his eye made me afraid to do anything else, but I was still drawn to his darkness and violence, drawn to the king who could force anyone to obey.

The wind made the branches sway, and I could hear a babbling brook somewhere nearby, but the lack of noise was the most comforting. I realised it was because I figured I would hear an enemy approach.

“Are we safe here?” I asked. “Really?”

He didn’t look at me. “Nobody comes here unless they’re with me. It’s too close to the Hollows and the Nether. It’s my place. Where I used to come sometimes.”

“Alone?”

“Not always.”

We sat in silence until I began to fidget. Being without Realtín and Grim felt odd. I needed to do something, to connect with someone, to be less alone.

“Thank you,” I said in a quiet voice.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“And that man was your father? Your kin?”

I nodded. “He’s not a very happy man.”

“He’s a coward.”

“Maybe. Why are we here, Brendan?”

“I needed some... time. And we should go over a few rules. I can’t keep running around randomly saving you, Cara. I need you protected until the ceremony. That was our deal, and that means you have to stay with us. It would be truly embarrassing if another human ruined our chances.”

“My dad wouldn’t do anything to hurt your chances.” I wasn’t entirely sure of that.

“The fae could make him. You still don’t understand what it is we do, do you? I could make you do anything.”

“Like what?”

He gave a tight laugh. “Don’t push your luck. We indulge ourselves on human emotions, Cara. We can provoke and encourage, and it will only get worse without a ruler. There will be no limits. And you... you have something about you, too.

Someone with a weak mind could crack in your presence if they have already been pushed to the edge. You must stay with me now. It’s the only way to keep you safe.”

“I’m not safe with you lot,” I said hotly. “Someone tried to poison me today.”

He stiffened. “And I haven’t heard this because?”

“Um, I asked them not to tell you.” I chewed on my nail.

He shook his head and pulled my hand from my mouth. “That was idiotic. Between you and Drake, this will be the death of me. It was Drake’s anger, you know, and you’re... I couldn’t fight him, and I had to deal with the problem myself. It’s a pivotal
point. I can’t let the guards perform the punishments. I have a lot to prove, and you and Drake aren’t making it any easier for me. If my allies turn on me, he will hurt just as much as I do.”

“It’s not fair,” I said glumly. “He should have a chance to take his body back.”

“You’re right. It’s not fair. But it’s best for the fae if I’m king.” He looked around. “Time doesn’t change here the way it does where you’re from. The deeper into the realm you go, the more time passes in your world. We age slowly here, but it’s too sheltered for most of us to stay indefinitely. Your world is so much more fun when you’ve had all the fun there is here.”

“I like the idea of having time to breathe. Why aren’t we allowed to know about this place? How can all of this be here and we never see it?”

“It’s beyond your limits,” he said. “Humans would destroy the beauty and die from the ugliness, if they could even understand this place at all. This is neutral territory. Farther out, past the meadows, the divide begins. If you go past the hollow hills and enter the marshlands, you’ll end up chasing lights for eternity. And if you happened to step into the Fade…” He shook his head. “Just don’t do that. If I ever bring you here to hide, you stay on this bench. No matter what happens, you don’t move until I come and take your hand. Don’t take mine, don’t stand, don’t come to me. I’ll come to you. Do you understand?”

“I understand. Relax already.” I leaned down to touch the grass. It felt different from the grass at home. “Are there other humans here?”

“In this realm? Yes. They’ve been here so long that they can never leave, or they’ll grow old and die instantly. This is the Tír na nÓg of your stories, Cara. It’s a sad existence for a human. Your lives are so short and meaningless, and you never quite know what to do with any extra time.”

“There you go again.”

“But yours will have meaning,” he added. “You have a part to play that actually means something.”

“And when it’s all over, I get to go home and pretend none of this ever happened?”

He gave me a pointed look, and a shiver ran through me. He was such a dangerous, beautiful creature. The fact I was attracted to his darkness said more about me than it did about his charm.

He leaned in close, and my heart beat extra fast. “You could stay here as your reward. I would allow one wish if you helped me. But this isn’t a life, not for a human. You would hide here, avoiding death but never really living, not the way you want to, not the way you’re meant to.”

“I wouldn’t want to live for an eternity. What’s to live for?”

He rested a hand on my knee. “There’s a lot to live for, child of Ireland. You should know that better than I, you with the miniscule lifespan. But you don’t, or it wouldn’t have been you who witnessed that night. So why does the light keep dying in your eyes?”

His question threw me so much that a sob caught in my throat. I wasn’t unhappy; I was disinterested. In everything, until Drake. I had woken up that night, every emotion inside me had been awakened, and it had all been because of the fae. My world had come to life.

“It doesn’t,” I lied.

Zoe had once drunkenly told me to get away from her because it hurt too much to look at me. People thought of me as miserable and cold. I blocked off my emotions, brick by brick, so it always surprised me when anyone saw past the wall and into the hollow that should have been my heart.
He touched my cheek and made me look at him. “Doesn’t it?”
I knew I was being entranced. I stared into his green eyes and felt his magic surround me until there was nothing else in the world. And there wasn’t, not in that place. I could stay and wait and avoid my world, if I wished, and suddenly, that didn’t seem so bad anymore. He could be kind to me, but one day soon, he would grow tired, and I would be forgotten. I wasn’t sure if I would care, but when he touched me, the longing for fae eased just a little.

He leaned in to steal a kiss, and I knew I was going to let him.
“Why would a king want to kiss a girl?” I asked as his lips brushed against mine.
“The king likes to taste the world,” he replied, holding my gaze. “He doesn’t want to keep the girl.”
I wished for purple but let myself get lost in green, allowing his eyes to swallow me. I let the king taste what he didn’t want to keep because I felt something. Maybe it wasn’t real, but imaginary bliss was far better than none at all. And that was the biggest danger in my life, far more perilous than faery assassins and poisoned food and dickhead fathers.

His fingers gripped my shoulders hard, and I knew it was Drake, so I pulled him closer and kissed him as if I would never kiss anyone again. Drake kissed me back, and that was all that mattered. We were wrapped up in the madness together.
“Wait,” he said at last, pulling away.
I stared up at solid violet eyes. “Hi.”
“Didn’t you listen to anything I said?”
“I listened.” I got to my feet and pushed through the willow branches to walk along the meadow, wishing he would stop trying to ruin everything.
“Why did you let him kiss you again? Why let him charm you? You knew. I saw it in your eyes, and you still let him. Haven’t I told you how dangerous we are? What we can do? He’ll take your mind, take everything from you until there’s nothing left.”
“Maybe that’s better than anything else.”
His expression softened. “I’m sorry about your father. I saw… it’s the first time we’ve both truly agreed on anything, which was probably the most terrifying part of this whole experience.”
“Don’t talk about him here. Stop ruining it.” I folded my arms and stared at the ever-changing sky. The beauty had been spoiled. I saw everything through different eyes. The place was gaudy rather than pretty, garish rather than soothing. Everything was a cover for something less pleasant. My father’s memory had tainted it. The change left a bad taste in my mouth, and I had to force the tears to stay away.
“I have to get you out of here,” he said softly, resting his hands on my waist. “The longer you stay, the harder it is to leave.”
I shoved his hands away and ran. I ran past a stream that didn’t ripple, through a meadow that never ended. He caught up with me, but by then I was crying. I wasn’t even sure why.
“Stop,” he urged, holding me. “You have to go home. This isn’t the right place for you.”
I heaved out a breath, trying to break free. He held me tighter, keeping me against his chest, and his touch made me forget to struggle.
“Why not?” I demanded. “What if this is the most perfect place for me? I hate it back there. No. I don’t even hate it; I just don’t care. I can’t bring myself to feel anything. The only time I feel alive is when I’m terrified, so I get into trouble just to feel something. I don’t need to do that with the fae. I feel everything, all the time, around you.”
“That’s because we’re trouble all of the time.”
My chin trembled. “But I so badly want to keep it. Just let me keep it.”
“Hush,” he said, stroking my hair. “Calm down and listen to me for a minute. At the
festival, you were desperate to leave. You wanted to live. What’s changed?”
“I’ve never lived.” I broke free and sat on the grass, pulling velvety strands loose
from the earth. I could live there, but I was afraid I might forget home. Forgetting
Darragh was my biggest fear. I pored over photos of him just to keep his features
branded in my mind. I was losing his memory, even as I struggled to keep it. If I
stayed with the fae, I’d lose Darragh for good. If I didn’t, I’d never truly feel again.
“Talk to me,” Drake said, sitting next to me.
“Nothing’s changed,” I said. “I want to live. I want to be happy, but it just doesn’t
happen. I don’t know how to feel happiness properly. There’s something wrong with
me, something… broken. I just want to know what it’s like. I want to be… like you.”
He cocked his head to the side. “You are like me. The reason I make him weak is
because I’m not pure-blooded fae. My mother was human. I’m more like you than
you think. Too different to fit in anywhere, and yet if I wasn’t, I would be just like
them and never know any better.”
I blinked. “You’re half human? But… you got the wings and everything.”
He laughed softly. “They’re a nuisance. Always getting in the way. Trust me, you
don’t want the wings.”
“But you have the magic and the freedom and the—” I bit down on my words. “And
you’re trapped now. I’m so sorry.”
“Nobody in the world is truly free if you know their story. I’ve come to learn that.”
He pulled me between his legs, making me lean against his chest so he could wrap
his arms around me. He was like a human, except better. He was like a faery, except
better. He was like nothing else, and the only slivers of true happiness came when he
touched me. The pain of the real world couldn’t hurt me when his skin was against
mine. The racing of his heart against my back brought me comfort. I had been with
boys before but never out of love. It was the first time I had gotten something good
from being so close to a man, and he wasn’t really a man at all.
“What makes you so unhappy?” His breath tickled the back of my neck.
Something came over me like a warm, comforting blanket. I felt safe, and the words
spewed out before I could stop them. “I’m not unhappy. Not really. I’m just…
nothing. That’s my default mode. Nothingness. My mother loves me. I know she
does, but sometimes I think she’d be happier if I wasn’t around.”
I thought of how freely she smiled when my father showed her affection, but once
he noticed me there, he usually closed himself off from her and became scowly and
mean, as if I brought out the worst in him. Mam would often look at me with sad,
loving eyes, and I would feel like the ultimate third wheel, as though I could never
belong.
“Why would you think that?” Drake asked.
“My father hates me, and all of the aggro between us hurts her. I don’t understand
why it happens. I don’t know why he hates me. He loved my brother, and he used to
kind of ignore me, but when my brother died, it was like he forgot to hide how much
he hated me. When I’m not there, he and Mam are happy, but around me, it’s like
everything turns sour. I ruin everything. Maybe I’m unlovable.”
“Nobody’s unlovable.”
“My brother acted like he loved me, but he took his own life and left me. He called
me Butterfly, and he didn’t care that Dad didn’t like me, but Darragh left me alone.
My grandparents acted like they loved me, but after Darragh’s funeral, they had a fight with my dad, and they’ve never been back.”

“No. I was just a kid. I wasn’t allowed then, but they never came for me, so I just… I suppose I thought they had changed like my father, realised they hated me and didn’t care anymore. Maybe Dad would have left if he had the chance, too.”

“You could stay with Brendan,” he said. “If being at home is so bad.”

I turned to look at him. “Why are you agreeing with him all of a sudden?”

“I didn’t realise how bad your home was for you.”

“I can’t, because if I go, I might never see Mam again. But I want to go. I want to be with the fae all the time. I want to see you and Brendan and Grim and Realtín every single day.”

“Why?”

I barely heard the question. “I can’t help it. When I don’t see you, I can’t concentrate, and when I do, I feel so good that I never want it to stop. I want more and sooner and—” I sat up straight. “Are you doing something to me? Making me talk?”

His face was sad as I got to my feet. “This is what we are, Cara. If we don’t get our own way, we take it.”

“That’s not fair, Drake. That was my stuff to tell.”

“You’re right,” he said, his wings twitching as he rose. “Would you like me to take you home now?”

I shoved him, my anger burning me from within. “You’re all the same. All of you! Devious bullies. Get me out of here.”

I seethed, feeling betrayed and wide awake all of a sudden. There were some things I kept hidden, and I hadn’t wanted to say any of the things he had coaxed out of me. I hadn’t wanted to remember the things that might have caused me pain if I let myself feel it. And he had found out the truth—that I was addicted to his touch, to fae magic, addicted to everything he had tried to tell me wasn’t real. He would never believe what I felt was true.

He led me to the broken wall, keeping a safe distance between us. Tears slid down my cheeks, but as I grew closer to my own world, my barrier solidified again, ready to protect me. When we stepped through, I felt disoriented. My world looked colourless, muted and dull. I checked my watch; only a few minutes had passed.

“Grim and Realtín are waiting for you back at the college,” Drake said.

I walked away, refusing to check to see if he followed.

Grim and Realtín spotted me before I reached them. They rushed to meet me, but their smiles were strained. Most of the students were still standing around, probably talking about my father. I left before anyone could speak to me.

The fae kept up with me in silence. I realised Grim was carrying my schoolbag and took it from him. I sat at a bus stop and hugged the bag. Realtín sat on my shoulder and stroked my cheek. I stared at a spot on the road as the last sparks of happiness died. The surges of emotion that Brendan and Drake provoked were already weakening. Perhaps I was becoming too used to their presence.

“If I hadn’t been a witness or a sacrifice,” I said, “if I had just turned up at the festival, what would have happened to me?”

Grim cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. “One of the fae would have played with you until he grew bored. Then he would have likely tortured you or made you hurt yourself. He may have let you go someday, but it’s more likely you would have died a horrible death.”
“But why? Why do fae torture humans like that? Or you helping around the house? What do you get out of it? Even Realtín, pulling hair and throwing things. What’s the point?”

“Humans are full of emotions,” Grim said. “We can make them feel more strongly, which in turn, nourishes us. We feed on the happiness or pain, depending on the fae. Some enjoy anger or sadness, but humans are always some kind of entertainment. Most fae don’t care about death; they just like to feed on the humans’ fear and pain.”

“What about me? What do I feel?”

He hesitated, and Realtín’s hand stopped stroking. “Not very much,” he said in a quiet voice. “Most of the time, you feel very little. But when you do feel, it’s powerful, an electric surge that is almost too much to bear. All of the guards are eager to watch over you because they say the rush from you almost dying is so significant. I’m sorry, Cara. It’s… I know we seem like monsters to you.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. I wanted the truth. Most of the time, I only really feel around the fae. I mean, if there’s danger, I feel that, but that night, at the festival, I felt everything for the first time. Not just the danger. I feel like I might fade away when you’re all gone.”

“You won’t,” Grim said firmly. “You’re just not used to the feelings. Hold on to them, Cara. Don’t let them go. You learned to kill them. Let them survive.”

I chewed on my nails. “I’m not sure I know how. He makes me feel.”

“Drake? Or the king?” Realtín asked sharply.

“Both of them. I don’t know. It’s addictive. My brother was addicted to prescription drugs, and now I’m addicted to magic. How fucked up is that? Sometimes, I think I’ll do anything just to feel for another second, and that scares me, but I can’t keep away. I don’t know that I’ll ever move on from this.”

“Some fae are more powerful,” Grim said. “Perhaps that’s the difference. And perhaps you should keep your distance from both of them.”

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “I’m learning.”

“Did the king do something?” Realtín asked. “Something to hurt or offend you?”

“No.” I sighed. “Everything he does is something I want. It was Drake. Drake’s the one who let me down. But he fucked up.”

The fae both looked confused.

I tried to explain. “The things he does to hurt me are for the reasons that make me care about him. He tries to protect me in ways that make me angry, but his reasons make me…” I shook my head. “I’m in big trouble this time. I’m falling for someone who shares a body, someone who won’t be around for very long.”

“Unless you help him survive,” Realtín said slyly. “Unless you make him strong enough to rid himself of Brendan for good.”

I stared at her, thinking fast. Maybe I could help Drake get his body back after all. Except I wasn’t sure I wanted Brendan to fade away either.
Chapter Twelve

When I turned the corner to the road my house was on, my stomach dropped. Mam was standing a few feet away, wringing her hands. When she saw me, she flew at me, her face pale and shimmery.

“You stupid girl,” she said, but there was no anger in her voice, only fear. “What did you do?”

I was in no mood to placate her. “Do you ever ask him what he does? He waited outside the college and attacked me in front of everyone. So somebody stopped him. That’s what happened, Mam. That’s what I did. I was a fucking victim, yet again.”

“He’s going crazy,” she said, bending over as if about to throw up. “He tried to get into your room, but the door is stuck or something, and it’s driving him insane. He started smashing up the place, and I can’t get him to stop. I don’t know what to do, Cara. You’re leaving me with no choice.”

“What are you on about? Call the police if he’s wrecking the house. What are—”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“Stay with Zoe. She won’t mind. She’ll even lend you clothes. I know she will.”

“But my stuff is—”

“I’ll text you when it’s safe to get your things. I had to call his boss to let him know he’s taking vacation days for the rest of the week. I can’t let him go to work in this state. I’ll take him out of the house, help him cool down. You can take what you need when he’s not here, and everything will be okay.”

“What are… are you kicking me out?”

She dragged her fingernails down her cheeks. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t keep everyone happy. I tried, and I tried, but it doesn’t work. It gets worse. I’ve ruined everything, but I can’t change the past, so you have to go.”

“Mam,” I whispered, feeling that chill in the pit of my stomach. If I left, it would be for good. Nobody came back in our family. Once they left, it meant forever. I knew that was what she was telling me, but I couldn’t believe it. Not at all. “Please, Mam. Kick him out. We’ll be happy. You and me. He’s the one who’s made us miserable.”

“I’m afraid of what will happen if you stay, Cara! I’m so afraid. I don’t have any other options.”

“Mam,” I whispered, feeling that chill in the pit of my stomach. If I left, it would be for good. Nobody came back in our family. Once they left, it meant forever. I knew that was what she was telling me, but I couldn’t believe it. Not at all. “Please, Mam. Kick him out. We’ll be happy. You and me. He’s the one who’s made us miserable.”

“I’m not miserable with him! He makes me happy, but you… he said he wouldn’t be able to deal with it, but I didn’t believe him, and I forced him. I forced him to watch me love you. It was a mistake. It was all such a mistake, but I couldn’t face the alternative.”

“I don’t… I don’t understand.”

“I’m afraid of what will happen if you stay, Cara! I’m so afraid. I don’t have any other options.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “You have plenty of options. You could be a mother to me, be there for me the way you’re supposed to. You never… between the two of you… why are you doing this to me? What have I done? He’s picked on me my entire life, and I have no idea why. Yet you take his side, each and every time. I was the child, Mam. Me. Not him. I needed you. Not him. Why couldn’t you pick me? Just once?”

“I chose you when it made all of the difference! And it’s gotten me nothing but grief. He needs me more than you know. You don’t understand what it’s been like for him to—”

I took a step back. “You’re right. I don’t understand. Not you, not my grandparents, not Darragh, not him. I don’t understand why none of you stuck by me when I needed you. I don’t understand what I did to be undeserving of your love. I don’t know why
you all think it’s okay to treat anyone this way, never mind family. It’s on days like
this that I don’t blame Darragh for what he did.” I walked away.
“Cara,” she called. I looked back to see tears streaming down her cheeks. “I don’t
want this. I don’t want to lose you, too.”
“Then get rid of him!”
“I can’t watch him then. If you go, I can keep him away from you. I can stop it from
getting out of control again. But you can’t be together. I’m too scared of what will
happen. It’s getting worse all of the time, and I—”
“Whatever makes you feel better.” I turned and left her there.
“I’ll text you!”
I didn’t look back and let out shuddering breaths as I turned back around that corner.
I kept walking even as Grim and Realtín called my name. They caught up with me.
“Did you lock my bedroom door?” I asked.
“Grim thought it would be best if—”
“Thanks. You should probably tell Brendan that I’m staying with Zoe. I mean, I
have to ask, but… yeah, just tell him I’ll be at Zoe’s.” I pulled my phone out of my
pocket and dialled my best friend’s number. She answered immediately, and I knew
she had been waiting for me to call.
“Can I stay at your place tonight?” I asked.
“Yeah, of course. Good idea.”
“Not really my choice,” I said. “Mam kind of kicked me out.”
Pause. “What a fucking idiot of a woman.”
“He’s her husband,” I said automatically. “And I’ll be moving out soon, so best
choice for everyone, right?”
“Oh, Cara. Are you coming over right now?”
“Yeah, but I’ve no stuff with me. Just my schoolbag and what I’m wearing. Oh, shit,
you had plans with Darren.”
“Don’t worry about any of that. Just come over. Mam has dinner on. You’ll feel
better after you have something to eat and a nice bath.”
“Thanks. I mean that, Zoe.” I hung up and kept walking, but with purpose. “I’ll stay
with Zoe for a few nights,” I told my fae friends. “Then I’ll look for somewhere else.
Maybe I’ll go fulltime at the supermarket.”
“You could stay with us,” Realtín said. “You saw the room the king let you use.
That could be yours for as long as you want. Then you’d be so safe.”
“I’m fine now,” I said. “You don’t understand, Realtín. I lose myself with so many
fae around me. I forget how to be normal.” I heaved a sigh. “Besides, I really don’t
think it’s a good idea for me to be under the same roof as Brendan and Drake. Or
Sorcha, for that matter.”
“Do you love him?” Realtín asked bluntly. “Is that why he’s so strong? Because of
love?”
“It’s not love.”
She gave me a knowing grin. “Not yet?”
“Don’t encourage her,” Grim said. “Cara, the king is not… he’s not the right fae to
fall for, and Drake is fading. It’s slow, but it’s happening. By Imbolc, he’ll be gone.
Do you really want to care about someone only to lose him?”
“Grim, I wouldn’t know what to do if a person I loved actually stuck around. And
you two have to play nice at Zoe’s house. She’s good to me. Be good to her.”
Realtín stuck out her tongue, which I hoped meant yes. Realtín sent an invisible
guard back to let Brendan know of our change in plans. I wanted to see Brendan
again, but I really didn’t want to see him again. Whether it was his royal power or
something to do with Drake, I lost myself around the pair of them, and I wasn’t exactly known for making good decisions at the best of times.

Zoe was waiting in her front garden when I arrived. “I’m so sorry.” She threw her arms around me and pulled me in for a hug. “I’m such a fucking coward. I just stood there and let him go after you. I was probably in shock or something. You should have seen his face, Cara. He looked like he wanted to beat you to death. I was really scared for you.”

“I bet the entire world knows by now.”

She pulled back to grin at me. “Pretty much. But the general consensus is poor Cara for having such a shitty father. How are you feeling?”

“Shell-shocked. Everything just spiralled out of control really quickly. I don’t know what happened.”

“And you can’t go home?”

I shook my head. “I know it sounds childish to be so upset about it, but I don’t know what to do next. He’s been so controlling all of my life, and now I’m free, but I’d give anything to go back. What’s wrong with me, Zoe?”

“Not a thing,” she said firmly. “Come on inside, and we’ll chat about it.”

“Sure your mam won’t mind me staying?”

She rolled her eyes. “Any chance to act the hostess. She has dinner ready for us.”

Inside, Zoe’s mam made a fuss over me. I sat at her perfect kitchen table and tucked into the dinner she had made.

“Mam, Cara needs to speak to me in private, okay?”

Zoe’s mother bowed out of the room, even closing the door after herself.

Zoe shook her head. “That was easier than expected. So don’t worry. We’ll finish dinner, watch some soaps, and you can have a long bubble bath if you want. I have some ice cream in the freezer and an emergency family-sized chocolate bar, so we’re covered.” She squeezed my hand. “I need my bestie to be okay.”

“You’re insane,” I said, but I was seriously grateful for her.

Realtín flew around the room in curious mode, while Grim sat at the table. It was strange that Zoe couldn’t see them. The two parts of my world kept colliding, but they might as well have been miles apart.

“It was crazy, though,” Zoe said, “how your dad reacted. What was it all over?”

I shrugged. “He’s been mental lately. He said I had someone in the house. I wasn’t even there. No idea what he was on about. I don’t care, either. Can I stay for a few days? I know I need to sort out something permanent, but—”

“Stay as long as you need. Maybe your mam will calm your dad down, though. We’ll figure something out. So… about Drake…”

“Yeah.” I dropped my fork on the plate, my stomach turning. “Drake.”

“Honestly, Cara, I was more scared of him than your dad. I mean, he came out of nowhere and just laid into the man. I was cheering inside—don’t get me wrong—but when you walked off with him, I kind of felt a little bit sick. He’s not the most stable of people, judging by that performance. I mean, I know Darren acts the idiot sometimes with drink on him, but Drake was stone-cold sober, and he didn’t even shout or… I mean, it looked like something he does on a daily basis. Like it was nothing to him.”

I shrugged. “He was pissed about Dad. I dunno, maybe he just shows his anger in a different way.”

“I can’t believe your dad tried to hurt you. He stomped on your leg when you walked away. That must have hurt.”

“It’s nothing. Not really.”
She sighed. “I knew things were bad your way, but I kinda hoped you were
exaggerating. I didn’t realise he was so physical.”
I gave a shaky laugh. “He must have been having a bad day.”
“Maybe your boy was having a bad day, too. For barely friends, he was extremely
angry that you got knocked to the ground.”
I pressed my lips together, trying to come up with words that would give nothing
away. “He’s protective. That’s all. And yes, we’re barely friends. I know I had plans
with you, so I’m sorry for walking off with him, but I think both of us needed that
time out from everything. If I had waited for you, everyone would have mobbed us.”
She nodded. “You’re right. They mobbed me as it was. They all want to know about
Drake more than your dad, though.” The alarm beeped on her phone. She made a
face. “Pill time.” She went to the counter and rummaged through her handbag.
“Maybe you should get a prescription, too, eh?”
I knew she was fishing for information. “They make me sick.”
“So?”
“So they don’t work if you throw up straight after taking them!”
She narrowed her eyes at me. “Hmm. Does Drake know you’re not on the pill?”
I rolled my eyes. “It’s none of his business, Zoe. Or yours, for that matter.”
She swallowed the tiny tablet and took a seat next to me. “Just be careful, okay? So
what happened exactly when you went home?”
I ran my hands through my hair and sat back in the chair, my appetite gone. “Mam
was waiting for me on the road. She was in bits. I was mad at her, but I feel sorry for
her now. She has to live with him when he’s like that.”
“Would he ever hit her?”
I shook my head. “Never.”
“Do you not think you should talk to the police about today? I mean, you have
dozens of witnesses. It might get him to see that he’s in the wrong.”
“That would just make things worse for Mam. No matter what, I don’t want her to
suffer because of me. She was in an awful state when I saw her, rambling away. She
asked me to stay elsewhere. She said I can’t come back. I couldn’t get my stuff
because Dad was busy trying to break into my room to wreck my shit. He took his
temper out on the house, basically. So, yeah, it was goodbye from her. She said she’d
text me when it was safe for me to get my stuff.”
“That’s it? Just get your things and go? No, how do we fix this mess?”
I shrugged. “You don’t know what it’s like. When he acts like that, she plays nice
and does what she can to distract him. This time, it went too far. He’s her priority,
whether I like it or not, and I have to just deal with it. Besides, it’s about time I moved
out anyway.”
“I kind of hate your parents right now. I know I bitch about mine, but I’d rather the
suffocating mother than the kind who acts like she doesn’t give a shit. I’m so sorry for
you, Cara.”
“I’m fine.” And I was. My walls had been rebuilt, sturdier. I wouldn’t let anything
touch me. The things that happened were something to do with a different Cara, one I
couldn’t feel. I protected myself the best way I knew how.
“She’s wrong,” Grim said quietly. “Your mother cares just as much as hers. She
shows it in different ways, but nobody is perfect. We all do the best we can.”
I tried not to look at him, but it was hard when he spoke like that. I wanted to
believe, wanted the words to reach through the cracks in my walls and hit me right in
the heart. But I didn’t think I had a heart anymore; if I did, it was shrivelled and
cracked with lack of use.
After we finished dinner and destroyed the chocolate, Zoe ran me a bath, telling me to relax for as long as I needed. I wallowed in the water, trying to come up with decisions, to figure out my life. I had no family to speak of, nowhere to live, and I had to survive probable attempts on my life for almost three more weeks. After that, the fae would be done with me, and that would leave me with no protection.

But of everything that had happened, what played on my mind the most were kisses and willow trees. I didn’t know why Brendan had kissed me, and I didn’t care because it led to kisses with Drake. But Drake had made it clear that he wasn’t interested in anything else. Not that he would be around for anything else. Once Brendan regained his full powers, Drake would be gone. Unless I helped him.

Realtín’s hints were full of self-interest. If Brendan was gone, she and Grim would be free. But if Brendan was gone, then Drake could end up as king in his place, and I didn’t get the sense that he was in the least bit interested in that. He had one thing on his mind: revenge.

I had a niggling feeling that the loss of Brendan’s soul would hurt me almost as much as the loss of Drake’s. I wished I knew more about both of them, but at the same time, I knew I should avoid them. Drake was destined to fade, and Brendan didn’t care about anyone but himself. I had no future with either of them.

I got out of the bath and stared at my eyes in the mirror, trying to figure out if my pupils were larger than normal, if that was why my father hated them. They looked ordinary to me. Figuring out his reasons for hating me would have to wait another day.

When I left the bathroom, Zoe and her mother were already asleep, so I sat at the kitchen table with Grim and Realtín.

“We can get your things tomorrow if you need our help,” Grim said. “The door is protected, so nobody apart from you or us can enter. I’m sorry if that caused another problem with your family.”

“The problems existed long before you arrived,” I said. “What can I do to help Drake? Theoretically speaking. I know you have to be loyal to Brendan. But is there a way to help Drake?”

“You could ask a higher power for help, but you would need to give something in return, and I don’t believe your soul is worth this favour,” Grim said.

“She can make Drake stronger than Brendan,” Realtín said.

Grim shook his head. “I don’t know if that’s—”

“If anyone can do it, it’s her.” She looked at me. “If you fall for Drake. If he falls for you. That’s stronger than any love of power holding Brendan on this earth.”

“It’s not that easy,” I said. “I can’t just make somebody fall in love with me.”

“No,” she said. “But keep reminding Drake you’re there. Make sure he knows he cares what happens to you. Don’t let Brendan avoid you because Drake is always watching. Drake can block Brendan, but Brendan hasn’t learned to block Drake. I believe in you, Cara. I think this is possible.”

I looked at Grim. “You don’t agree?”

“Drake is stubborn. Very set in his plans. He will push you away to protect you. But you know that already, don’t you?”

I nodded. But if there was any chance I could keep Drake alive, then I would take it because I had nothing else to lose. I owed him my life. Maybe I could give him his.
Chapter Thirteen

The next day, Zoe did her best to make life seem normal. We had breakfast, went to our classes, and gossiped. And she convinced me that we were absolutely, definitely, no-maybes, going out that weekend.

Grim and Realtín were subdued, which almost certainly meant they were up to something. I kept checking my phone, hoping Mam would text to let me know she was okay.

My knee bounced under the table in the canteen during lunch. “Think everything’s…” I sighed.

“She’s fine,” Zoe said. “She’s a grown woman, and she makes her own decisions, Cara. You can’t do anything more for her. She made her bed; let her lie in it.”

I was surprised by the anger in her voice. Zoe didn’t usually put any energy into anger except when it came to Darren.

Mam sent me a text to let me know she was taking my father out that evening, so I could go over and get my things. I tried to ring her back, but she’d switched off her phone.

“That’s cold,” Zoe said. “Want me to go with you?”

“Nah. I’d rather do it myself. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. I might pop over to Darren’s for a bit while you’re gone.”

“You should. And Zoe? Thanks for everything.”

I wasn’t going to be alone at my house. Grim and Realtín would be with me, and probably an unseen bodyguard or two as well. Still, as we made the trek to my home that evening, I felt nervous. The worst-case scenario would have been my father being home, but all of the lights were out as we approached the house. I took a deep breath before letting myself in.

“Just pick out the things you want to take now and what you would like us to take care of for you,” Grim said reassuringly. “The king has told us to help, but we would have anyway.”

I smiled gratefully at him and stepped into the hallway. Black garbage bags lined the wall. Frowning, I checked all of the rooms downstairs and saw the aftermath of my father’s destruction. All of the precious things belonging to my mother, the photo frames and ornaments and antiques she loved to collect, all of them were gone. I guessed they were in the rubbish bags.

Sadness enveloped me. I had done that. I had provoked my father and pushed him to the limit. But he had been taking me to the edge for years. I hadn’t meant to throw us both off the cliff. With tears in my eyes, I waited for Grim to unseal my bedroom door. Inside, everything was as it should be, except for a note that had been slipped under the door. I picked it up.

_Cara, take what you need – just keep out of his way. There’s an envelope in my jewellery box on my dresser. It’s yours._

_Love you, X_

“Can you two start emptying my drawers?” I asked. “I need to get something from my mother’s room.”

They both seemed happy to help, but I was pretty sure Grim would do all the work while Realtín made a mess.
I headed into my parents’ room, a place I had never been welcome. My father didn’t like me in his space, and that was fine with me. Her old jewellery box was still intact, but I opened it slowly, feeling like a small child about to do something forbidden.

A bulky envelope sat on top of the few pieces of jewellery my mother owned, most of it things Darragh and I had made at school. As I took it, something else caught my eye—a necklace with a medal. Darragh had worn it every day that I could remember. He had only taken it off to die. I sucked in a breath before picking up the necklace, too. I held it tightly in my hand, trying to remember what life felt like when Darragh still lived.

The envelope was full of money and paperwork I might need, like my birth certificate and PPSN information. My mother had been ready for my departure. As I looked through the documents, I noticed a photograph of Darragh and me. I was about nine, and he was in his late teens. He was smiling, but there was an emptiness in his eyes that I might not have noticed if I didn’t know he’d committed suicide a year later. I looked awkward in the photo, my nest of black hair contrasting with Darragh’s blond locks.

In my parents’ room, one photo stood on the bedside table—Darragh and our parents, the three of them smiling and happy. Dad was almost unrecognisable. My longing to have known that man threatened to suffocate me. Darragh was maybe seven or so in the picture, so it had to have been taken before I was born. Mam’s hair was longer. She had started dyeing it, but back then, her hair was a lot lighter than I expected, definitely not as dark as mine. Dad was as fair as Darragh.

A cold feeling filled the pit of my stomach. I left the room before I could form the thought that struggled to pop into my head. I had been pushing it away for a very long time.

I got some bin bags and returned to my room to find Grim and Realtín dancing together. Grim blushed and pulled away when he noticed me, but Realtín spun around by herself as if in a trance.

“She gave me money,” I said. “Not much, but I have savings, and I still have a job, so I should be okay.”

“What about your classes?” Grim asked, which made me smile, considering how little use most of the fae had for human education.

I shrugged. “I’ll finish up the term and figure something out. Maybe go fulltime at work instead. Either way, I can’t stay with Zoe forever.” I dropped the envelope and medal on my bed.

Realtín reached out to grab it. “Ooh, pretty.”

“Don’t touch it!”

She flinched, jerking her hand back.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It was my brother’s. I just found it. I can’t… I don’t want anything to happen to it.”

“Where is he?” she asked.

I cleared my throat. “He died when I was a kid.” I turned and threw clothes into bags, not paying attention to what I might need.

“Perhaps I can deal with this,” Grim said, gently taking the bag out of my hands.

“Why don’t you relax for a few minutes?”

I nodded, close to exploding. Deep down, I had always known the day would eventually arrive. I just hadn’t expected it to happen when I had finally gotten my act together about work and school. I had run wild in my teens, and I was doing my best to grow up, but I just wasn’t ready to be on my own yet.
I sat at my desk and checked my email. V.G. Love had sent me his phone number. I saved it to my phone for later.

I moved to the bookshelves to look at the fake faeries, the things I had collected before I knew the horror behind the beauty. No matter how terrifying life with the fae could be, it was still more than I had on my own.

I spotted something new—a butterfly carved from wood hidden amongst the gaudy faeries. Surprised, I reached for the beautiful figure. Dad had insisted he heard footsteps in my room. Maybe someone had been there to leave… a gift? I held the butterfly close to my chest, unable and unwilling to put it back. Finally, I put it in my bag and went to help Grim, feeling invigorated for no real reason. We sorted everything, and he promised the fae would come for the rest of my stuff.

“The boxes under my bed… they’re pretty important to me, Grim.”

He nodded. “I’ll protect them myself.” He patted my hand. “New beginnings can be terrifying, but sometimes the best things are born from the darkest days.”

He looked at me pointedly, and I assumed he meant his relationship with Realtín. They had stuck by each other even when life hadn’t seemed worth living, and that had helped them survive.

“You’re right,” I said. “I can get through this. It’s not a big deal. I have friends, I have a job, and I might even get to finish my course. There are a million ways I could be worse off. I’m just being—” I froze at the sound of scratching at the window.

“What’s wrong?” Grim asked, tying up a bag.

“I thought I heard something. A cat maybe.” I chewed on my thumbnail and moved to the window. A shadow flew by, and I stepped back quickly. “I think something’s out there.”

“I’ll go,” Realtín said. “It’s likely the guard. Don’t worry.”

But fear had gripped my heart. It pounded in my chest, and the emotion was exhilarating. Grim made to move to the window as Realtín flew out of the room, but I yanked him back by the arm.

“You’re right,” I whispered. “Something’s not right. I can’t—”

A cat’s yowl made us both jump.

Grim frowned. “Maybe it was just—”

The window shattered, and a dark figure flew into the room. The glass had splintered inward, sending shards spraying across the room. I shielded my face with my hands, unable to remember how I had gotten on the floor.

The figure didn’t have wings, but it had claws. It slashed out, and I backed up in a hurry.

Grim threw a bag at the fae attacker. “Run!”

The attacker was over six feet tall. I couldn’t leave Grim to face him alone. I grabbed a camogie stick that I had flung carelessly on the floor while packing. I swung it at the fae’s head. Its hood fell as it avoided the blow, exposing a wretchedly ugly face. I swung again, but the fae grabbed the stick and shoved back. The momentum sent me flying against my desk.

Grim stabbed the fae in the leg with something, but the fae barely reacted except to strike back. Grim was flung into my bookcase. He lay slumped against it as the ceramic faeries tumbled on top of him.

“Grim!” I cried.

The attacker advanced on me. I reached onto my desk, wildly grabbing for anything I could use as a weapon. My hand landed on a can of deodorant. The fae gripped the back of my neck and yanked me toward it. It opened its vile mouth, revealing rotting
fangs. Two were longer than the rest, the only ones not falling to pieces. It leaned forward to bite, so I held up the can and pressed the trigger.

The spray went into its eyes—a direct hit! The creature yelped and loosened its hold. I scrambled away, cutting the palms of my hands on the glass scattered across my bedroom floor.

I heard the fae coming after me, so I grabbed a larger piece with two hands and rolled over onto my back. I slashed as the fae leapt at me.

As the blood pumped from the wound across its neck, I realised what I had done. I had only meant to slow the thing and protect myself. With a little scream, I pushed and crawled, trying to get away from the blood and the dying fae. It slumped on top of me, drowning me in murky-looking blood.

It seemed as if I kicked at the body for hours, trying to break free. I whimpered when Brendan walked in with Realtín. His eyes widened as he took in the scene. I pointed at Grim, and Realtín went into a frenzy.

“He’s fine,” Brendan said. “Realtín! Tell Sorcha to hurry.” He rolled the body off of me and frowned. “A rotting pooka. What were they thinking sending it here?” He lifted me to my feet. “Are you all right?”

I nodded, but I couldn’t stand on my own. I sat on my bed, making sure I didn’t stain my brother’s medal with pooka blood. I couldn’t think straight. All I could see was an ocean of blood.

“You’re hurt,” Brendan said gently.

“No.” I shook my head vehemently. “It’s… that thing’s blood.”

“Look at your hands. We’ll have to clean you up.”

“I have to go. I need to get my stuff out of here before Dad gets back.” I tried to stand, but I wobbled until I sat again.

“We’ll fix this,” he said.

Grim moaned. Realtín flew back into the room, followed by Sorcha.

“Sorcha,” Brendan said, “attend to her hands then take her where she wants to go. Watch over her tonight until the little ones are well enough to return.”

Realtín was tearing her hair out of her head in a panic. Grim smiled at her reassuringly, but she chattered excitedly, unable to snap herself out of the loop she had caught herself in.

Sorcha didn’t look pleased, but she nodded. “Into the bathroom,” she ordered me. “Wash your hands, and I’ll bandage them. Then we leave.”

Grim was trying to calm Realtín, but he had a massive goose egg lump on his head. Brendan was busy instructing a team of fae who stormed through the house as if it were a warzone. My bedroom was destroyed. My house was destroyed. My life was destroyed. I followed Sorcha to the bathroom, feeling as if a chunk of myself had been cut away.

“Next time, run,” the banshee said, closing the door behind us.

I ran the tap and held my hands under the faucet. The wounds were deep, but I barely felt the sting. I was too wired. “He would probably have killed Grim if I had.”

“So?”

I turned to stare at her. She was beautiful, but the darkness in her eyes was terrifying. “I care if people live or die.”

“Did you think twice about killing the pooka before he tore out your throat?” she demanded.

“I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“You didn’t mean to…” She threw her hands in the air. “How have you humans managed to survive this long? ‘Didn’t mean to kill him.’” She snorted. “Next time,
mean it. Brendan’s depending on you, and we’re all depending on him. Don’t mess it up.”
I finished cleaning my hands and turned off the tap.
“Don’t dry them,” she snapped, rummaging in her bag.
She took out some old-looking material and slapped it against my palm. I winced with pain, but a soothing effect happened immediately. The material pulsed and changed colour from beige to green.
“What is that?” I asked, holding my hand up to the light.
“It’ll eat any infection,” she said, pressing a second piece against my other palm.
“It’s alive?”
“Your wounds will keep it alive for a while. It’ll die and fall away when the skin knits together again.”
“So… what do I do with it then?”
She glared at me. “Throw it away, girl.”
I made to leave, but she held my wrist and squeezed.
“Let me go.”
“You know what I am,” she said. “If you betray him in any way, I’ll bring death to your family and friends. You’ll do whatever he says. If you don’t, everyone dies. Do you understand me?”
“Brendan will—”
She slapped my cheek. I tried my best not to flinch under her glare.
“Nobody can stop death,” she hissed. “When I invite it, it comes, and it isn’t picky about who it takes with it. You will do anything that’s required of you, and when it’s over, when Brendan’s forgotten all about you, I’ll consider letting you live. Now get out of here. I may have to spend the night with you, but that doesn’t mean I don’t get to entertain myself. Bother me once, and your friend won’t wake up in the morning. Do you get it now?”
I nodded sullenly. She would keep all of her promises. I could see it in her eyes.
Chapter Fourteen

I was awakened by tiny hands pinching my nose. I slapped Realtín away. “Stop that!”
“Huh? Cara? You awake?” Zoe’s voice was muffled by her duvet, but when she sat up in the dark and stared at me, I couldn’t pretend to be asleep.
“Yeah, sorry. Bad dream.”
“No worries. Sorry I was late home. Lost track of time. Mam said you had bandages on your hands. What happened?”
“Oh, I was clumsy and broke a glass.”
“Ouch. You should have come over to Darren’s. He was so funny earlier. Have you ever seen…?” She fell asleep, snoring lightly as her head hit the pillow.
“Realtín!” I whispered.
“Oh, how can you stand listening to her? She grates on me. Besides, we wanted to talk to you. Stupid human waking up whenever there’s a sound. What’s wrong with her?”
“You promised you would be nice to her.”
She held up a finger. “Ah-ah. I have never promised that. I keep promises. I said I would try. And I did try. But she’s too much for anyone.”
“We’re sorry for waking you,” Grim said. “We wanted to make sure you were okay.”
“Apart from the banshee threatening everyone I know, I’m great. Can she bring death? I mean, is that a thing, or was she bluffing?”
“Banshees court death,” Grim said. “It follows them around. I would take a banshee’s threat very seriously.”
“That’s what I was afraid of. How did it go after I left? Did you find out who sent the pooka?”
“No,” Grim said. “The king is very angry. And a little confused.”
“Confused?”
“This is the third attack on you. There have been no attacks on his life. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to him.”
“I’m just so popular,” I said with a sigh. “Did my parents go home?”
“They were delayed for a while, but all’s well now. We cleaned up your room as best we could and resealed the bedroom door. I asked the king to glamour the window so it appears unbroken. We thought you wouldn’t want to deal with yet another problem within your family.”
“You rock. What happened to the guard? I thought there were always some hanging around.”
Grim exchanged a worried glance with Realtín. “Apparently, there was some mix-up, and the pooka got close enough to attack.” He touched his head.
“Looks painful,” I said, feeling bad for him. “Thought you were a goner there.”
“So did I,” he said.
Realtín tapped my nose. “I can’t believe you killed a pooka!”
“I didn’t actually mean to kill the thing.”
“You saved my life,” Grim said. “Pooka leave no witnesses. They’re too hungry for that.”
“Anytime,” I said. “Who do you think sent the pooka?”
“Sadler, perhaps,” he said.
“Who is this Sadler chap?”
Grim made a face. “He’s a distant relative of the old queens and of old royal blood. He was once Brendan’s father’s right-hand man, but it all turned sour. It’s said that he took a human wife for the summer, but Brendan stole her and made her crazy. He was one of those who helped get rid of Brendan in the first place.”
“So he’s old?”
“They say he hasn’t visited the human world since he lost his human wife,” Grim said. “He had her beheaded in the end.”
“I heard he loved her,” Realtín said. “That she wasn’t just a summer wife and that his heir is her son. One of the old sprites once told us that he treated her as an equal. Brendan made her his dog to spite Sadler, all for laughs. That was the beginning of his end.”
“But he’s reborn,” I muttered. “He sounds like a monster.”
“He was,” Grim admitted. “Perhaps he still is. Either way, Sadler wants his revenge. I can’t fault him for that. It’s his right. But it’s now Brendan’s right to take the throne.”
“Are there any other contenders for the throne?”
“Some,” Realtín said. “None of any consequence. Sadler and Brendan have the biggest claims. You’ll see them all during the week of the ceremony.”
“Am I going to make it to the ceremony?” I asked.
“We hope so,” Realtín said.
“What will happen there? Nobody’s told me much yet.”
“There’ll be a feast,” Grim said. “People will speak for their choices, and the main players will be paraded. You will likely be alongside Brendan for this. It will be safer and make you a part of the ceremony. If you reach that point, you’ll probably make it. There will be trials, but none of us know exactly what will happen. The crones will decide on the day. They’ll read the stones and tell us all our roles. That’s how the game is played.”
“I’m starting to get scared,” I admitted.
“You killed a pooka,” Realtín said. “You can do anything.”

***

The next morning, I rang the number V.G. Love had sent me. An old lady answered the phone, and after much shouting and repeating myself, I arranged to meet the author that afternoon at a café. I skipped my last class and got to the restaurant twenty minutes early. I fidgeted nervously, wondering if the author was ever going to show.
A woman sat in the chair opposite me, wearing sunglasses. Her hair was almost platinum, and when she removed her sunglasses, she revealed pretty blue eyes.
I knew her. “You!”
“And you,” she replied. “The one who sneaks into the back of my lectures and thinks I don’t notice. Introduce me to your friends. I noticed them in my room, too.”
I swallowed hard. “Their names are Grim and Realtín. They’re kind of… watching over me.”
“I can see that, Cara. Sorry if I kept you waiting. I wasn’t sure if this was a good idea. I knew it was you when I saw that email. It had to be. There are no coincidences.”
I gazed at her intently. “So you’re V.G. Love.”
“My real name’s Veronica Greene. We haven’t actually spoken before. You’re the quiet one, even when you were officially part of the course, but I noticed you, even
then. Like I said, no coincidences. I suppose you can call me Ronnie.” She smiled, but it seemed fake. And she could see.

“This is kind of a surprise,” I said. “I didn’t expect to know you.”

“Life can be surprising,” she said briskly. “Looks like you’ve gotten tangled up in something big.”

“Somehow,” I said. “I can’t believe you write those books. And teach that course. Aren’t you afraid they’ll come back for you?”

She lifted her bag onto the table. “I can’t talk in front of those two.”

“Can you give us a minute?” I asked the fae. They obliged after a little persuasion.

“Thank you,” Ronnie said. “I appreciate it. As for my work, the fae can be full of themselves. They love to be talked about, especially since the world has almost forgotten about them. They’re losing their power here. Their infamy is fading, and it will never be the same again.” She pulled out her purse. “Besides, I want them to come back for me.”

That surprised me. I had been hoping she could tell me how to get over that feeling. “What’s your story?” I asked.

She avoided the question by ordering a coffee from a passing server. I couldn’t stomach anything. Ronnie asked me polite questions about my classes until her drink arrived.

She took a few sips as if working herself up. “I spend my evenings telling stories, but somehow my own is the hardest to tell. I was a little older than you and staying with family in the south of the country. I walked a different way to the market one day and found myself in a field I didn’t recognise. I got so sleepy that I lay down and fell asleep right there. Can you imagine? I woke up in the bedroom of the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. He was quite astonishing. But cruel. I still bear the marks.”

She pulled down the collar of her jumper and showed me a ring of scars around her neck. She rolled up her sleeves, which covered similar scarring. I couldn’t help gasping in horror.

“He chained me, humiliated me, but I was in love. I let him do anything he liked. Even when it hurt, I found pleasure, as long as it was with him. I saw horrible things, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t care. I was found a few days later in the woods, bleeding and hallucinating, my clothes torn to shreds. My body took a while to heal, but I still dream of him every night in all of his… glory.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said. “That sounds awful.”

“Awful?” Her voice grew playful. “No, it wasn’t. Not then. Afterward, the memories made me scream. But for that one night, I felt pleasure that most humans never dream of. I craved more. I was desperate to return, to touch him just once more. The years passed and the addiction diminished, but I still wanted to go back.”

“You want to spend another night with him?”

Her expression grew cold. “No, I want to punish him. I want to do to him exactly what he did to me. I want to go there, knowing I can hurt him. You see, I’ve learned quite a few things since then.”

“That’s not a good idea. He’s probably dead in any case. The queens are dead, and there’s a king waiting to be sworn in, but he happens to have been reincarnated into another faery’s body. They led me there the night everything changed, intending to sacrifice me or use me. I’m a witness now. This king needs me so he can regain his power. I’ve got a target on my back. I… I killed a pooka last night. It’s out of control.”

She tutted. “Just a child.”
“Can you help me? I don’t know what to do. A banshee’s threatened to kill everyone I know if I don’t help, and the king reckons the fae will destroy everything if he isn’t there to rein them in, but if I help him, the fae who owns the body he inhabits will fade away. And he’s the one who saved me from them all the first time.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Interesting story. You need to protect yourself, but nothing works on all of the fae. They’re secret-keepers, the lot of them. Oh, they play and frolic and laugh and act, but they hold their secrets fiercely. Their magic is different from one fae to the next, and most of them fake limitations so nobody will figure out their true weaknesses.”

“Then how do you know how to hurt the one who took you?”

Her laughter was harsh. “Even warriors die, Cara. I’ve spent decades researching them, speaking with victims, and piecing together every bit of information there is. Most people don’t even realise what’s happening to them. Most paranormal experiences can be blamed on the fae. Ghosts, poltergeists, even UFOs—it always comes back to some branch of the fae. They’re sneaky.”

“In your book, you spoke about iron, but all of the fae I’ve met are in the middle of a city, surrounded by iron and everything else.”

“If they’re strong enough, they can mask the effects. Your little friends are not affected, and that might be because they’re owned by a powerful fae who protects them, or it might mean they were born in the human world. Some fae can acclimatise. You’ve heard of changelings, yes?”

My cheeks burned. “A little.”

“Well, when cities began to appear, the fae discovered that the progeny of changelings could easily survive in the cities. Fae rarely reproduce, of course, but the changelings seemed to produce a kind of fae who had evolved to resist iron. It’s quite a special trait.”

“So iron never works?”

She held up a hand. “I didn’t say that. Only fae who spend time in this realm can avoid the effects of iron. Those who spend too long in the fae realm will suffer horribly. They are too pure for this world. If you ever enter their realm, take some iron with you, just in case.”

I rubbed my face. I felt so hopeless.

“Don’t thank fae for their help unless you want to insult them. They take it as you wanting to forget what they did for you, acknowledging it so you can toss it away and no longer remain grateful. A debt takes a lifetime to repay, and a thank you means you refuse to pay it. They have unusual ideas when it comes to manners. Their traditions are extremely outdated. They believe they’re superior to us. They might call you by your full name, but don’t expect them to reveal theirs. They began the naming traditions among humans to take away their power, or so the fae legends say.”

“Really? A name has power?”

“They believe your name is like a collar on a dog. Hold the collar, and you have control of the dog.” She shrugged. “That’s how most of them think. You can break their laws without ever realising it. Tread carefully and learn how to read between the lines. They respect trickery above all else, so your only hope is to trick one of them into protecting you for a lifetime. Often, the fae warn you without really warning you, and it’s only later that you realise what they meant. Learn how they twist words, and you’ll have the upper hand.”

“I don’t know how to use any of this,” I admitted, feeling stressed.

“Most people don’t know how to use information until the right time comes. Oh, they can’t out and out lie. They can riddle and twist and weave words until it’s hard to
find the sense, but they detest lies; they see them as a weakness. Remember this and use it if you need to make a deal. Their deals are unbreakable, so be careful.”

“So, basically, I have to outwit them?”

She cocked her head. “Pretty much. But please, whatever happens, tell me about it. I think it would make an amazing book.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said.

“Another thing. The royalty sometimes gain power from certain mythical weapons. Keep an eye out for those. If something seems like it might be important, but they downplay it, then it’s probably huge. Their most prized possessions look old and broken but are worth gold to them. Be smart. Don’t eat or drink their food. Don’t look them in the eye for too long. Don’t kiss them or touch them frequently, and whatever you do, don’t fall in love with one! Losing your heart is worse than losing your name. The cravings will be immense when all of this is over. You’ll end up going cold turkey when they tire of you. Be prepared.”

I bit my lip. Um...

She rose from her seat. “I have to go. Keep my number and get in touch. If you can… perhaps you could invite me along to this ceremony. And Cara, keep your distance from me on campus. I think we both know it would be a bad idea to be seen together very often.”

She left, and I waited for Grim and Realtín to reappear. They hadn’t left, only concealed themselves. Ronnie might have seen them, but she didn’t sense their presence like I did.

“Try not to tell Brendan any of that,” I said under my breath.

“You knew we were here?” Grim asked.

“If you had so many questions, you could have asked us,” Realtín hissed.

I gave her a sad look.

“We would be forced to tell him what questions she asked,” Grim said. “She keeps us all safe by asking someone else.”

Realtín kissed my cheek. It felt like damp butterfly wings.

“In case you didn’t know,” I said, “if I say thank you, I’m just trying to be polite. I’m not being ungrateful or anything.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” Realtín teased.

My phone rang. I checked the caller ID. Zoe.

“Cara!” she sobbed when I answered.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“My house was trashed. Mam’s freaking the fuck out. Somebody came and wrecked everything, and she slept through it. Like, what the hell is wrong with him?”

“I’m so sorry, Zoe. Is she okay?”

“No! She thinks it was your dad. She’s absolutely fucking terrified. All of our stuff is just… what the hell is wrong with him?”

“Just take care of your mother,” I said. “If it was my dad, he’ll pay for it.”

“What about you? Are you coming back here?” She sounded half-hysterical at the notion.

“No, I’ll sort something else out. Just in case it was him. Have you called the police?”

“Yeah, they’re on their way. I have to go. Be really careful, Cara. He’s a fucking psycho.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”
She hiccupped a sob. “Darren’s bringing people over to watch the house. I don’t
know. He sounded weird on the phone, like he was dying for a fight or something. Is
it just me, or has the world gone wonky this week?”
“It’ll be okay. Stay in the house with your mam and let Darren sit outside in his car
or something, okay?”
She agreed, but I didn’t believe her. I hung up and sighed. Realtín had already
disappeared. Grim and I left the café.
I waited until we moved onto a quieter street before speaking. “If it wasn’t for the
fact that Zoe’s mother slept through everything, I would have blamed my dad.”
Grim nodded. “At least she slept through it. It might not haunt her now. Although, I
would not have been surprised if your father had been the one to do this. The air tastes
of darkness, a reminder of the old Unseelie queen’s effect on the world.”
“People do seem angrier than usual lately. Is that a fae thing?”
“It’s likely,” Grim said. “Many fae encourage violence and madness. The
consequences fill them up. Without a leader—”
“Get it.” I shrugged and walked faster. I had no idea where I was going.
Brendan fell in step with me.
I glanced his way. “Well, if you’re here, I take it something big, bad, and fae is
going on.”
He reached for my hand then seemed to think better of it because he rubbed his chin
instead. “Likely so. Your home was attacked, and I’m told the place you’re staying in
was attacked. It’s time for you to stay with us.”
“I can’t stay with you lot. I’ll lose my mind.”
“You’ll be safe. What if our enemies decide to harm your friends next time?”
“And what happens to me when you don’t need me anymore? Am I as good as
dead?”
He glared at Grim. “What have you been telling her?”
“He didn’t tell me anything!” I snapped. “Stop pushing him around. You’re as bad
as those psychotic queens.”
“Take a break,” he said to Grim. Once Grim went around the corner, Brendan led
me into an alley and pushed me against the wall of a shop. “I’ll keep you safe if you
help me,” he said, staring into my eyes.
_Hypnotic_. Remembering Ronnie’s warning, I looked away, but it was too late.
Whenever I was around him, I forgot myself. I _wanted_ to forget.
“My enemies are your enemies. I’m the only one standing in their way. There is
nobody else who can help you now. And if you don’t help me, I will forget you. Do
you understand? I reward the loyal, but I am not weak, and those who believe it only
fool themselves.”
“I’ve never said you were weak. I don’t care about royalty and fae or any of that. I
want a job and a home and a reason to forget about you people. You made me this
way, and now I can’t get you out of my head, so stop using your magic on me before I
forget why I should keep away.”
“Cara,” he whispered, his voice turning dangerously seductive, “why would you
want to keep away?”
“You’re nothing but a bully,” I replied as calmly as I could with my heart racing so
fast. “You dragged me into this, and now you want me to risk my life. Well, why not
start buying my loyalty by being nice to your servants for a change? They’re my
friends, and I am nothing to you. I’m not your subject. You don’t own me. We have
nothing together. We are nothing together, and one day soon, we’ll forget all about
each other, so why not make it easier now by being, I don’t know, pleasant?”
He flinched. “What will it take for you to cooperate without all of these incessant battles? I can force you to do anything at all, or have you forgotten?” He gripped my chin, and I got caught in his relentless stare. “Run into the road, Cara.” His voice crept over my skin, leaving dangerous kisses in its wake. “Run and run until you die, Cara.”

I had to run into the road and dance with the traffic, run until my blood painted the ground. I had to keep running and never—

“Cara!”

I came to on the edge of a path amidst the mingled sounds of car horns and shouting, Brendan’s arms wrapped around me as a truck sped by. He lifted me onto the sidewalk, holding me up because my legs had turned to jelly. I had almost done it. I hadn’t even fought back.

“You can’t do that to me!” I struggled, but he refused to let go.

“This is what we are,” he whispered in my ear, his arms still wrapped around me.

“And this is what will happen to some innocent human, somewhere, every day I am not king. Without a leader, there are no rules. The fae and humans need me, and so do you. Are you really going to let your pride get in the way of that?”

“I’m already helping you,” I said.

“No, you’re biding your time until you can figure out a way to oust me from Drake’s body. You can’t play me, Cara. Not me.”

“I’m helping you because your banshee wants to kill my family,” I said, my lower lip trembling. “I’m helping you because maybe all of these attacks will stop if you’re in charge. I’m helping because I know there are monsters under the bed, Brendan. You need to make them go away.”

“Do you now? What else do you know, Cara?”

“I know you take humans and use them up then spit them back out.”

“And how do you know that?”

I stared at him blankly, desperately trying to think back on what I had said, if Realtín and Grim would be in trouble because of my words. It was all a blur. I shook my head feebly.

His grip loosened. “Everyone has a choice.”

“Not when you feed them poisoned apples and wine! I didn’t have a choice.”

“But you knew there was danger, and that was the lure. I’ve seen it many times, Cara. Sometimes the subconscious makes the decision, but a decision is always made.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but decided there was no point.

“When I reigned, I was a young and foolish king. I didn’t know anything about humans other than that they were pleasant entertainment for a time. I had too much time, grew bored too easily, and made my fun in the only ways that made me feel something for a while. You’re not the only one, Cara, not the only one who can’t feel. But you have feelings; we’re born with none. You don’t know what it’s like for us, to be so empty inside. We’re shells, all of us, desperate to find something, anything, that will fill the emptiness just long enough for us to forget for a while. If it wasn’t for humans, we’d all be mad.” He gave a short, sharp laugh. “Perhaps we’re all already mad.”

“You understand then,” I said, “what it’s like for me to be around you. Why the thought of going back and having none of this again is…” I looked away, feeling the ache of an empty future, one with dead-end jobs and crappy flats and living week to week because there was nothing better out there for me.

He shook his head. “Sometimes, I think I envy the life you’ll return to. When my soul was trapped, it was like I was in a maze, a nightmare that never ended. But
sometimes, there was clarity, and I saw things that kept me going, that kept my mind intact. I didn’t lose myself completely because of those moments. I couldn’t choose what I saw, couldn’t interfere, but I saw humans do beautiful things, things that made me want to change.”

“Like what?”

“It doesn’t matter now.” He stepped away from me. “But I discovered so much about myself, about my own people, and the rest of the world. The snippets weren’t enough, and I fear I’ll lose them soon. I want to be a better king, but when I’m myself again, I will no longer be sorry for the things that have happened to you. You won’t like me when I’m myself again. If you even do now.”

“So change,” I said. “Don’t be that same old king again. Be a different one, a better one, one the fae deserve. The last queens died because of how they treated people. You were betrayed because of the way you treated people.”

“They act as if they’re offended, but they wouldn’t tolerate kindness either. They think us weak if we care, especially about humans. An old friend once lost his mind over a human, so I took the threat away to save his life. He still hasn’t forgiven me, and that is his weakness. Drake cares for you, but we’ll both be hurt if anything should happen to you. The thing that makes us weak is keeping him alive.”

“If I help you, will you set Realtín and Grim free?” I blurted. “Will you let them live freely and unharmed?”

He hesitated. “I’ll consider it. You were wrong about one thing, Cara. I am your king. Whether you know it or not, a part of you wants to obey me.”

“No,” I whispered. “Never.”

“I can feel everything you feel. The fae play and aggravate because it increases the emotional response from humans. We feed off of that response. We live off your fear and lust, and that’s the only reason we allow you to live. I can feel everything you’re going through, and I could feed from you for a long time. Perhaps living with you and your mother has changed your father. Those charges of energy and emotion could be affecting him.”

“He’s just an arsehole,” I said. “He hates me. It has nothing to do with a trace of something fucked up in my blood.”

“Perhaps there has been a fae whispering in his ear all these years. It would explain so much: your brother’s depression, your father’s anger, your mother’s fear, and your unhappiness.”

“What do you know about my brother?”

“I know many things,” he said. “And there might only be a trace of fae in your blood, but perhaps the fae it came from was potent. Stay with me. An attack could happen at any time. Do you really want to have to fight again? You’re no warrior, and your luck will run out sometime.”

I gazed at him, weakening. He said the right things, and I didn’t want to be alone. “I don’t want to fight,” I whispered. “Until Imbolc?”

He nodded. “Until then. I promise.”

There I went again, believing a faery.
Chapter Fifteen

Brendan left me to his fae, while he went to attend to other things. I wondered if the friend he’d mentioned was Sadler, if maybe Brendan hadn’t been the monster the others thought him to be. Faeries couldn’t love freely for fear of seeming weak, and they could never trust another soul. Yet I still envied them.

Realtín and Grim led me to my room, the same lavender and silver place that was way too good for me. I had my own bathroom, my own double bed, and my very own guard outside my door.

“This feels like prison,” I said.

“It won’t be forever,” Grim replied. “Two weeks until the ceremony, and then it’s over.”

“I can’t wait.” I was torn between never wanting to see the fae again and wishing I could stay with them forever. I sprawled on the bed and took my phone out of my pocket. Dead. “I need to charge this. Is there electricity here?”

“Yes,” Grim said. “But perhaps our magic can give it the boost it needs?”

I stared at the phone, unwilling to test the theory on something I had spent months saving up to buy. “I think I’ll just use the electricity.”

Brendan made us join him for dinner that evening. Sorcha was there, along with his head guards, including a tall, bald, broad-chested faery I had seen a number of times. The rest of the seats were full of faeries I didn’t know. They all seemed to want something from Brendan. The politics bored me, and Realtín entertained me by making snide remarks in my ear about everyone present.

After dinner, Brendan stood. “You must excuse me,” he said in a tight voice. “I have a guest, as you can see. I’ll be spending this evening showing her around the grounds.”

The other fae exchanged surprised glances.

Sorcha clenched her fists. “But we still haven’t talked about the—”

He took my arm firmly and pulled me from my chair. “Tomorrow. We’ll get to it tomorrow.” He led me out of the room, giving the others a warning look that apparently meant, stay.

“I might kill somebody at one of these dinners,” he said as we walked outside. “Please look the other way if I ever pick up the carving knife.”

“That bad?”

“Weren’t you listening? If I ever thought court intrigue was dull before, it was nothing compared to this. The life has gone out of these fae.”

“I stopped paying attention when they started talking about marrying you off to anyone even remotely related to them.”

He stared at me, clearly horrified. “When did anyone say that?”

“Realtín translated for me.”

His laughter was contagious. “Not even servitude can knock the mischief out of that one. She’s right. What they say and what they mean are two very different things. They ally themselves to me only if it benefits them. They only care about power and pain.”

“I thought that was all you cared about, too.”

“I’m not myself,” he admitted. “Perhaps it’s Drake’s influence. But he will be gone when the throne is officially mine.”

“What if you don’t change back?”

He released a shuddering sigh. “Then I’ll have to brush up on my acting skills.”

“But what if you don’t get the throne? What happens then?”
“If Sadler gains the throne, then my life is forfeit. We can’t let that happen.”
“Is he… bad?”
His face softened. “Not bad. Just angry. I did him a wrong once. He won’t ever
forget it. If he forgives me, then he’ll be forced to feel the pain. Anger is always better
for fae. It makes us strong.”
“I pity you all sometimes.”
He laughed. “Oh, if they heard you say that.”
We continued on the path, and I felt eyes on my back. I glanced around, but nobody
was there. I shivered. “Grim said they fight over who gets to watch over me because
they get such a thrill when I almost die.”
“The guards? Can you blame them? If not you, then me, and you’ve seen for
yourself how boring my day is.”
“But do you think the attacks could be coming from them? Just to scare me?”
He looked over his shoulder, frowning. “I don’t think they would risk it.”
“But am I really safe here? With you?”
He grinned. “Maybe the threat of danger will attract you all the more.”
I punched his arm. There were no guards next to us, so it seemed safe, but it felt like
hitting a wall. “You’re strong.”
“Not yet. Soon, I will be. It’s you who are weak, in any case. It’s a shame you don’t
have more fae in you. If you can kill a pooka now, imagine what you could have been
with power.”
“I’m not fae at all. Look at me.” I held up my ordinary arms. Even my mother
looked different. I was just like everyone else.
“There’s something familiar about you, something I can’t pinpoint. Perhaps that’s
why Drake is taken with you.”
My cheeks burned. That was far too awkward a conversation to have with the
person inhabiting Drake’s body.
“You do care for him, don’t you?”
I ignored the question. “What’s it like? Invading somebody’s body and knowing
they’re still in there with you?”
He paused for a moment. “Our thoughts run parallel. I can hear the things he wants
me to hear. We don’t converse. It’s not like that. Except we understand each other. I
think, in another time, I would have liked this faery.”
That threw me.
“Sorcha wants me to kill you after the ceremony. To get rid of you and Drake, once
and for all. For some reason, the thought leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”
“I don’t feel very safe.”
“Would I warn you if I planned to do it?”
“Probably, just to fuck with my head.”
His laughter surprised me. “I find I like that you talk to me as if you aren’t afraid of
me. It makes me forget the things I’m responsible for.”
“I’m definitely afraid of you. Sorry.”
He reached out and touched the necklaces around my neck. “Grim told me how his
Seelie queen refused to wear the same adornments twice, but these are the only pieces
I’ve seen you wear. Do they mean something to you?”
I pushed his hand away. “It’s nothing.”
“Obviously, that’s not true.”
“They’re… memories,” I said. “My mother gave me the locket at Christmas.
There’s a picture of my brother and me inside. Butterfly was his nickname for me.
The medal was his. I found it before the pooka came. Now that I’ve left, it kind of
feels like… this is all I have of family. I don’t even know why he wore the medal. It has St. Patrick on one side and St. Brighid on the other. I don’t remember him being religious or anything.”

“St. Brighid,” he repeated. “Our Brighid was a fire goddess, mother of all. She turned her back on us a long time ago. Strange to hear her name mentioned by you.”

“Not the same person though,” I said, looking at the medal. “At school, we used to make her cross from reeds on the first of February, but I forget why. This Brighid is the patron saint of babies and children with unmarried parents. And crops or something.”

“Much like our Brighid then. She is birth and fertility in all of its forms. Imbolc is her festival.” He made a scoffing sound. “Sadler claims to descend from her.”

I dropped the medal against my chest and shrugged. “Maybe they’re the one and the same then. You sound a little angry at her.”

“She deserted us when we needed her. She is long dead.” His cheeks flamed with colour. “Maybe if she hadn’t, I wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

“So how did you end up like this? What happened when you were king?”

He fidgeted. Watching him speak was interesting because his facial expressions were so different to Drake’s. It was easy for me to separate the two personalities. When I felt like it.

“You know already that I was a young, brash king. Spoiled, really. My mother was summer, and my father, winter. Back then, we claimed we controlled the seasons, but they were empty titles. We were not gods. My parents joined in the hope of uniting the courts again. We had been weakened after many wars, and there had been two opposing courts for many years. Before you ask, that’s an even longer story.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“There were dark days before I was born, and my parents united against their enemies. They were the last good leaders, in truth. They left too soon. Having me nearly killed my mother. I was the summer boy who could survive winter. I belonged everywhere, and they believed I would be the one to gather the fae again, to make us as strong as we had once been.”

“Are the fae weakening?” I blurted, thinking of Ronnie’s words.

“I believe so. Most do not, however. But we shall see. In my first life, I was the strongest fae, the one with the most potential. My parents assumed I would be as fair as they were. They were wrong. I was too cocky. My parents spent summers and winters apart for a number of reasons, and I stayed with one or the other. They came together during springs and autumns. Those were their happy times. When I grew old enough and proved strong enough to control both courts, they left for the Nether.”

“The Nether?”

“The place fae go when they say goodbye. Nobody returns from the Nether. If Drake is lucky, he’ll end up there. If not, he may become a shade instead. That’s what I fought against when I was sent to the Fade.”

“What’s a shade?”

“The shades are twisted, corrupted, lost souls. They’re bound to guard the Nether, to be trapped in the outer Fade, but when one escapes, it wreaks havoc on our world and yours.”

“You escaped the Fade,” I said, fear leaving me cold.

“I was no shade. I fought to keep my mind intact. Mayhap it was the banshees who kept me whole, but while I was there, I thought it was a connection to the real world, those moments of clarity I told you about.”

“But somebody wanted you to be a shade? That’s why they sent you to the Fade?”
He nodded. “The ultimate punishment. I brought it all upon myself. When I ruled, I
spent too much time in our realm, keeping my youth intact, when I should have been
searching for wisdom. Vanity was my biggest problem. I was so arrogant. I spent too
much time in excess, too much time seeking enjoyment. I hunted in the Great Forest,
drank and danced and played my days away. I ignored the threats and danger, and I
savouried every pleasure. It was too much.”
“I thought you lot were made for excess.”
“We are, but the ruler should be the one who sets the example. My life was filled
with wild, heady days that led to my downfall. When I ruled, Ireland was a young
country. Humans worshipped us, called us gods, and sacrificed their virgin daughters
to us. I spat back depraved, demented old women who couldn’t remember their own
names. Still, they sang songs and spread the legendary stories about us. We enjoyed a
golden age for a time.”
“So what went wrong?”
“Their mother was the one who helped conspire against me. She tricked their father, too, using her lust to become
his wife and mother of his daughters. He saw through her eventually, but their children were already tainted. It took little to make the fae turn against their queens. Grim and Realtín barely hesitated when Sorcha approached them with a plan of execution.

My mouth dropped open. “Grim and Realtín? They murdered the queens? But they

“Just one queen,” he corrected. “One who deserved it.”
“Don’t you feel guilty? You encouraged them to become murderers!”
“We’re already murderers, Cara. Haven’t you realised our rules aren’t the same? The rules are the desires of the most powerful fae.”
“It’s not fair,” I whispered. “None of it is fair.”
“Can you feel that?” He wrapped his arm around my waist, his fingertips pressing against my side. “This is the fae in you, Cara. You project everything you manage to feel on us until we can barely stand it. That’s why Drake is here, why the guards want to watch over you, why I couldn’t kill you even if I tried.” He ducked his head, too close, his eyes dazed and drunk. “That doesn’t make you safe, little one.”
I stared back at him, unsure of his mood. “What do you want from me?”
“I haven’t decided yet.” He pulled away abruptly. “It’s getting dark. Keep away from the shadows.”
“What?”
“Go inside where it’s safe. I’ll wait here a while.”
I stepped away from him warily, but his mind was elsewhere. I couldn’t understand the effect he had on me, but I had some kind of effect on him, too. I headed back to the house, half-jogging until I saw Realtín and Grim waiting for me.
“Why didn’t you tell me what you did?” I demanded.
“I told you he would tell her everything,” Realtín said, flying around in circles.
“He’ll turn her against us. Make her…” She yanked at her hair.
“Our lives were barely worth living,” Grim said pleadingly. “We had little choice, Cara.”
“If he asked you to kill me, would you do it?” I asked.
They exchanged a glance that told me everything.
“We don’t have to explain ourselves to you!” Realtín screeched, flying at my face.
I batted her away. “I need some space.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and stepped into the home of the king of the fae, a place where I could be killed at any second if I pissed off the wrong person. And this was the safest place on the planet for me.
Chapter Sixteen

Sorcha stood beside my bed the next morning, her dark eyes full of spite. I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

“Food,” she said, pointing at the tray on the bedside table.

“No, thanks.” Taking food from the fae was a bad idea, but taking food from Sorcha was the height of stupidity. Not that I’d been particularly smart lately—or ever, if I were being honest with myself.

With one last scornful glance, she turned on her heel and strode away, her skirts drifting along the floor like mist on water.

I showered and wrapped a towel around me before stepping out of the bathroom. Brendan was sitting on the bed, studying my phone. He was the only fae there who wore casual human clothes on a regular basis, and I wondered why, but it was kind of a comfort to see familiarity amongst the weirdness.

“Um, hello? Privacy?”

He looked up at me. “Why aren’t you eating? Is this a new game? I told you what—”

“The last time I ate food Sorcha handed me, I couldn’t leave the room until Drake sobered me up. I still can’t look at apples!”

He tossed my phone on the bed. “Humans need to eat regularly. Most humans die here because somebody forgot to feed them. I need you alive.”

“Well, as long as you get what you want. I need to get dressed.”

He held up my jeans with a grin. “I wish human women in my day had realised how fetching slacks were.”

“They’re called jeans, you turnip.”

He laughed and held them out to me.

I grabbed them and glared at him. “Can I please get dressed now, your majesty?”

He stared at me blankly.

“Brendan… get out.”

“Why? Are you disfigured and ashamed?”

I took a calming breath. “I’m not getting dressed in front of you because humans tend not to get naked in front of strangers.”

“We’re not strangers.” He lay back on the bed, an irritatingly smug expression on his face. “I might be more agreeable if you eat.”

“I’m going to eat on my lunch break and after my classes. And I’m going to be late if you don’t get out of here.”

“Classes?”

“Classes. As in college. That involves actual attendance.”

He sat up, looking excited. “Fine. We’ll go to this college.”

“We? What do you mean, we?” No. Freaking. Way. It was bad enough trying to concentrate on a lecture with a couple of small, fidgety, mischievous fae whispering next to me without the actual king and his entourage tagging along. And if he happened to see Ronnie? Bad news all round.

“I can’t leave you unattended. You attract trouble like a moth to a flame, and I want to be the one who deals with whatever comes for you. It’ll give me a chance to study the tactics of my enemies.”

“As much as I enjoy being your bait, Grim and Realtin have done a pretty excellent job of protecting me all by themselves.”

“They warn and conceal; they aren’t strong enough to protect. And what if your father shows up again?”
“Someone will call the police or something. He’s not going to be there, Brendan.”

“And if another warrior like MacDearg attacks your friends to get to you? What then? Sadler isn’t done with us. He’ll keep trying until the ceremony… to unsettle me, if nothing else.” He grinned at me, his gaze travelling lower. “Besides, I’m curious about those wild college days.”

I gripped the towel a little tighter. “There’s nothing wild about it, and you can’t just walk in and start acting like you belong! You need an ID, a PPS number, a real identity. You can’t just tag along because you’re curious.”

His smile darkened. “I don’t need any of those things. But if you really don’t want me to go, I can always arrange for a fae to take your place in your classes.”

My stomach twisted. “You wouldn’t.”

His brows lifted. “You’re the one who wants to do things the hard way.”

I spluttered for a second. “I need a break from fae stuff. I still need to—”

“Deal with your father?”

“Stop talking about him!” The dam was about to burst. Everything was surging to the surface, and I couldn’t stop it anymore.

“What harm does talking do?” Brendan asked, looking astonished.

“He’s not… just get away from me!” I ran into the bathroom and locked the door. Shit. I was falling apart. The man who raised me might not be my father. The idea had finally stuck, and it wouldn’t leave.

“Cara?” Drake knocked on the door. “He doesn’t know what to do with you when you’re upset, so he let me take the reins. Can you come out?”

I opened the door.

He held out a dressing gown, looking sheepish. “I didn’t know if—”

“It’s fine,” I said.

He turned his back long enough for me to cover up. I sat on the bed, and he followed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked uncertainly. “Would that… make you feel better?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you… do you want to talk to me?”

His hesitation was refreshing, and I found myself nodding.

“Why are you sad?” he asked softly, brushing my damp hair behind my ear.

I shrugged, unable to answer around the lump in my throat.

“Do you miss your family?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been going through stuff in my head, and I think… I think maybe my dad hates me because he isn’t my dad. Maybe Mam had an affair or something, and I’m the reminder of that. He’s nice to other people, and he loved my brother, and I… I don’t look like any of them.”

“No, you don’t.” He slipped an arm around my waist. His wings moved, sending a draft around us. “Why haven’t you asked them?”

I gulped. “I’m scared I’m right. Besides, they don’t want me back there. Mam won’t answer my calls. I can’t ask now. It’s too late.”

He used his thumb to brush a tear from my cheek. “Maybe they’re not worth your sadness. Being around us is making you feel worse because everything is exaggerated here. That’s what we do, I’m afraid. Provoke and coax out the pain.”

“But I don’t know who I am,” I blurted. “I thought I knew, but what if… what if I was wrong? How am I supposed to know who I am when I don’t know where I came from?”
He pulled me closer, his face tense. “I understand. I didn’t know where I came from either.” He looked sadder than I felt.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

“Perhaps it would help us both. Help you understand. I was born in the human realm, and I grew up like a normal boy at first—wingless, fatherless, but happy. We had little, but my mother loved me. I kept asking about my father, who he was, where he was. I had this emptiness inside because I didn’t feel complete without knowing my family. She told me I looked like him, but he didn’t know about me, and she couldn’t find him again. Ireland was different then; I barely remember it.”

He closed the space between us, his voice lowering as his eyes went faraway. He ran his thumb across my wrist, and I felt dizzy. “But I remember my sixth birthday. The sun was shining, and I felt different. My skin itched so badly, and I had scratch marks all over me. My mother thought I was sick with an infection, and she left to fetch a neighbour, a healer woman. They called her a witch, but she was more than that. She bartered for her services. My mother had barely kept us out of the workhouse, so she couldn’t afford to bring a priest to see me. The woman came and looked me over, and then she stared into a blue bottle. Something inside it whirled around, and it… it terrified me. Her face paled as she looked, and she told my mother to run. My mother began to cry, and the healer told her to leave me, that my father was coming back for me.”

I gasped.

He gave me a wry smile. “Maybe you were lucky, Cara. Because my mother’s night with the fae resulted in a child she wasn’t allowed to keep. He came, like the healer said, and my mother begged him not to take me. She would have been better off without me. She would have had more food, more time, but she wanted to keep me, and I’m still not sure if it was to have a child or a reminder of her time with the fae.”

“What was he like?” I asked.

“He was everything I had never imagined him to be. I was terrified of him. His hair was long and dark, but I had his eyes. We were more alike than dissimilar, and I hated that. I refused to leave with him, so he tore the skin from my back, exposing the wings that had been there all along, waiting to sprout. Just like his.”

“Did he take you?” I whispered.

“He killed my mother in front of me and carried me back to the land of the fae, where I was kept with other children. But I was different, and I didn’t fit in. I didn’t see my father again, bar once when he asked me to pledge my fealty to his queen. I refused and escaped, but my mother’s body was long gone, along with anyone who had ever known her.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” He lifted his shoulders into a shrug, but his pain was raw. “I flitted in and out of the fae realm, waiting for my chance to find my father again. I found the healer instead. She had sworn her soul away for that blue bottle. It had given her power and a good life for a peasant, but she had to pay for eternity. She taught me things, told me she caught glimpses of the future in that blue bottle. She promised to tell me who my father was and how to find him only if I took her home one last time.”

“Did you?”

He nodded. “She’s at peace now. One day, the fae who gave her the bottle may look for me, but time is so different in that realm that it might never happen.”

“Did you find your father?”

“Almost.” His expression darkened. “There’s still time. I’m closer now than ever.”
“So… how old are you?”
“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t know the year of my birth, and time passes so
differently in the fae realm that it’s impossible to say. Very old, compared to you.”
“Creep,” I whispered.
He gazed at me. “You should let him accompany you. You’re right to go back to
your classes, to be around humans, but it’s a risk you don’t need to take without him.”
“Why can’t you do it instead?”
“It takes a lot of strength to remain in control,” he said. “He would fight me
constantly.”
I stroked his cheek. “I could help, give you something to anchor yourself with.
Realtn thinks it’s possible.”
I kissed him, desperate to feel closer to him. He let me at first, pulling me closer to
him. I forgot everything for one brilliant moment.
He pulled away, his eyes sad. “I don’t want to be king, Cara.” He kissed my
forehead. “I have to go.”
“Wait!”
It was too late. Violet had already turned to emerald.
“You’re so rude,” I spat, wrenching myself away from Brendan.
“And you’re slyer than you look,” he said. “Get ready. We leave soon.” He strode
out of the room, leaving the door ajar.
I dressed, all the while thinking of what would happen when it was all over. Ronnie
was bitter and obsessed with faeries. Was that the life I would lead, never truly living
because all I thought about was the fae? She could be my future. But she had warned
me. Maybe I could avoid the same outcome. I pitied Drake, but even he had that
darkness in him, that need for chaos. His quest for revenge was worthy, however. I
couldn’t blame him for wanting payback from his father.
A scratching sound sent my pulse into overdrive. A black cat sauntered into the
room, jumped onto my bed, curled up into a ball, and fell asleep. It couldn’t be the cat
from my nightmares, the one from my window all those years ago, but part of me felt
as though it had to be. Part of me wanted it all to be connected, for me to be
connected.
“Hi,” I said awkwardly, reaching out to pet the cat.
It purred contentedly, and I relaxed. It was just a cat. There were plenty of identical
cats roaming the streets. Just. A. Cat.
Realtn flew into the room and back out again. “Come on, come on, come on, come
on!”
Downstairs, at the front door, Sorcha and Brendan were arguing.
“No,” he said. “You’re staying here.”
“I should be with you,” she said. “You might need—”
“I need you here,” he said sternly. “No arguments.”
She gave me a suspicious glare as we left. I tried to seem as meek and unhappy as
possible, so she wouldn’t think it was anything I wanted.
And it wasn’t. Not really. Except… spending the day with the king was kind of
exciting. I just wished it was Drake instead.

***

“I hope you enjoy this,” Brendan said as we approached the bustling college.
It wasn’t the most prestigious place to gain admittance to, but it was local and
probably the best someone like me could aim for. Brendan casually held my hand as
we stepped through the entrance, as if us walking to my classes together was
something normal instead of one of the most bizarre experiences of my life, though with plenty of competition.

We strolled down the hall, and Brendan’s hand on mine tightened until Drake said my name. I looked up at him in surprise.

“He’s loosening the reins today,” Drake said. “He thought it might make you happier.”

I was so shocked that I reached up and kissed him. He pressed against me, and I thought I might die of happiness.

Realtín sucked in a gasp. “Is that…?”

I pulled away and gazed pleadingly at Grim and Realltin who were hesitantly approaching us. “Try not to see things too clearly today, okay?”

Grim nodded, but Realtín did mid-air somersaults in her excitement.

Drake cupped my cheek and kissed the corner of my mouth. He had never been so free with his affection, and it helped me forget what would inevitably come our way.

“Shouldn’t we be going somewhere right now?” he asked.

“I could take the day off,” I whispered. Maybe it was the presence of the fae, but my lust had ramped up, and his eyes were dazed too.

“You need to calm down,” Drake said, leaning his forehead against mine. “You’re projecting a lot of, well… a lot right now.” He actually looked kind of drunk. “We can’t go anywhere else. People will get suspicious.”

I looked at the students passing us, all of them with their eyes averted. “People seem to be avoiding us.”

“Not those kinds of people,” he whispered. “They’re repelled. They know I’m here, but they can’t find it in themselves to look straight at me or speak. You’re within range of the effects when you’re next to me, I’m afraid.”

“That’s weird,” I said, feeling as though we were the only two people in the world. That was how the fae often made me feel, as if nothing existed outside of them.

“Brendan thought it would be simpler this way.”

He held my hand as I led him to my first class, one I shared with my friend Erika. She didn’t sit with me, didn’t even look my way, but she tensed as she passed, her gaze rapidly turning in every direction but directly at me.

“This is making me uncomfortable,” I said. “I want it to stop.”

“Brendan’s right. You’re extremely bossy for a human.”

“So says the king. Have you made anyone bow to you today?”

“Not yet. Perhaps I’ll start with you.”

“Don’t count on it, unless you plan on using faery magic.”

He stroked my hand. “Do I need to?”

“You’re starting to sound like Brendan. You two are spending way too much time together.”

His laughter broke the strange silence. Everyone in the room flinched, but not one person looked at us or said anything.

“So creepy,” I whispered. I stared at his fingers against my skin. “You’re different today.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, I’m just… confused.”

His hand moved to my leg. “You told me to make the most of the time I have left, right?” He smiled at my frown. “The real reason? It helps me stay. It’s my own body, and I don’t feel comfortable in it unless you’re there, uh, feeding me. You make it easier to be strong sometimes, and I don’t know why, but I thank you for it. And now you should pay attention. That’s what we’re here for, right?”
He moved his hands onto the table, but his thigh still pressed against mine. My cheeks burned. He needed me, and I felt as though I needed him, too.

I spent one nice, almost normal day with Drake. He told me more about what Brendan did every day and what he thought would happen at the ceremony. I started to imagine what it would be like if he were human, if that day could be my life every day. It was the first time I had ever kissed someone I could actually see a future with, and he was the one who had no future at all.

We strolled home together that afternoon. I savoured every second.

“How long do you have left with me?” I asked lightly.

“Until the ceremony.”

I gasped and stopped walking. “I meant with me today. You mean… that’ll be it? You’ll just disappear?”

“I’ll fade.”

“But then I won’t see you again.” The thought of losing one more person was more than I could bear.

He dropped my hand. “Cara, you knew that. Maybe this was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have—”

“I could refuse to speak for him at the ceremony. He wouldn’t become king, so he won’t have the strength to get rid of you.”

“So I hang around sharing a body until somebody decides to knife him in the back? I’d have to watch him kill you, Cara. Do you know how—”

“I don’t want you to fade.”

“I’ve lived already. You haven’t. The fae need their king. It’s not worth giving up for one solitary fae.”

“I don’t care about any of that. I care about you!”

“You shouldn’t,” he said coldly.

“Too late.”

“There’s no future with the fae unless you’re willing to give up your mind and soul. Do you want me to watch you age? You’re human. This can never work.” He moved closer. “Everybody forgets when it’s over. You won’t feel anything when I go.”

“I’ll remember,”

“Nobody does.”

“I know someone who remembers.”

“Lies,” he whispered, brushing his lips against mine.

He gathered me in his arms, and I heard the sound of his wings. I didn’t care about the differences between us, the reasons we shouldn’t care for each other. I only wanted to enjoy every second I had left with him.

“This isn’t right,” he muttered against my mouth. His grip tightened, and his tongue became almost violent in his next kiss.

I pushed away from Brendan in disgust. “You ruin everything.”

“He knows better than to steal kisses in public. If anyone thinks I—”

“I don’t give a shit what anyone thinks of you!”

“Don’t make me walk you home on a leash,” he said. “This is life and death, and I won’t get any work done if the walk home takes longer than all of your classes together.”

I felt like pouting. “Spoilsport.”

“Don’t get too attached,” he said, softening. “I thought it was harmless at first, but when he lets go, I can still feel everything he felt. It’s confusing and addictive, but it’s bad for all three of us. Do you understand that? He’s going to be gone. Growing more
fond now will only add to your heartache and confusion when I’m the only one in his body.”

“What do you care? I’d rather know him for a while than not at all.” I walked faster then jerked to a stop. “Please don’t make me forget him. When it’s all over, let me remember him.”

“Do you really need more pain and loss in your life?” he asked, but he was the one who looked pained.

“There’s no point in living if you don’t feel something. I hate not feeling. I’d rather be heartbroken than heartless. I can’t lose these memories. I’ll have nothing left.”

“You make me pity you,” he said, sounding surprised. “You say you feel nothing, but when I’m around you, I drown in your emotions. Everything is ricocheting back and forth until it’s almost too much to bear. Some fae is going to steal you one day, Cara. You just feel too good to give up. You probably learned to block everything off because it was so hard to deal with. I do pity you. You have the worst of both worlds with none of the rewards.”

“You could—”

“You don’t seem to realise how much is at stake. I have so much to deal with, and I’m sorry if it gets in the way of your schoolgirl crushes, but I’m talking about the kingdoms of the fae. I don’t have time to help you. The control Drake has, the strength of his emotions, the humanity in him is terrifying. I just want this to be over. I’m sorry for Drake, but I can’t save him.”

“But you said—”

“I said might. I never said it was a given. If a way presents itself, I’ll try my best to reward him, but my priority is the kingdom. If you had any sense, it would be your priority, too.”

“I’m just—”

He put a finger to my lips. “I’ve tried to make you happy. I let you spend the day with him, despite how angry it makes the only loyal subjects I have, and I get nothing but ungratefulness in return. I don’t know why I waste my time.” He walked faster as if desperate to get away from me.

Realtín and Grim showed themselves, but I knew all was lost.

“Are you…?” Grim shook his head. “I wish I could help you, Cara.”

“Nobody can help me,” I whispered, my mind clearer than it had been all day. I’d had a day of a fantasy life, one that could never truly exist.

As I walked with my fae friends, who were really nothing more than slaves, I realised how trapped I was. Brendan controlled every part of my life, and I had nothing. When it was all over, I had nowhere to go. I couldn’t talk to Zoe, I couldn’t go home, and I was constantly on edge, waiting for someone to attack.

And I was falling for a fae who would soon lose his life. I wanted him so desperately it hurt, and I wasn’t entirely sure if that was a natural feeling or a side-effect of being around the fae. But I didn’t care about any of that anymore. The important thing was what was going to happen next. Brendan would take my memories of Drake. Brendan would let Drake fade. And I was going to help him do it.
Ronnie sent me a text message asking me to meet, so instead of going straight back to my room, I requested permission to visit the supermarket. I thought Brendan might be more inclined to agree if I played up to the whole king thing.

“Besides,” I hedged, “you said I need to eat. And it’s not like I can trust fae food.”

“Fine,” Brendan said, turning his back on me as if distracted. “Don’t be too long. I’ll send two guards in your wake. If anything happens, stay with Realtín and Grim.”

He walked away as if he had already forgotten I existed. I kept relying on him, thinking he cared like a normal person, but he didn’t. I had to remember that he was the kind of creature who used and abused, and I was the kind of creature who would let him because that was what I was used to. I wasn’t ready to be anyone else yet.

“I’m just going to get junk I can keep in my room,” I said on the way to the supermarket.

“There’s a kitchen,” Grim said.

“I know. I just don’t trust anything anymore. Will it be okay in my room even?”

“We’ll take care of you,” Realtín promised. “We love you, Cara. We won’t let them hurt you.”

I stared at the sprite, wishing I could believe her. She was as flighty as the rest of them. She would forget me, too.

At the supermarket, I picked up as much stuff as I could carry, knowing I might not get another chance if Brendan suddenly decided to ban any future trips. He could do what he liked, and even if I put up a fuss, we both knew I would obey in the end. I had no choice.

I dawdled in the freezer section, picking up and dropping various items.

“Just choose one already!” Realtín snapped.

I spotted Ronnie strolling up the aisle toward us. “Can you two give me a minute alone?” I asked.

Realtín turned and saw Ronnie. “I don’t like her,” she said under her breath.

“You don’t like anyone.”

“Come,” Grim said. “Be very careful, Cara.”

Ronnie approached me when they left. I couldn’t sense them at all.

“Still with the fae, huh?” Ronnie said. She still wore those stupid sunglasses.

“They can’t keep away,” I joked, but her lips pinched together. “What was it you wanted?”

“When exactly is this ceremony you’re a part of?” she asked, trailing a finger along a shelf.

“Imbolc. It starts on the first of February. The whole thing might last a week or so.”

“Not long to go. May I accompany you?”

“Oh.” I stared at her blankly. “I mean, you could go, but how would you find your way in?”

“Where is it being held?”

“Nobody’s said. I assumed it would be in the fae realm.”

“Yes, but we enter in the human one,” she snapped.

“Well, I don’t know anything about that.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “It must be on the leylines, and it would need great power, a place that hasn’t been used in a long time.” She glared at me. “You must find out, Cara.”

“Must she?” Drake asked from behind me.
Ronnie jumped and inched back, her mouth opening in horror. “You.” The colour leached from her face.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I… no. I thought I saw…” She turned and fled, knocking down a display in her haste.

I glared at Drake. “What did you do?”

“Me? Nothing. I just walked over. Brendan was suspicious of you asking so nicely, and when Grim and Realtín left you, he decided it would be better if I joined you.”

Thoughts flooded my mind as I stared at his face. Ronnie had freaked at the sight of him. Never at Grim or Realtín. But at Drake.

“Did you…?” I stared at him, terrified of my own thoughts. “Were you the one?”

He frowned. “One what?”

“Were you the one who took her? Tortured her, left her scarred, and… like that.”

His frown deepened, and the air frizzed with his anger. “Why would you even think that?”

“Why would she even act that way? She recognised you, and she acted like she just faced her worst nightmare.”

“Don’t accuse me of things,” he said in a low, steady voice. “You know nothing of me.”

I backed away from him. “Maybe you’re right.”

I strode to the checkout with my head held high, but I couldn’t stop shaking. I had never even entertained the idea of Drake being like the rest of the fae. I had never truly thought about what fae like Brendan did to humans, despite knowing about his past. I hadn’t let myself believe, but Ronnie’s fear had been all too real. Ronnie had been a victim, and I was spending time with fae who made victims.

My tiny fae friends joined me while I paid for my shopping, but even they were murderers. When we returned to the house, I asked Grim and Realtín to back off for a while.

“I need to study, and I just… need a break from all of this stuff.”

They agreed, albeit reluctantly, and I headed into my room, ignoring the beefy bodyguard standing in the hall. I didn’t like his eyes. He reminded me far too much of the black-winged faery with the everlasting smile.

The cat was still on my bed. I had dropped some cat treats into my basket at the supermarket, just in case. I opened a packet and offered one to the cat.

“Doing okay, kitty?” I asked, still feeling a little sick whenever I looked at the animal. I couldn’t escape my memories when I was with the fae.

The cat accepted the treat then rolled over and offered his belly. I scratched his stomach before getting out my books and sitting on the bed to work. The cat sprawled across my legs, getting in the way of everything, but I kind of liked it.

I stared at a blank page in my notebook. I could blame the fae, but my assignments had been giving me trouble since the year began. I was barely keeping my head above water, and being around the fae gave me the excuse I needed to stop worrying about coursework. But if I gave up, Zoe would be disappointed, and Dad could be all smug and deprecating. That was if I saw either of them again.

When Grim and Realtín returned, I hadn’t made much headway on the work. I closed my books and started to show them the cat, but he had left already.

“Brendan sent us,” Grim said.

“He doesn’t trust you up here on your own,” Realtín added.

“You can tell him I wasn’t planning on studying myself to death. Besides, I have a bodyguard outside.”
“He’s angry with you.”
“I don’t care. So… why the hell did you two sell me out to Brendan today?”
“That woman!” Realtín raged, her cheeks darkening. She buzzed around my head, flashing red and gold.
“She’s not a healthy person,” Grim said. “She’s not dealt with her time well.”
“She was tortured, Grim. How can you blame her for that?”
“I don’t blame her,” he said. “I’m letting you know that people like her are dangerous. Letting her return to her family wasn’t a gift. It was part of her punishment by whichever fae took her in the first place. She’s jealous of you, and she’ll do whatever it takes to find her way back. She can’t come back, Cara. It’s not her place.”
“She was scared of Drake,” I said. “I accused him of being the one who hurt her.”
Realtín stopped flying long enough to slap my cheek. “You traitor!”
I waved her away. “I wouldn’t have pegged you two for queen-slayers either, but there you go.”
“We had no choice,” Grim said. “You can’t compare—”
I held up my hand. “I know. I’m just tired of the fae stuff today. Do you think he did it? Could he do that?”
“No,” Grim said firmly. “He would treat you differently if he did. Besides, his own mother—”
“I know that,” I said. “But fae do things that I can’t explain away. I can’t imagine Brendan hurting someone, but he’s done it. I can’t imagine you hurting anyone, Grim, but at the first chance, you took out your own queen. And I can’t imagine myself taking a life, but I killed a pooka. This world is fucked up, and I’m a part of it. I just… can’t see what’s true sometimes.”
“You can trust us,” Grim said.
“Can I? Because if Brendan said the word, you’d both turn on me.”
Realtín yanked my fringe. “And we chose a different path once. We can do it again.” She kissed the cheek she had slapped.
“Then tell me about this ceremony. Where is it going to be held? What will I have to do?”
“But we don’t know yet,” Grim said as Realtín wrapped her arms around my neck, all apparently forgiven.
“What about leylines? Explain them to me.”
“It’s… power underfoot,” Grim said. “It’s something we know but can’t explain. It’s where the magic comes from. Solitary fae can exist away from the power, but large groups of us cannot. We stay on leylines, and our use of humans replenishes the power over time. Festivals can’t be held just anywhere because they use up all of the power for a time. The deepest magic is set out like paths. We have different kinds of maps to the world.”
“So there’s a path to the fae?” I asked. “I could find fae by following a path?”
“You would need to feel it first,” he said. “We can feel it because we’re fae. We can find each other, and we tend to be attracted to the strongest magic. The solitary fae usually avoid it, because that’s where the trooping fae will gather. It’s difficult for me to put into words. It’s born in us.”
“The night I was led to the fae, the path I took, are you saying I followed a leyline?”
“Yes,” he said enthusiastically. “Sorcha may have sent out a calling, but you followed a path that you had just woken up to.”
“Then how come I couldn’t get back in once I left?”
“Because we use up the leylines. They must replenish, and that can take centuries. That particular leyline may never be used again because of what happened there.”
“But I could find others? We could figure out where the ceremony is being held?”
He frowned. “Why would we want to?”
“To be prepared,” I said. “If I lost you, if somebody took me from here, could I find my way back?”
He shrugged. “Hard to say. You would need to feel the magic without help.”
“Could I learn?”
He shook his head. “It’s either born in you or it isn’t.”
“But we could try to practice it.”
“I wouldn’t know how to teach you. I’m lesser in many things.” Grim struggled to pick up one of my books. “This is extremely interesting, the things that humans explain away logically. It’s fascinating.”
“No magic for us,” I said. “Or is there? Is it something you’re born with or something you learn?”
His face lit up. “It’s in the blood. Royal bloodlines can always become royalty again because the power they inherit is so pure and powerful. Lesser fae are born with some magic, but other fae have overbred and diluted their magic. Royalty rarely procreate for this reason. The title itself provides a large amount of power because those who swear fealty provide an energy source. Fae like Brendan are already superior to the rest of us at birth, but when they take the throne, they become far harder to remove.”
“Brendan said he was the most powerful fae when he was born. How?”
“Because both of his parents were royal, although it was partly an accident of birth. In the old days, royals would have a child with a human when the time came, usually the kings, but sometimes queens, too. Some thought that this would ensure the child could never be more powerful than the parent, but it was unpredictable. The child would have the fae power of their parents in its purest, rawest forms. There was no telling how weak or strong they would be once they reached maturity.” He shrugged. “Brendan’s parents wed for love. Pure fae births of that kind can be dangerous, but they survived, and he had power from both his parents combined. When he came into his true power, people thought him unstoppable. But that’s never true, Cara. There’s always a way out.”
“Like murder?” I said, staring at him.
“You would have done the same,” he said. “If you saw what we saw, went through what we went through, you would have—”
“Every time my father insulted me, shouted at me, and put his hands on me, I wanted to hurt him. I wanted bad things to happen to him. But I didn’t do anything because I knew it would be worse for everyone if I did. Did you know what would happen when she died?”
He frowned. “Not everything. I thought we would be free. We’ll never be free. I see that now.”
“But why? Why can’t a fae like you be king?”
He burst out laughing but sobered quickly. “That’s impossible. My kind has the weakest sort of bloodlines. Our mothers have litters, and each has less power than the last. The king’s parents were smart enough to conserve their power into a single offspring.”
“But it’ll run out eventually? Like, Brendan’s child will be weaker than him, and so on?”
He flinched.
“You okay?” I asked.
“Yes, I… I’m fine. Brendan’s offspring might be weaker or just as strong. That depends on the mother as well as the traits inherited. He might have a number of children and choose the strongest as his heir. That’s not unheard of.”

“But there are no queens,” I said. “So his power will be diluted, right?”

“It is… likely.” He and Realtín exchanged a glance.

“What if he didn’t have a child?” I asked. “If he had no heir, then what would happen?”

“He would choose an heir, unless he was murdered first. When he was first banished, there was no heir. Chaos reigned until new royals were chosen, just as it is now. The parents of the twin queens were more powerful than most fae, but still not as powerful as Brendan.”

“But what’s the difference? You two can do magic, right?”

“We can,” Realtín said. “But we’re under the rule of the king we swear fealty to. He is more powerful because of us, but we aren’t because of him.”

“And our magic can be easily overridden by a stronger fae,” Grim added.

“How do the solitary fae really figure in to all of this?”

Realtín cannon-balled onto the bed. “They’re the opposite of us trooping fae. We stick together and have courts, but they live wherever they want. Some in the fae realm, but most in the human one.”

“Their power is dependent on things other than their loyalty,” Grim added.

“But they’re naturally less powerful, and Brendan’s stuck in a solitary fae body, so he’s not as powerful as before?”

“That’s a simplified version, but yes,” Grim said. “That will change when his kingship is official again.”

“Do you think Drake has the power to stay?”

“The magic that holds Drake is almost like a blood-tie. The magic holding Brendan is just as powerful. It would take a greater being to help Drake now. Brendan will grow in power enough to help him, but it will be too late by then.”

I paced the floor. “That’s so frustrating. Drake’s stuck around this long. Maybe he’ll be different.”

“He’s very, very lucky,” Realtín said. “You could make a difference, but you would need to work quickly. There are still no guarantees.”

“She’s right,” Grim said. “This kind of thing isn’t known to happen. It’s a struggle for Drake now, but having a sworn-in powerful king in his body will be like trying to contain the sun in a fireplace. It’s too much.”

“There has to be something I can do.”

“We like Drake,” Realtín said, “but we can’t go against our king.”

“But you’ve thought about it?”

Grim patted my hand. “Drake is a rarity. We don’t know who his family are or what his power stems from. We don’t know how he’s able to fight off Brendan at all. There’s the theory that you’re anchoring him here somehow, but you didn’t know him before, did you?”

I shook my head, feeling ill.

He smiled. “Maybe the whisper of a promise of what might come was enough for both of you. Saving a life is a sacred thing, and you believe he saved yours. In old traditions, your life is his now, but with Brendan on the scene, Drake’s life is in your hands, too. I don’t envy either of you.”

“Do you think there’s fae in me? I mean really, not just some distant ancestor. Do you think something passed on to me?”
Realtin flew over and sat on my head, gripping my hair to hang on while I continued pacing. “I think so. Grim isn’t sure yet. But you’ve pulled some magic on the king.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hush now,” Grim said sharply. “Don’t confuse her.”

They ignored me then, arguing rapidly under their breaths. I tried to study again, but I couldn’t concentrate. It was almost like being at home. I knew something bad could happen at any moment, but I also knew that there was nothing I could do about it.

I heard a hiss and looked out the door to see the black cat spitting at the bodyguard. The guard aimed a kick, but I rammed my elbow into him hard enough to send him off balance. His hand went to his sword, but he recognised me and stopped, although his eyes seethed with his anger.

“Leave it alone,” I said fiercely.

I bent to pick up the cat, praying it wouldn’t scratch my face off. It huddled in my arms like a baby. The guard grunted as I passed. I closed the door behind me and let the cat free.

“What are you doing with that?” Realtin asked.

“The stupid arse of a Neanderthal standing outside my door was trying to hurt it.”

Realtin made a face. “Ooookay.”

The cat jumped on my bed and waited for me to sit. Then, he immediately climbed onto my shoulder and fell asleep draped over me. Again, I felt comforted by his presence and wondered if maybe he was lost and stuck on fae property. Just like me.

I missed my friends. I missed my mother. I wanted normality, just for a little while, and if I did die, there were some things I wanted to do first.

“Where’s Brendan?” I asked, absentmindedly stroking the cat.

“Downstairs in meetings,” Realtin said. “Why?”

“I want to ask him something.”

The sprite giggled. “I need to see this. Come on.”

She stuck her tongue out at Grim and flew to the door. We headed downstairs to Brendan’s office. I could hear him shouting before we even got close. The perverse side of me decided it was a good time to interrupt. I rapped on the door, hesitated, then let myself in.

Everyone in the room stared at me in shock—except Sorcha, who looked as though she wanted to murder me right then and there.

“Um, can I speak to you for a minute?” I asked as sweetly as possible. “My lord,” I added with a little bow of my head.

Realtin’s hysterical giggles from the hall were abruptly silenced, probably by Grim’s hand.

Brendan took a deep breath. “Yes.” He stood and followed me out, slamming the door behind him. He rested his forehead against the wall and took a few more breaths.

“Are you okay?” I asked, forgetting I was still annoyed with him. I actually felt sorry for him.

“I’ve forgotten how absolutely infuriating faery politics are, especially when you’re on the brink of power but don’t quite have it yet. I want to rip heads from bodies, but I have to play nice. For now.” He turned to lean his back against the wall and grimaced. “You have excellent timing. What do you want?”

“I need to get out of here. I can only study so much, and being around so many fae all of the freaking time is exhausting. I’m losing my mind, and you need me non-insane at this ceremony, right?”

He shook his head. “I can’t let you go home.”
“I know. I just need to get out of this house every now and then. Any time I try to go for a run in the garden, they all gather around and watch me like creepy weirdos. It’s the opposite of getting some space. So I want a human night out with my friends before I go absolutely mental.”

“And what would you do with these human friends?”


He stared at me until I grew uncomfortable. “Is there some other reason?” he asked.

“Um, no.”

“Cara…”

“Okay, fine!” I lowered my voice. “It’s my birthday soon. I always celebrate my birthday with Zoe. It’s a thing. And I could die at any moment, so it would be really great to get this particular birthday out of the way first. So can I go? Please.”

“Ah. A birthday is a powerful thing. What age will you be?”

“Twenty-one.”

“So young?”

“I look older?”

“You feel older.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Excuse me?”

He grinned and poked a finger at my forehead. “You feel like an old soul, not a child.”

The office door opened, and Sorcha joined us, her eyes stormy in their anger. “We need you,” she said pointedly.

“In a moment. Cara, I’ll make a deal with you. You accompany me to a fae party tomorrow night, and I will join you on your human night of fun.”

Sorcha made a choking noise. “You cannot be serious. We have to gather your allies. She is poison. She can’t be there.”

“Of course I’ll come,” I said, mostly to annoy Sorcha. I couldn’t realistically threaten her family with death and terror, but I could piss her off whenever I found a chance.

Brendan smiled. “Good. Sorcha, go back inside and entertain our guests for a few moments.”

With a red face, she stomped back into the office.

“Do you really want me to go to your party thing?” I asked.

He hesitated. “I said it partly in jest, but yes, if you’re there by my side, then perhaps nobody will force me into any business discussions, and I am heartily sick of business. I’m curious about your human night, and if you’re good, maybe I’ll let you have one without me.” He kissed my cheek and returned to his office.

“That was… odd,” Grim whispered.

I was too busy staring after Brendan to answer.

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I ignored the blatant faery stares and pulled up my hood.

“Not again,” Realtín complained. “It’s too early and cold for this.” She gave a dramatic shiver and wrapped her arms around her body.

“If I don’t run, I’ll go crazy in there,” I said. “Just sit on a bush or something and wait for me. He can’t expect you to shadow me everywhere.”

“Didn’t you say you have an assignment to finish before school? That’s why you got up so early,” she said.
I started stretching my legs. “That’s why I need to run. I can’t concentrate for long. Getting outside helps. Just sit over there, and I promise not to run far. I’ll circle you, okay?”

Grim and Realtín exchanged bemused glances before agreeing. I sighed with relief. Hearing Realtín in my ear kind of took the good out of going for a run.

I raised the volume on my music, started jogging, and focused on the run. If I tried, I could block out the gathering of faeries who came outside to watch whenever I ran. I had assumed going out so early would have lessened the numbers, but apparently, I misjudged. By the time I passed Grim and Realtín’s bored faces three times, I had upped my pace and my heart beat loudly. I loved that. It reminded me I still existed.

Grim and Realtín were nowhere to be seen when I did a fourth pass. I glanced around to see that the garden had been cleared. I was about to panic when Brendan appeared and ran alongside me.

I ripped out my earbuds. “Oh, what now?”

“I decided to see what all of the fuss was about. Am I being a… creepy weirdo now?”

I laughed in spite of myself. “You’re always a creepy weirdo, King Brendan.” I sped up a little.

He kept up easily. “This is what you’ve been doing out here? Running in circles?”

“The circle is to stop Realtín from complaining about having to keep up,” I said, annoyed by how much easier it was for him to talk without breathing heavily. “The running is to stop me from losing my mind.”

“How so?”

My legs hurt already. “Helps me think. Or not think. Whatever. If it’s not challenging then shut up and beat me already.” I kicked his ankle, tripped him up and raced ahead, giggling at his swears as I turned off the path.

I stretched my legs as I ran, every muscle tightening and straining. The sounds of my footsteps, the feeling I might fall over if I so much as slowed down—I was finally running. Brendan’s footsteps behind me only urged me on, and I sprinted as fast as I could, determined not to let some faery beat me.

A stitch poked my side, and I struggled to breathe. But the garden was long, and I raced past the rose bushes, feeling as though if I could just make it past the arch, everything would be okay. If I could make it past just one hurdle, nothing else would matter. I pushed myself, struggling to maintain the pace. The arch flew past, and then Brendan’s arms were wrapped around my waist, hauling me into the air and dropping me before he raced ahead.

I scrambled to my feet and chased after him. “You cheater!”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “You started it, human.”

I caught up with him, laughing so hard that I couldn’t beat him. He slowed, grinning, and I shoved him into a rose bush. I jogged a few steps away, unable to breathe around the laughter. I doubled over before sinking to my knees. The king threw rose petals at me, but he was laughing, too. I sucked in a breath, aching from the exertion and laughter.

“You can’t be trusted,” he said, sitting on the ground and breathing heavily.

“Look who’s talking.” I panted, lying on my back in an effort to slow my heartbeat. I looked over at him. “You’ll feel worse for sitting down.”

He groaned. “I’ll have someone carry me back.”

“You need to cool down properly,” I said, reluctantly getting to my feet. I helped him up. “Stretch your legs at the very least.”
I made him walk back to the house with me. “You can’t make somebody carry you,” I scoffed. “What kind of king are you?”

“What kind of human are you? Challenging a faery to a race. You lost, by the way.”

“The arch was the finish point,” I lied. “I won.”

“I let you win.”

“You’re not supposed to be able to lie.”

“And you’re an idiot to believe that,” he said, grinning. “I hope you won’t be too tired for the festivities this evening.”

“That was just a warm-up run for me.”

He looked at me, his eyes soft. “I think I see the point now, Cara. I forgot everything. For just a moment, nothing else mattered. It reminded me of… other days.”

He fell silent, but it was too late. He reminded me of a normal person, somebody I might have found a friend in if we had both been human. I readjusted my ponytail, my train of thought leading me to places I couldn’t afford to go. Brendan’s cheeks were pink, but he had recovered far quicker than I did.

He reached out and picked up an earbud hanging out of my jumper, forcing me to stop walking. He moved closer to me, held the earbud to his ear, and smiled. “This is the music you like?”

I shrugged, uncomfortable by the lack of space between us when I was sweating like a pig. “It’s what I like to run to.”

“Chaotic,” he said, his usual confident grin returning. “I think I like it.”

On a whim, I took out my mp3 player and handed it to him, earbuds and all. “Have a lend of it then.” I gave him a quick overview on what buttons to press.

His smile widened, making him look younger. “Thank you.”

I bit my lip, unsure of what to do next.

He rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at the house. “I should return to… everything.”

“Yeah.”

He hesitated before taking my hand and squeezing it. I inwardly cringed at how sweaty my skin must have felt.

“Thank you for the race.” He turned abruptly and left me standing there alone.

A tiny stream of light flew out from behind a bush and headed straight for my shoulder.

“What are you doing to the king?” Realtín whispered.

I stared after him, my insides swirling. “I have no idea.”
Chapter Eighteen

Neither Brendan nor Drake accompanied me to my classes that day. Grim told me the king was too busy preparing to host the party, but I wondered if maybe he was avoiding me, or if Drake had refused because he was angry with me.

I still didn’t know what to think. Ronnie’s fear had been real, and Drake had lived so long that he had probably done plenty of things I couldn’t stomach. In contrast, Brendan was so playful that I couldn’t imagine his darker side being as extreme.

Zoe acted as though she hadn’t seen me in an age. “I thought you were mad at me, or dead or something. Where have you been?”

“Staying with a friend. I’m so sorry about your house, Zoe. Is there anything I can do?”

She shook her head. “We’ve been staying with Mam’s sister, so basically, hell on earth. She can’t face cleaning up the mess, but I don’t blame her. Wait a second… what friend?”

I must have blushed because she gaped at me. “Drake? You’re living with him now? Where? I mean, is that safe?”

“T’m not living there. I’m staying there temporarily until I sort out something permanent. It’s a favour. I barely see him because he works. I have my own room. Stop worrying.”

“I’m not worried. I’m just interested. Okay, maybe a little worried. Is he a drug dealer or something?”

I scowled. “No. And like I said, I don’t see him much.”

“But what have you been doing then because I never see you.”

“I know. And that’s going to change. I’ve been trying to catch up with assignments. We’re still on for my birthday, right?”

“Will he be there?” she asked suspiciously.

“Yes. Will Darren?”

She grinned. “So this is what it feels like to worry someone’s not good enough for your best friend. I love you. Stop disappearing.”

“I will. I’m just in the middle of a lot of… stuff. When it’s over, you’ll be sick of me all over again.”

“I’m never sick of you.”

“Lies. How are things with you and Darren?”

She hesitated. “Weird. He’s acting…” She shrugged.

“What is it?”

“You know how he gets stupid when he’s drunk sometimes? Well, he’s been acting like that all of the damn time lately. He got into a fight at work yesterday. He might lose his job. He barely speaks to me. And he’s so jumpy. I’d swear he was on something if I didn’t know better.”

“Work is probably worrying him or something. He’s not really the kind of person who talks about his feelings all day, right?”

“No, but…” She sighed. “You’re probably right.”

Ronnie walked right past us, but she didn’t as much as glance in my direction. A few minutes later, my phone beeped with a text from her, asking if I had heard anything more about the ceremony. I ignored it because I didn’t think reuniting her with the fae would be good for her. Maybe Grim had been right about her.

At lunch, I tried ringing Mam again, but she didn’t answer. Probably for the best. I had questions for her, but I didn’t really want to know the answers.
That afternoon, I went back to Brendan’s home, but the glowering guard outside my door stopped me from entering my room.

“You’re wanted downstairs,” he said gruffly.

Sighing, I headed back downstairs with Grim and Realtín. Brendan’s office was full of pretty fae girls who giggled constantly in his presence.

“Pixies,” Realtín sneered. “You’ll hate them.”

“Tonight’s very important,” Brendan said. “I need you to look as fae as possible. These girls will take your measurements and help you get ready. If there’s anything they’re missing, let them know.”

The pixies took my measurements, pushing and dancing and full of mirth. One smiled shyly at me before biting her lip and proceeding to act as hyper as the rest. All of them were pretty, winged, and shimmering. I felt like a troll next to them.

When they left, I looked at Brendan, feeling a little scared. “Nobody’s going to die, right?”

He laughed. “I’m almost certain there will be no death tonight. If there is, it won’t be yours.”

“But you’re not going to kill anyone, are you? It’s not going to be like the festival, like the queens.” I bit on my thumbnail, nervous as memories engulfed me.

“You’re afraid?”

An old woman stepped into the room before I could answer—the needle-fingered creature who had made me strip so she could create my “sacrifice” dress.

“No way,” I said. “Not again.”

“Again?” Brendan asked. “Ah. I see. She’s the best dressmaker there is, Cara. You will allow her to work on you.”

He had on his I’m the leader, do as I say look, and when even Realtín shook her head, I knew to obey. I shrugged and let the dressmaker do her job. She took note of the measurements the girls had made, studied my body, then looked at Brendan questioningly.

“Do you have any requests?” he asked me.

“Nothing as skimpy as those girls who measured me,” I said immediately.

Brendan covered his smile. “Listen to the girl,” he told the dressmaker. “And not white this time.” He stared at me. “Red should work. But keep her measurements. The outfits she needs for the ceremony will be extra special. We need to put on a show, tonight included.”

I had visions of something awful, but I kept my mouth shut. At least I wouldn’t have to sit in my room all night with only a sprite, a brownie, and a cat for company.

The woman tugged at the chains around my neck. I stepped out of her reach, covering the locket and medal with my hand.

“Let her wear them,” Brendan said. “I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to cover them.”

The old woman glared at Brendan, tutting to herself.

“It’s time for you to prepare,” Brendan said, turning his back on us. “Grim, stay here.”

Realtín clung to my hair as the old woman led me down a hallway I hadn’t noticed before. She pushed me through some double doors and into a large bathroom. A large step-in bath sat in the centre of the room. Black petals covered the surface of the steaming water, and the scent in the air was kind of hypnotic.

The pixies appeared and surrounded me, giggling as they removed my clothes before I could protest. They helped me step into the bath, speaking rapidly all of the
time. The petals’ aroma filled my nostrils, and the water soothed the tension in my shoulders. I felt myself relaxing for the first time since the fae had come into my life.

I didn’t protest when Brendan’s fae girls washed my hair, scenting it with exotic-smelling violet flowers. They wrapped towels around me as I stepped out of the bath. Nudity was nothing to them, and I let myself get carried along, accepting fae rules and traditions because it was convenient… and a lot more fun.

They led me into an adjoining room, where they sat me in a chair and went to work. I closed my eyes and dozed off while they twisted my hair and giggled over my tattoo. They made up my face until the dressmaker arrived. She held up a lot of red fabric, but when I put it on, I discovered the dress was backless and had high slits up the sides.

It at least reached the floor and covered my cleavage and midriff. In the human world, the clothes I wore gave me power, but in the fae one, I felt exposed and vulnerable, despite the fact that everyone else in the room was wearing less than me.

The girls fussed over the dress, adjusting it until they were happy. They made me go barefoot and attached silver anklets and bracelets to my limbs so every movement made me jangle noisily. When I walked, the dress trailed behind me, and the pixies practiced holding it up off the floor.

A pretty blue-haired, bronze-skinned pixie knelt at my feet and begged to attend to me at the event.

“Uh, okay,” I said, startled by the request.

The other pixies hissed, but she grinned wildly, although her eyes were sad and empty. I had watched her more than the others, noting the differences. Her playfulness didn’t ring as true as theirs, and her heart seemed heavy.

“My name is Anya,” she said, lowering her head. “Ask anything of me, and I’ll do it.”

“They’re trying to impress the king,” Realtín said sourly. She dived into some powder, sending up a dust cloud that made the pixies squeal.

They brushed something across my skin that made my skin shimmer like a faery’s. When they finally allowed me to look into a mirror, I saw shining loose curls, most of it pinned over one shoulder with an oversized red lily. My skin glowed, and I could see myself as one of them. In that moment, I fit in somewhere. But it was all an illusion—makeup and faery tricks. As a final touch, they added a jewelled chain that hung a trail of rubies down my back.

“You’re so lucky,” Anya said, stroking my back. “No wings to spoil it. You could pass for a royal.”

“Wanna trade?” I joked, but she frowned and looked away.

When Grim finally came to rescue me, the party had already started.

“Brendan wanted you to be the last to arrive,” he said. “I am to introduce you.”

I shook with nerves. “Is this really a big deal?”

I shook with nerves. “Is this really a big deal?”

“Bigger than we expected,” Grim said. “Be careful, Cara. Please him publicly, think before you speak, and only speak when spoken to.”

“Oh, just enjoy it,” Realtín scoffed. “When else are you going to get this chance?”

But Grim looked so worried that I knelt next to him.

“I’ll be okay,” I said. “You don’t have to worry.”

He glanced around, terror in his eyes. “Be careful,” he whispered.

“He won’t let anything happen to me, Grim. Not tonight.”

“Be careful of him,” he amended. “He’s different with you. He acts like a free man. There’s danger in the things he forgets. I do worry for you.”
I kissed Grim’s cheek. “Maybe he’s a different kind of slave. Come on. Let’s get this over and done with.”

He took my hand as I rose. He escorted me to the party, his head held high. The pixies followed, laughing and shoving each other. Anya gathered up the back of my heavy dress and carried it.

The bodyguard at the door of the great hall glared at me, but he stepped aside to let us pass. The pixies piled into the room, making so much noise that everyone looked in our direction. So many eyes focused on me, the only human there, as far as I could tell.

The hall was huge, likely magically so, and faeries cavorted together in the centre. Long tables lined the walls, and at the centre of the table facing the doors stood a throne, a plain one, but a throne all the same. A million lights twinkled above my head, but they weren’t sprites. The musicians played well, no sweat or blood that I could see. Everyone seemed calm, and there was no darkness in the air. The frenzy of the first festival hadn’t burned into the party yet. And maybe it never would with Brendan around to control things.

“Why are they staring?” I whispered as, one by one, groups of fae turned to look directly at us.

“They’re judging you,” Anya replied.

“Oh, great. That makes me feel so much better.”

She looked confused. “They want to know what to expect at the ceremony, if you’re a threat. If the king…” She looked away.

“I get it,” I said.

“He wants them to think you’re more fae than you are,” Realtín whispered close to my ear. “That way, they’ll think it less likely for your word to count at the ceremony. Grim says they’ll let you speak if they think you’re easily discredited.” Her tiny hands trembled as she brushed my hair out of her way.

I caught sight of Brendan across the room and was filled with the urge to run and hide behind him. He was speaking to a horned creature built like a house. Sorcha stood by his side, her hand on his arm. She wore a blackened-blue Grecian-style dress decorated with sparkles that moved every time I blinked. She looked like a starry night sky.

She saw me, frowned, and whispered into Brendan’s ear. He turned and looked at me, and I couldn’t look away. He wasn’t Drake, but sometimes I forgot, and he had charms of his own. I liked his confidence and power and those moments when his mask slipped and he spoke from the heart. He had treated me well, all things considered. At the party, he was making sure everyone treated me like someone important. I wasn’t used to that.

He made his way over to me, still holding my gaze. My cheeks burned. I desired Drake’s body, and I wanted to be close to his soul, but Brendan had wormed his way into that circle of affection, too. Faeries had broken down all of my walls.

Grim announced me loudly, and everyone kept watching, curious to see what Brendan would do next.

He came too close, so close I had to step back, almost knocking Anya over. He took my hand and made to lead me into the room, but I hesitated.

“I can’t,” I whispered. “Everyone’s looking at us, and the dress at the back is freaking ridiculous. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

“You’re earning yourself a night out,” he said, making a show of looking over my shoulder at my back. “And they won’t care about the dress. You should be more comfortable in your own skin.”
“Easy for you to say,” I muttered. “And I care.”

“And I’m in charge.” He stared down at me for a couple more seconds before turning me slightly so he could trace the rubies down my back.

I squirmed, and he laughed. He lowered his arm until his hand covered the lowest part of my back. My skin prickled under his touch. He led me around the room as if I were a show pony. Anya, Grim, and Realtín followed us.

“This is ridiculous, too,” I said under my breath.

“Get used to it. You’ll be paraded at the ceremony. They want to see you. They’re curious about you.”

“Why? What do they care about humans?”

“They don’t. They care about what I think of humans, and they will assume things tonight. Don’t worry. I’ve planned every step,” he said, his eyes alight with that mischievous streak that came alive every so often. “These are the rules: Sit next to my seat, be careful what you say, do not thank anyone, don’t ask their names, don’t reveal anything about yourself, and act dumb.” He led me to a large seat at the top table in the room. “You look beautiful.”

“They made me look fae,” I said wryly.

“I’ve never seen a faery like you before,” he teased. Then, he squeezed my hand and left me alone.

“You can go dance, Anya,” I said, seeing the pixie looking longingly after the king. She shook her head. “I’d rather stay with you. If you desire anything, anything at all, only ask, and I shall—” Her smile faded as Sorcha approached.

“I see what you’re doing,” Sorcha said. “Don’t get too comfortable in my place.”

“You brought me here, remember?”

She sneered. “Half-breeds don’t earn places with the king.”

“Tell that to Drake.”

She pulled my hair, drawing me close enough to kiss. I stared up at her defiantly, refusing to wince.

“Do not say that name here. Are you trying to get us all killed?” She smiled, letting go and smoothing down my hair. “I can arrange for your life to end when he doesn’t need you any more, little girl. Don’t expect us all to go down with you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know your routine. The death threats are getting old.”

She leaned over me. “You’re not even good enough to be his concubine. Your own family doesn’t want you. What makes you think royalty will? Once we don’t need you anymore, you’re gone. But you’re used to that, aren’t you?”

I rose, forcing her to move back from me. “If I were you, I’d back the fuck off before I do something we both regret.”

“Like what? Cry until Drake comes to save you? Pathetic human. Have you forgotten who I am? I brought you here; I can send you away just as easily. We both know you’re desperate to stay. Poor little human. The product of—”

“Sorcha!” Brendan’s voice startled both of us. “Go see what’s keeping the food.”

He glared at her. Anya stood by his side, her eyes wide with terror.

Sorcha sent me a death stare until he repeated the order. With a strange little howl, she strode away, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, and one who hated me with the anger of the most malevolent. I kept thinking it was jealousy, but I hadn’t noticed any kind of chemistry between her and Brendan.

“She hates me,” I said.

“More than you know,” he replied. “Nothing happened the way she planned. I was supposed to take the body of a warrior. You were supposed to be a sheep.” His smile was weak. “Or maybe that was me. Everything is wrong.”
“Does she love you?” I asked.
“She loves power. One day, I’ll take a wife. My wife will be queen of the fae. She would kill a million souls for that opportunity. I should be grateful for such a loyal wife, and yet…” He shook his head. “Maybe when my power is returned, when I’m alone, I’ll feel myself again. See things more clearly.”

“Maybe you don’t want the hassle anymore. You said combining the two courts was a mistake. Why make the same one again? You could let someone else take over half of the kingdom.”

He took a seat, so I joined him. Anya knelt at my feet, playing with my anklets.
“It’s not that simple. Very few have royal blood and the strength to control the power and the courts. Sadler might, but we would be eternally at war. He would have no reason to make peace with me if he had a court behind him. It would be pointless.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “What would happen at a human party? What would you be doing if we were all your human friends?”

I smiled, wistful at the memory of the things I had taken for granted. “Drunk dancing, making note of anything gossip-worthy, and maybe I’d meet a boy before it’s time to go home.” I would have given anything for one more normal, boring night.

He glanced over at the door. Sorcha had returned. He clapped his hands, and servers began passing around plates of food. The goblets refilled themselves, of course.

“Eat. Drink,” he said, gazing at me.

I watched the pixies dance. Some of them writhed in the laps of older fae who looked on in scorn, even as they grabbed at the pixies. One bit the shoulder of a pixie who giggled as milky tears fell from her eyes. I knew why Anya wanted to serve me at the party. The only alternative was pain and degradation.

“Do they have to do that?” I asked, my voice trembling when I intended it to be sharp.

“All have their place,” he said. “Do you wish it to stop?”

“Why do they have to hurt them?”

Anya’s hands shook at my ankles.

“The pixies are strong. They take what’s given and keep the others calm. They are eager to please.”

But he clicked his fingers, and all of the pixies ran to the middle of the room and danced toward the musicians, away from the guests. I stared at him, feeling the way I had when he’d protected me from my father. He stared back, his expression unreadable.

“Why are you here?” I blurted. “In the human realm, I mean. Why haven’t you gone back?”

“Maybe I like it. It’s safer here. More freedom. Besides, it’s easy to forget there, easy to…” He shook his head. “You still haven’t eaten anything. Are you afraid?”

“Of course I’m afraid. I’m not stupid.” But I looked longingly at the wine, remembering the taste.

Brendan took a canapé from a plate, bit into it, and chewed. He swallowed the bite and handed the rest to me. “It’s not poison. See?” He glanced around the room as I hesitated. “They’re all watching.”

I already knew.

“I told Grim and Realtín to enjoy the evening,” he said in a tight voice. “I thought you might like that.”

I took the food from his hand and ate it to show I trusted him. Maybe to everyone else, it meant I wasn’t in control of myself and that my words could be discredited,
just as Realtín said. His expression turned soft, but then he grimaced, and those green eyes turned violet. His fingers gripped the arms of the chair tightly.

“And Anya, can you fetch me a glass of water?” I asked sweetly. “Ask Realtín how I take it.”

Anya glanced at the king before nodding and running off.

“How many times do I have to warn you?” Drake demanded angrily.

“I’m hungry. And they’re watching! I can’t refuse their king while they watch.”

“And if he tells you to take off your clothes and dance on the tables? If he tells you to kill a pixie of your choice? If he tells you to go home and end the lives of the people who raised you?”

“He wouldn’t do that,” I protested.

“You trust him now? But you don’t trust me? Are you really this stupid? He’s fae, Cara. Fae. Can’t you see what he’s doing?”

“He’s not doing anything but making me feel welcome.” I lowered my voice, noting the stares. “And you’re fae, too, remember? But when I assumed that about you, you acted like I was a bitch, so why is it different for Brendan? And can’t you ever show up to do something other than lecture me?”

“Start taking care of yourself, and I won’t have to.”

“And what about when you’re gone? When you’ve given up the fight and left me alone? What am I supposed to do then?”

“There isn’t—”

“You’re a coward, Drake.”

He glared at me, but Sorcha had noticed the change and came over to rip into him until Brendan managed to take control again.

“Louder music,” Brendan called out, his voice stronger than he looked.

Most of the fae were soon distracted by the pixies, who did their best to draw attention to themselves. Anya returned with a glass of water, except it was in the most extravagant-looking glass I had ever seen, so heavy that Anya could barely carry it. The rim had been coated in what looked like multi-coloured sugar, and the ice cubes were star-shaped and filled with pieces of fruit. A garish umbrella completed the ensemble.

“Oh.” I cast a glance in Realtín’s direction to see her doubled over with laughter.

“This is… wow, Anya. You’re a star.”

She beamed and knelt at my feet again.

Brendan turned to me, and by the look on his face, I knew Drake hadn’t blocked him that time. He lifted a goblet and took in a mouthful before holding the glass out to me, daring me to drink with him, to forget all about Drake’s warnings and tedious lectures. He dared me to dive into the world of the fae with him, and I wavered.

He held my gaze for a couple of seconds, and I took the goblet. I kept my eyes on him as I took the first sip. The wine was as good as I remembered.

He took the cup back after my second sip. “Pace yourself, or it will burn.”

“I remember. I remember how it felt.” I had drifted into a minor buzz. I sighed as my entire body relaxed. “Even better than the bath,” I said, stretching my arms. I turned in my seat to look for Grim and Realtín, but I couldn’t see them anymore.

I started to turn back to face Brendan, but his hand was on my waist, his other tugging at the fabric of my dress to see my hip and side.

“What is this?” he asked, grinning. “Is that supposed to be a faery? This is a faery tattooed onto your body?”

“Wings and all,” I said, feeling as though I should be embarrassed but not quite able to get there.
“That explains a lot,” he said, his hand still pressed against my skin. “Care for a
dance, mo Chara?”

“The only reason I can walk is because Anya’s been carrying half of the dress
around.”

“You’ll dance,” he said. “Anya!”

She crawled out from under the table, a strange look on her face.

“Come to me,” he commanded in a soft voice. She moved around me and knelt at
his feet. “Good little girl. Loyal to my favourite, aren’t you?”

She nodded, her eyes sparkling.

He touched her chin and ran his thumb across her lips. “You’ve done well, little one.
I’ll remember this night. Now, go and enjoy the rest of the festivities with the others.
Cara will be able to dance, won’t she?”

She nodded enthusiastically, apparently enthralled by the king. She left, trudging
away while I felt light as the air.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“She’s yours now. If you hurt, she’ll take the pain for you.”

“What? I don’t want—”

He held out his hand. “Dance with me, Cara. Please.”

I let him lead me onto the dance floor, forgetting all about my dress and Anya and
anything else that might have bothered me. My head felt a little fuzzy, and I could
have sworn I was walking on grass.

“What’s that smell?” I asked.

“Flowers. I made a flower garden just for you to dance in.” His voice sounded far
away, but his face was too close.

The heat between us ramped up significantly. He held on to me and spun me
around. I tilted my head back and laughed, feeling as if we were flying. Maybe we
were.

“So strong,” he murmured. “I could get used to that.”

“Whatever it is you’re doing right now. You don’t even know, do you?”

“I know I’m dizzy.”

The room stopped spinning. He pulled me closer to him, and the music slowed,
switching to a familiar melody, a song from my playlist being played by faeries. I
laughed. We moved in a human dance, and his eyes never left mine. I lost myself and
forgot everything all over again. I could see why people never wanted to return. I was
in ecstasy. I laid my hand on his chest and felt his heartbeat. My fingers clutched his
shirt as lust overwhelmed me. I couldn’t tell if it stemmed from him or me, and I
didn’t care.

“This is better than a human party,” I whispered.

He smiled and hummed along with the music. I saw Sorcha over his shoulder,
glowering at me. I didn’t care. Fear couldn’t penetrate the haze, couldn’t break past
how I felt right there in his arms. I wanted to kiss him, to taste his skin, but there were
people all around us, staring, staring, staring at the king and his pet human.

“Everyone’s watching.”

“Let them,” he murmured and held me tighter. “Let them think I’m lost. When they
come for me, I’ll be waiting.”

“Don’t say that,” I whispered. “I don’t want them to come after you.”

He leaned so close to me that our noses touched. “Do you care for me, Cara? Do
you want to stay with me forever?”
The pixies surrounded us with gleeful giggles, skipping around us in a circle as the music got faster and faster. I held on to Brendan as he spun me around. My feet stopped touching the ground.

“Forever?” I touched his face in wonder. I had already considered it more than once. I stared at his green eyes, so deep and dark, but I was still searching for a hint of purple.

He spun me around as if I weighed nothing. He held my gaze, unrelenting, even when my cheeks burned. Dancing with someone meant nothing to me. Dancing with a king was different. A king who looked like Drake. I could pretend those green eyes were violet, pretend it all meant something, pretend he wanted more than a plaything and a night’s entertainment. I could pretend lots of things. I’d had years of practice, after all.

His dancing slowed, and his arms gripped me a little tighter. My breathing grew heavy, and a desperate ache formed between my legs. He leaned toward me and kissed my neck, sparking thrills of desire that spiralled outward, covering every inch of my skin.

I felt his smile against my skin, and I squirmed in his arms. “Not in front of everyone.”

“Everyone who?”

I glanced around in surprise. We were completely alone in the garden, surrounded by black roses. “What’s going on?” I blurted.

“The party ended hours ago.”

“Impossible.”

He grinned easily, and a cold shiver ran down my spine.

“Is everything here a dream? Is everything just fantasy?”

“Only when it has to be,” he said softly. He stopped dancing and brought my hand against my chest. “You are real.” He laid my hand on his chest so I could feel the thrumming of his heartbeat. “I am real.” He kissed me. It was a soft, wet, pleasant kiss that didn’t set my world on fire, but he tasted like faery wine, like a life that would help me forget the pain of reality. “And this is real.”

“For tonight?”

“Perhaps. But a night could be more than enough.”

“For you or me?”

A look of regret crossed his features. “Some things are not for me to know until it’s too late. That’s always been my downfall.”

“I won’t be your downfall.”

“I might be yours.”

I laughed, but a tear rolled down my cheek at the same time. “It might be worth it if it meant I could feel something else.”

He stroked my cheek. “The fae have been cruel to you. You should run from us, my lovely.”

“I’ve nowhere to run.”

“Stay here long enough, and you won’t be capable of leaving.”

“I’m never afraid when I should be. That’s how I ended up here, remember?”

“The one with nothing to lose. Mostly caused by my kind, and yet here you are. There’s a name for girls like you, Cara. I should put you out of your misery.”

“Do.” I tried desperately to care about the softly spoken threat, but I couldn’t. I longed for the kind of peace only the likes of a faery king could give me.

“I haven’t finished with you yet. You could stay with me, Cara, and be treated like a queen. All it would take is one command, and all around you would idolise you, bow
before you, love you. That’s all you want, isn’t it? To be loved. To feel like the centre of someone’s world. It comes with a price, everything does, but I could give you everything you’ve ever longed for.”

“It wouldn’t be real love. Just the fantasy.”

“Sometimes the fantasy is enough.” He twirled me around and then performed a small dip.

I stared up at him, my lips trembling. “Not for me. I want something real.”

“I can give you real.” He pulled me to him. His lips descended onto mine as his hands tangled in my hair.

I closed my eyes and let him pull me into his world, the one where rooms spun and lights shone and false miracles happened. He lifted me and twirled around, his lips still on mine. The spinning was too much. I couldn’t see properly, couldn’t think. I was in a daze, and I wanted it to stop. I needed it to stop.

“Stop!”

Brendan lifted me high into the air. It was dark, and the moon had disappeared. I frowned in confusion as he set me down.

“It’s late,” he said, touching my chin with his finger and thumb.

He kissed me again, his tongue soft and sensual against mine. I gasped, dizzy all over again. I kissed him back so hard it hurt, but I couldn’t stop. I needed more, more, always more. I fell, and my eyes opened with a start.

I was lying on my bed. Brendan smothered my questions with his mouth as he climbed on top of me. I ran my fingers through his hair, hearing my own heart pound. His hand ran up my thigh. I kissed him as if I didn’t need to breathe, as though it was my last night on earth. He pulled away, and I almost cried from the loss.

“Are you willing?” he whispered.

The words sounded strange. They were important, I knew, but I couldn’t quite remember why.

“Cara, are you willing?”

I opened my mouth to say yes when I heard a scratching sound at the door. The cat. Something triggered in my head. Willing? With Brendan? What the hell was I doing?

I sat up and stared at the faery king. I slid a finger from his lips to his Adam’s apple and sighed at my body’s reaction. My body wanted his body, but my soul needed more. And my head said I didn’t want any of it.

“I’m not for you,” I whispered.

He blanched. “Almost. Almost.”

I pushed him back, getting to my knees so I looked down on him. I ran my hands along his shoulders, feeling the warmth of his bare skin. I couldn’t even remember him removing any of his clothes. His eyes burned with desire, but his pupils were too large. He looked as entranced as I had felt, and it was wrong. All wrong. If I let him kiss me, I might forget again.

“I want Drake,” I stated, pinching his shoulders. “I want Drake right now.”

He flinched, and I watched the internal struggle.

“I told you not to drink the wine,” Drake said.

My heart sank, but then he reached for me and pulled me closer, caught up in the dizzying bubble of intensity that Brendan had created. He kissed me, and everything else went away.

He pulled away, panting. “How? How did you fight it? You’ve been caught in the magic for hours. He sent Grim and Realtín away, so they couldn’t help you. How did you break free?” His skin glowed in the dark. His wings were folded in, but the shimmers reflecting made him look angelic.
“It felt like a couple of minutes,” I said. “We were dancing, and I asked him to stop, but everyone was gone, and then I was here, and he was asking me if I was willing. I heard… I don’t know. Something… woke me. My body was willing, but I knew it was all wrong. How did you get back?”

He stroked my face. “I’ve been fighting all night. You gave him strength. The power of your emotions was enough for him to feed on. You were like a drug. I don’t think he knew what he was doing for a while. I thought I was fading. The darkness kept growing, and I barely saw you anymore, but then you said my name. You chose me, and I couldn’t stop myself from grabbing the reins again. Now, here, holding you… it’s not even a struggle. I don’t know how, but I don’t even care. When I saw him with… I want you, Cara. Before it’s too late.”

His eyes had the same dazed look as Brendan’s. I wondered if we were each other’s drug, if he knew what he was doing. But when he kissed me, I forgot to care. I didn’t want the night to end, didn’t want Brendan to return, didn’t want to go back to the human world and leave all of the magic behind. And it was magical, feeling as if I could care about someone who might return the feeling.

“How long do we have?” I asked. “The truth.”

He traced a finger up my spine. “This could be the last time. He’ll have to avoid you after this to protect himself from me. And if you feed him the way you did tonight… this could be goodbye.”

“Don’t let him. Fight him.”

“I’m not strong enough. And it’s too late.”

“Then say goodbye properly,” I pleaded, my heart threatening to rip into pieces.

My soul knew his soul, and my soul would mourn and pine if his left the world. I stood and removed the jewellery. He came up behind me and undid the dress, letting it slip to the ground. His hands rested on my shoulders before travelling downward. I shivered at his touch, at the exposure. Sex had never meant anything before. But with him, it would, and afterward, there would be a goodbye.

Two thoughts chased each other in my head. He wanted me, and we were facing our final night together. I couldn’t go through life without knowing. Turning to face him, I took his hands and led him to the bed. “Stay with me.”

The magic sparked in the air, like nothing I had ever felt before. He hesitated, but his eyes were filled with longing. I closed the space between us and kissed him. He lifted me onto the bed, but I sensed him holding back. I rolled him over and straddled him. I leaned over him, suddenly afraid of rejection, but he lifted his hand and ran it through my hair, pulling me to him. I lived through one long, heartbreakingly beautiful kiss. Every inch of my skin screamed out for more, even as I savoured his taste in my mouth.

He held me away and stared at me with the kind of look I wanted for the rest of my life. It was real and pure and adoring, and I would have suffered through a thousand deaths just to bask in the warmth of it again. If I could only bottle up how worthy he made me feel and learn it for myself, half of my problems would disappear.

He pulled the rest of the pins from my hair agonizingly slowly, running his fingers through the strands until I shuddered. “Why you?” he murmured as he nuzzled my throat, leaving a trail of warmth in his wake. “Why now? There must be old blood in your veins.”

“Why?” I gasped as a thrill rushed through my body and ricocheted, smouldering every nerve ending until my skin felt aflame. The light around him seemed to burn brighter.
“How else could any of this be? It wasn’t supposed to happen this way, Cara. Not like this.”

“No regrets,” I whispered.

He rolled me onto my back, pushing my arms up over my head. “Never,” he said firmly, his lips brushing my skin everywhere.

I was on fire. There was magic in his touch, in the air, in every movement we made. I lifted my hips, colliding with his. He whispered words I didn’t recognise and explored my body.

When he hesitated and pulled away from me, I felt as if the world would end if he didn’t touch me again.

“Cara,” he said, looking into my eyes, “are you willing?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation, reaching for him, a sense of urgency driving me to push harder.

He met my embrace with his own. I finally understood what living was about, what it meant, and why I couldn’t give up. I had so much to lose, and it would all start with Drake. Too soon.

I pushed the thought away and filled myself with him instead. With the moment and the possibilities that would never be fulfilled. He held my gaze as he moved inside me, whispered my name in a way I had never heard before, and there was nothing else anymore. Just two souls connecting because they knew they would soon be ripped apart.

I gripped the headboard and vowed to memorise every second. The light from his wings and the strength in his lean muscle made it impossible to forget he wasn’t human. But the dampness of his skin, the trembling of his fingers brushing the hair from my face, and the way he bit my shoulder to muffle the sound of his pleasure would make it impossible to remember him as anything but a man.

When it was over, he wrapped me in his arms so fiercely, I didn’t expect him to let me go. I wasn’t ready to be let go.

“Don’t leave me,” I whispered, despising the desperation in my voice, but hating the thought of never feeling so content again even more. “Fight him, Drake.”

“I can’t. It would take a miracle. You give me strength, but even falling for you won’t help me when he has his full power again. Say goodbye to me, Cara. He can’t afford to let us be together again, and we can’t blame him for that. Say goodbye. Tell me you’ll walk away when it’s over.”

I refused, kissing him instead. It was so not a goodbye, but tears ran down my cheeks nonetheless. I would lose it all if I didn’t figure out a way to stop it from happening.

The way I felt about Drake didn’t make sense. We barely knew each other. But Realtaín had once had a quiet, reflective moment in which she had told me it wasn’t important what a person looked like, wasn’t important how well you knew them. Souls knew souls, and that was all that mattered.

I knew Drake’s soul, and it had marked mine. I couldn’t call it love, not yet, but Grim was right. That whisper of a promise of what might be still existed, and I knew I would find something real with Drake if we were given more time. I would never forget him, no matter what Brendan tried to do.
Chapter Nineteen

I awoke when Brendan stirred beside me, somehow knowing Drake was gone. I froze as he ran his hand along my bare skin. He leaned over me, and I felt his breath against my spine. Then he was gone, and I was alone.

I buried my face in the pillow, curling into a ball as flashbacks of the night before hit me hard and fast. Guilt and shame fought a battle in my gut, and I struggled to keep the nausea at bay. I had never been so confused.

I woke up some time later and tried the bedroom door. Locked. Sighing, I decided to crack open some books and remind myself there was a normal world out there, but something on my dresser distracted me.

I went over and stared at another wooden carving, one of a woman looking over her shoulder. She was dressed in an impossibly long gown with her hair pinned to the side with a flower. I stared at it for a long time, my stomach turning. I was afraid to touch it, and even when I sat on the bed, my eyes were drawn to the wooden figure. Finally, I hid it with the butterfly carving.

An hour later, Grim and Realtín arrived with food.

“Are you okay?” the sprite demanded in a high-pitched voice, flying around my head in a panic. “He stayed here, didn’t he? We tried, we tried. It wasn’t our fault. Don’t hate us, Cara.”

Grim’s face was bruised.

“What happened to you?” I demanded, falling to my knees beside him.

“They sent us away, locked us up,” Realtín prattled. “We knew he would do something. We tried. Grim fought them, but they…” She gazed at me. “What did he do to you?”

I shook my head. “You fought them… for me?” I asked Grim.

He looked away. “I’m sorry. I should have done more.”

I kissed his cheek. “You’re a good friend. You too, Realtín. I’m okay. I promise. He didn’t hurt me. I… we… things got weird, but I snapped out of it in time. Drake spent the night with me then.”

“The king let him?” Realtín squeaked.

I shook my head. “He didn’t have a choice. Drake was stronger than Brendan was.”

“How is that possible?” Grim asked.

The black cat strolled into the room before I could answer.

“You,” I said. “You were there last night, weren’t you?” I gave the cat a treat.

“Thanks for the help, kitty.”

I turned to see Grim and Realtín exchanging a confused look.

“Never mind,” I said. “Where’s Brendan now?”

Grim shuffled his feet, looking uncomfortable. “He’s working. He’s not… in a good mood. He wants us to keep you out of his way for a while.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. “Any sign of Drake?”

He shook his head, and my heart fell.

“Do you think Drake can see me through Brendan’s eyes?”

Grim nodded. “Of course.”

“Then I need to talk to him.”

“But Brendan said—”

“I know. I still have to talk to him.” I started to leave, but the door was locked again.

“What the hell? Why are they locking me in?”

“I don’t know,” Grim said. “Brendan never said—”
The cat freaked out, howling and spitting. The hair on the back of his neck stood right up, making him look twice his normal size.

“Something’s not right,” I said. “The cat knows things.”

Realtín stopped flying to stare in my face. “Cara, are you the—”

The bedroom window opened slowly, but nobody was there.

I blew out a breath. “Grim, Realtín, get out of here.”

“We can’t leave you,” Grim said.

“Get Brendan. Go!”

Realtín rushed to the door, kicking and punching it as she screeched for help. The cat yowled, and we all stared at the window. An impossibly large hooded figure slipped through it, dagger in hand. I glanced around for something, anything, to use as a weapon. The cat jumped onto the sill then disappeared.

The figure lowered the hood. She was a warrior faery, and the look she gave me wasn’t full of anger or hate. It wasn’t personal, just a task she had to attend to.

“Come,” she said. “We must leave.”

“What?”

She held out her hand. “I’m rescuing you, human.”

I shook my head, stepping back. “I don’t need rescuing.”

“You’re locked in, a prisoner.” Her voice sounded dull, as if coming for me was the least exciting thing she had ever done in her life. “Come willingly. I’m not leaving you behind.”

“No. I’m not a prisoner. It’s a mistake. I have something to do here.” Sometimes my purpose wasn’t clear, but the idea of leaving Drake, Brendan, everyone behind felt as though it might twist my heart right out of my chest. Maybe it was the magic talking, but I didn’t care anymore.

She cocked her head, observing me keenly. Her gaze flickered to Realtín. “You should be gone by the time I’m done with her.”

Grim stepped in front of me, but I pulled him back. I opened my mouth to speak, but the warrior advanced on me. She moved lazily, knowing I had nowhere to run. I scooped up Grim in one arm and snapped Realtín out of the air. I bundled them both into the bathroom and locked the door behind us.

“Shit, shit, shit! What do we do?”

“That is a daoine síde,” Grim said solemnly, as if he had already accepted the certainty of his death. “If help doesn’t come, we are lost. My magic won’t keep that door closed for long. The heroic fae are the giants of old, Cara. They always complete their quests. Nothing will stop them. This is no pooka. You should have gone with her.”

“I can’t leave!”

Something slammed against the door.

Realtín flew around in a panic. “This is hopeless. We can’t fight a giant!”

“Well, we have to do something,” I said, opening cabinet doors in a desperate attempt to find a weapon. “Where’s the stupid guard when we actually need him?” I found a small pair of scissors and handed them to Grim.

“This won’t stop a daoine síde,” he said.

“I know.” I spotted an air vent high on the wall. Maybe Realtín could at least escape. I stood on the edge of the bath, flinching every time the door was struck and warped a little more. The warrior would be with us soon.

I took the scissors and used one of the blades to unscrew the vent. I yanked off the cover and my nail in the process. The vent was too small for Grim.

“Realtín, go.”
“I can’t leave him,” she said in a small voice.
“Then get him help,” I said in a commanding voice.
So used to orders was she that she flew away immediately. I jumped down and lifted Grim into the air before he could protest. I shoved him into a high cabinet.
“Be quiet and stay still,” I said. “When she gets into the room, run. Okay? Run the fuck away, Grim. I mean it.”
He shook his head fiercely.
“You’re right,” I said slowly. “When she gets in, attack her from behind. But keep quiet first so you surprise her, okay?”
He nodded eagerly, shuddering as I closed the cabinet door. I pulled the bobbin from my hair and tied it around the handles as silently as I could. Maybe that would keep Grim out of the way long enough for Brendan to help us.
I turned the water on full heat and held the shower hose. With my other hand, I grabbed the bottle of mouthwash.
After one more effort by the warrior, the door broke in two. She stepped through, and I tossed some mouthwash at her face. She cried out as it burned her eyes and raised her hands to wipe them. I aimed the hose at her face. She fell back with the force of the water, still rubbing her eyes. The bathroom steamed up as I jumped over her and into the bedroom, heading straight to the window. If she had gotten in, I could get out.
I reached the frame and looked out at the straight drop. I slipped one leg over the sill, planning to climb down using the ivy, but was pulled back in by the hair. I landed heavily on the floor, catching a quick glimpse of the furious warrior dripping with water, her face red and her eyes bloodshot.
I scrambled away, but she stomped on my ankle. I crawled a few feet then half-turned and swung with my leg, connecting with her jaw as she bent down to grab me.
Hearing voices outside, I scooted under the bed as fast as I could. She tugged me back out by my feet and straddled my torso, raising her dagger high.
I struggled, but she held firm. The door burst open, just as she brought down the dagger. I wriggled enough to avoid the full force of the strike, and the blade sliced into my bicep.
I felt nothing. Then, I remembered poor Anya, how she was linked to me and bound to feel my pain. I had to stay alive to save her, too.
Brendan and his bodyguard pulled the daoine sídhé off me, but she broke free as I rose to my feet. She had lost her dagger, but she gripped my throat and squeezed.
Brendan struck her, but I still couldn’t breathe. My eyes bulged, and the room darkened. I felt no pain, not even much discomfort, as if I were outside of my body, watching. I heard the snap of bone as the bodyguard broke her arm in an attempt to free me. I vaguely wondered why they didn’t just kill her.
She finally let go, and I backed away, gasping as air filled my lungs. More fae came into the room and helped contain the warrior, but she never stopped fighting.
“Take her underneath,” Brendan ordered, panting heavily. “Find out who sent her and why.”
They hauled the warrior fae away, but she fought them off and ran at me again. Before she could reach me, Brendan’s bodyguard punched her in the jaw so hard that she fell to her knees and was finally dragged out of the room.
I wrapped my arms around Brendan, then thought better of it and backed away to sit on the floor with my back against the bed. “Cut it a bit close there,” I said, taking deep breaths. Almost dying was about as stressful as living. “Thought I was safe here?”
“You’re still alive,” Sorcha snapped.
“Anya,” I whispered, “could she be…?”
“She’ll be fine,” Brendan said. “She’s tougher than she looks.”
A rattling sound finally made its way into my awareness. “Oh, Grim’s still locked in the bathroom cabinet.”
“Locked in the…? As a punishment?” Brendan asked.
“He wouldn’t fit through the air vent, so I stuffed him in the cabinet and told him to escape when the warrior got through the door and attacked me. But he wanted to help instead, so I made sure he couldn’t get out. I figured you lot would turn up before the warrior moved on to him.”
“Grim!” Realtín called, flying into the room, followed by a group of fae.
“She’ll be fine,” Brendan said drily as Realtín knocked over a lamp in her anxiety.
“I couldn’t find Brendan,” Realtín said. “I got anyone I could. I thought we would be too late.” She flew at me and dropped damp kisses on my cheeks then went into the bathroom after Sorcha.
“If she didn’t find you, how did you know we needed help?” I asked Brendan.
“Someone else raised the alarm.”
I caught his eye. “You hurt Grim.”
He shook his head. “Not me. People got carried away. It won’t happen twice.”
I wrapped my arms around my waist, unsatisfied with his ready answer. “I was locked in. Grim and Realtín brought me food, and then somebody locked the door.”
“I noticed,” he said. “The guard was found unconscious in the hall. He won’t be guarding anyone again.”
“Grim said it was a daoine sídhe, that they don’t stop until they finish their missions.”
“She’ll be dead as soon as she talks.”
“And if she doesn’t talk?”
“She’ll be dead anyway.” He sat next to me on the floor. “The daoine sídhe don’t usually interfere this way, so this one was either paid very well or threatened very strongly.”
“She wasn’t alone,” I said. “She couldn’t have locked the door and then come in through the window.”
“I know.” He hesitated. “The amount of fae around you will have to increase, Cara. You can’t be alone. But I’m beginning to think that the chances of both of us making it aren’t good. I’ve heard more fae than I expected don’t want my return. They think it’s unnatural for me to come back to life.”
“You didn’t really die, though. You were only banished.”
“My soul was banished. My body…” He shook his head.
“I should go home,” I lied. “You don’t really need me, and I’m—”
“What home? Your parents don’t want you there.”
“Did you do that?” That fear had been in the back of my mind for a while, but I hated to voice it.
“No,” he said after a moment. “It was not my work.”
“I’m not safe with you.”
“I’m not safe with you either, Cara.”
“You tried to… you tricked me last night.”
His lips curved upward. “You knew exactly what would happen. You have a death wish, Cara, a self-destruct button you can’t resist pressing. You don’t know how to be happy, so you use us to destroy yourself.”
“Drake isn’t—”
Brendan held up a hand. “He’s going to fade. Then you’ll be worse off than before. I should make you remember just to punish you.”
I wanted to scream. I wanted to slap him. But he was king of the fae, and I wanted to live.
“If he cared about you, he wouldn’t have let me touch you,” he whispered, his voice taunting and cruel. “If he cared, he would never have touched you. You’re addicted to us, Cara. You’re poisoned with an addiction to us, and he’s prolonging it, making it worse for you. You’ll never get over us now. Do you understand me? He’s tainted you for life, and it will drive you mad in the end.”
“Why do you have to be so cruel?” My breath hitched in my throat.
“It’s the only thing you seem able to understand.”
“Screw you,” I hissed, and I strode out of the room.
Sorcha followed me down the stairs. “I’m to keep an eye on you.”
“Well, isn’t this just the perfect day?”
“You should be more grateful. He doesn’t have to go to this trouble to keep you alive.”
“He doesn’t have to be a prick either,” I snapped.
“It’s your fault,” she said. “You’re doing something to him. You and Drake together.”
“He’s in the wrong body. Ever think that might be the problem?”
She blinked fast. “Every day.”
“I need some air.” And to find that cat. Who else knew to find help? And nothing was ever as it seemed in the realm of the fae.
“I have to come with you.”
“I get it!” I headed down the hall, meaning to leave through the side door, but I heard yowling from outside.
“Um, Sorcha…”
Someone large flew into me from an open doorway to my left, slamming me into the wall. Dizzy, I lay on the floor and looked up to see my old bodyguard, the one who had been found unconscious outside my room.
Sorcha threw back her head and wailed. The noise ran right through me and echoed all around. The guard winced and stumbled a little. His face was bruised and his cheek swollen. He unsheathed his sword and raised it.
I crawled backward, terrified. He started to swing, laughing like a headcase.
A sound hissed through the air, and a bolt struck him right in the heart. He fell to his knees, still holding the sword, and I rolled over as it clattered to the ground where I had been lying. I glanced at Sorcha, who had finally stopped making that awful sound, and saw Brendan’s bodyguard next to her, his jaw clenched as he lowered his crossbow.
“You saved me,” I said.
The bodyguard nodded at me, but Sorcha flinched, probably out of regret. Brendan joined them, followed by Grim and Realtín. Grim rushed to help me to my feet.
“I told you his family were no longer to be trusted,” the bodyguard said. “I never expected it to go this far, but we need to clean out our house, my lord.”
“What do you recommend?” Brendan asked.
“Líle can be trusted to watch over the true child of Ireland. She would never betray her post. There are others who should be replaced. Friends of this traitor.” He glared at the body in disgust. “If you’re agreeable, it’s time to fight back, but we need to take measures first.”
Brendan frowned. “Peace is still an option.”
“We may not have a choice.”
Brendan nodded. “I trust you, Arlen. Do what needs to be done.”
“I must check her living quarters, and yours.”
“Do it. Realtín, fetch Líle now. Sorcha, I’ll need you for the rest of the day.”
He stood there, ordering people about for the next ten minutes until Realtín returned with Líle. I had seen her a couple of times before, and she seemed pleasant enough. She was tall and wingless with burnt orange hair and eyes. Her skin didn’t shimmer so much as it burned. Her veins looked like smouldering embers under her skin.
“Líle,” Brendan said, “you are now in charge of protecting the true child until the ceremony is over. You won’t leave her side, even when she sleeps. Same goes for you two.” He gestured at Grim and Realtín. “And don’t let Cara protect you next time.”
He looked at me. “Try to stay out of trouble for a few hours.”
“I need to go out,” I said.
“It’s too—”
“It can’t be any more dangerous outside. At least I’m not sitting in the same place, waiting to be attacked. Your bodyguard already said he wanted to check out my room, so I’ll just be in the way. I won’t even be alone, so what’s the problem?”
“I’ll keep her safe, my lord,” Líle said. “If there’s any trouble, I’ll drag her back here.”
“Let her go. He won’t expect the daoine sídhe to have failed,” Sorcha added.
“He?” Brendan narrowed his eyes. “You know more than I do now?”
Sorcha’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “Sadler did this. He’s playing with you, and you know as well as I do that the only option you have left is to end his life. Put him out of his misery before he causes more mischief.”
“It doesn’t have to come to that,” he said. “There’s still time to fix this. You may leave, Cara, but know that you’re at risk. Líle, your old team follows. Stay aware.”
He walked away with Arlen and Sorcha.
I looked long and hard at Líle, trying to size her up. “If you’re going out with me, you need to either humanise yourself or hide.”
“Not a problem.”
I narrowed my eyes. “And be nice to Grim and Realtín.”
She looked taken aback, but she nodded. “Duly noted.”
Satisfied, I got ready to leave, eager to get out of the fae atmosphere, despite the fact at least three fae would be tagging along. And whoever else was sneaking around where I couldn’t see them.
“Wait,” I said when we reached the front door. “I need to see Anya first.”
“I’ll fetch her,” Realtín said. “If only to stop your worrying.”
Líle frowned while we waited, and I wondered what her problem was. When Anya came to me, her eyes were sunken, her neck bruised, and her arm had been patched up.
“I’m so very sorry,” I said, hugging her carefully. “You have to cut this bond, Anya. It’s too risky.”
“It’s not for me to cut,” she said in a hoarse voice. “I am well now, and I’m glad I helped you. It’s a purpose I needed. Please don’t end the bond between us. I don’t want to go back to the way it was.”
The longing in her eyes was so familiar that I nodded, speechless. Maybe we were more alike than I realised.
“Go sleep in my room,” I said. “As soon as Arlen is finished checking it out. You need rest, and I’d like you to stay with me now. It must have been terrifying to
feel…” I shook my head, my eyes tearing up. The blue-haired pixie might have acted light-hearted and carefree, but she was more of a slave than anyone. I had made her life worse by dancing with danger and flirting with a king.

“I know Arlen,” she said. “I’ll tell him I’m wanted in your quarters. But I’ll sleep on the floor. I know my place.”

“Sleep on the bed. I have to start trying to make this up to you.”

She smiled, and when she walked away, I wished I could take the weight from her shoulders.

“Let’s go,” I said. “I could really use some air.”

We walked aimlessly away from the faery house. I needed time to think, time away from Brendan so I could try to understand why I wasn’t angrier with him. I also wanted time away from Drake’s body.

“What’s the deal with the pixies?” I asked.

Realtín snorted. “They’re the lowest of the low. Worth nothing.”

“They are playmates for children, playthings for any fae who wants to be entertained,” Grim said. “Slaves to their reputation.”

“All they do is laugh and dance and obey their masters,” Realtín said. “I bet they don’t even have minds of their own.”

“Anyahas a mind of her own,” I said. “She’s not like the others.”

“Maybe she found something else to hold on to,” Líle said. “It’s easy for all of us to get lost otherwise.”

I wanted to ask her what she meant, but I didn’t know her at all, and I wasn’t sure yet if I trusted her.

“I wonder if more daoine sídhe will come for you,” Realtín said brightly.

“Thanks for that thought. I won’t be able to sleep now. What are the odds of me making it to the ceremony alive?”

“Nobody is going to die on my watch,” Líle said in a tone that plainly conveyed she found the idea of failure to be a personal insult.

“We’re here, too,” Realtín said. “We’ll all make it.”

“Except for Drake,” I said under my breath.

“Who’s Drake?” Líle asked.

“I, um, he’s—”

“Weren’t you supposed to meet up with that human girl?” Realtín interrupted.

I smiled gratefully at her. “Yeah, I’ll just text her.”

Zoe was with Darren and Eoin, but she seemed excited to meet up with me near her house.

“Act human, okay?” I instructed Líle on the way.

She gave a hearty laugh which made me exceptionally nervous. Zoe met me at the end of her road, waving and jogging away from the others to give me a hug.

“You keep disappearing!” she practically squealed in my ear.

“Sorry. How are you? Your mam okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. We went back to the house to pick up a few things, and the place had been cleaned up. It was like new. Think your dad grew a conscience all of a sudden?”

I glanced at Grim. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Mam decided not to involve the police. I think she wants to pretend nothing happened.”

“That’s going around a lot lately,” I said.

She noticed Líle for the first time. “Who’s this?”

“Líle. She’s, um, a relative of Drake’s.”
“You’re still staying with him?”

My cheeks burned under Líle’s curious gaze. “Líle’s new in town, so I thought we could show her around.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Zoe said, still staring at Líle. I wondered if some faery magic was affecting her.

Darren and Eoin came over, and Zoe made all of the introductions. I was just glad to get off the topic of Drake.

“Want to get a coffee or something?” Zoe asked.

“That would be great,” Líle said, her voice low and seductive.

Zoe grinned and linked arms with me as we walked toward the café. Darren and Eoin trailed behind us. Realtn kept tripping them up, laughing hysterically all the while.

“You’re practically glowing,” Zoe said. “Having fun at the boyfriend’s?”

“No boyfriend,” I said firmly. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

Zoe frowned, but she got the hint. She would probably make up some reasonable explanation in her head.

A group of teenage boys passed, leering at Zoe. She didn’t notice. Darren, on the other hand, immediately started an argument. I looked back in surprise to see him squaring up to a sixteen-year-old.

“Darren, what are you doing?” Zoe demanded when he shoved the lad, knocking him to the ground.

“Shut the fuck up, Zo,” Darren yelled, his face reddening.

One of the boy’s friends whipped out a blade.

“Come on then, you fucking coward!” Darren shouted, slamming his fists against his chest like the Neanderthal I’d always suspected him to be.

Eoin headbutted a third boy. What happened next was kind of a blur. All of the bodies seemed to mesh together until Líle walked right through them, separating them without so much as a word. As if following a silent command, the group of teenagers headed off together. Eoin wiped some blood from his face with a grin.

“What the hell?” I said.

“This is what I’m talking about,” Zoe said, her face paling. “It’s freaking me out. And look! People just walk right by as if nothing is happening. Nobody calls the police, nobody interferes, nobody even looks their way. Nothing makes sense anymore.”

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean,” I said.

“I feel like leaving them alone will make things worse,” she admitted. “Like they’ll be completely out of control. That kid pulled a knife, Cara, and Darren didn’t give a shit. Look at him.” Her upper lip curled in distaste as Darren and Eoin shouldered each other, celebrating as if they had won something. “Sometimes I wonder how I ended up with him.”

Líle shepherded Darren and Eoin ahead of us. Both of them laughed and joked as if the trip had never been interrupted. Zoe and I followed at a distance. Realtn flew around Líle and the boys, surrounding them in a halo of light. Grim stayed by my side, his expression worried.

“It’s like they don’t even care,” I said, more to Grim than Zoe. He gave me a knowing look.

“I know,” Zoe said. “I’m so stressed out. Erika and Fiona had a massive row yesterday. I thought they were going to tear each other’s hair out. My neighbours down the road went on a rampage and slashed everyone’s tyres. I heard a teacher in
the secondary school behind your house punched a student last week. Some bad mojo in the air.”

I sucked in a breath. “It’ll be over soon. Maybe it’s a full moon or something.”

“Well, whatever it is, I’m swiftly losing patience with it. You’re the only person I don’t want to slap right now, I swear.”

I gave her a worried glance. If Zoe succumbed to whatever bad energy was in the air, I would never forgive myself. Worse, if Darren hurt her because of the fae running wild in the world… I couldn’t even think about it.

We made it to the café without any other disasters occurring, but even Grim was restless, as though the unpredictability of my human friends had affected him, too. I had to keep reminding myself that it wasn’t their fault, that it was the fae influence over them, but it was hard whenever I remembered Eoin’s grin as he wiped blood from his face. It reminded me too clearly of the black-winged faery and his enjoyment in inflicting pain.

I desperately wanted to return to the safety of Brendan’s home. At least there I knew to expect the madness. The outside world held nothing but questions.

We ended up sitting in the café for over an hour, Zoe and Líle flirting shamelessly with each other the entire time. Darren grew more and more sour, and Eoin insisted on aggressively trying to engage me in conversation.

Growing more frustrated by the minute, I made excuses as soon as I could, leaving Zoe with Darren and Eoin. “What was that?” I blurted as soon as we left the café.

Líle grinned. “I enjoy your friend.”

“ Weirdo. You can’t put spells on my friends.”

She looked offended again. “I do not need to put spells on humans.”

“Okay, relax.” I held out my hand. “Can we at least have a truce?”

She took my hand and squeezed it. “I have no problem with you, true child.”

I wasn’t sure yet. “Thanks for stopping that fight earlier. It could have gotten nasty. Well, nastier.”

She nodded grimly. “Fae manipulation. Darker fae provoking the humans. Looks like one has gotten a grip on your friend’s boyfriend. The sooner we have a leader, the better.”

“Is she safe with him?”

“For now.”

I grew nervous the closer we got to Brendan’s home. I had been attacked there more than once, but I had other reasons to be nervous of the fae king.

“The rumours are true then,” Líle said softly. “The king is not himself.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the king,” I said sharply.

She raised a brow. “Who is Drake then?”

I hesitated. “Someone I met one night. It was easier to say you’re related than make up a new story. That’s all.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” She glanced at me. “The rumours are building about Brendan. They say he’s weak, but I don’t believe it. I grew up on his deeds. There’s never been a more powerful fae than he. And in the house, people whisper of the other soul refusing to let go.”

Grim piped up eagerly. “This experience will make him a better king. He’s learning from the other soul. Drake is teaching him humility and mercy. Brendan’s a far better choice than the queens.”

Líle nodded. “Some of us are still loyal. Arlen has his work cut out for him. Even with this other soul, the girl is seen as the king’s biggest weakness.”

“She’s his strength,” Grim said. “She’s the key to his true power.”
“Stop talking about me like I’m not here,” I said, feeling uncomfortable. “It’ll be over soon, and then you can all get on with your lives.”

Realtín patted my cheek affectionately. “I know it’ll hurt when Drake’s gone, but the pain will soften eventually.”

Líle stared at me in surprise. “You’re keeping the other soul here?”

“I’m not doing anything,” I said. “He’s strong, too. That’s all. What the banshee did was unnatural.”

“Drake cares for her, and she for him,” Realtín said. “It’s not their fault this happened.”

“This is strange,” Líle said. “I thought there was something going on with the king—I mean, he indulges her so—but not a relationship with the other soul.”

“Nothing’s going on. There’s nothing,” I said. “There’s no future. He’ll be gone, and Brendan will be done with me. You lot will forget Drake and me. Everyone will forget.” Except for me.

I walked fast, keeping my head down. I hated thinking about what would happen. As much as I wanted Drake to stay, the thought of Brendan fading was almost as bad, but I would never admit that aloud.

“You could speak to the Goddess,” Líle said.

“What?”

“Brendan might be king, but there are higher entities. Humans have religions; this is our version of that. Some of us pray to the Goddess, others sacrifice to the priestesses, but it’s all one.”

“And it’s all forbidden,” Grim said sharply. “Brendan made sure of that when he last reigned.”

“He did,” Líle said. “But that doesn’t stop the Goddess from existing, and Imbolc is Brighid’s own festival.” She looked at me. “They say she drew power from her worshippers, but Brendan feared her name. He was young and foolish, and perhaps that was his true downfall. Perhaps the Goddess punished him for his sins.”

“You’re a follower,” Realtín said in a hushed voice.

“I have gained comfort from praying to the Goddess,” Líle admitted. “I have an affinity with the Three, and I think it’s wrong for any king to tell me who to worship. Royalty are not gods. Those already exist.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” I asked, remembering how upset Brendan had been when he told me about his version of Brighid.

“If I had been male, I would have been forced to stand with those fae that night. By a twist of birth, I could have been the one pushed out of my own body. We’re all under the thumb of another. I take pride in my loyalty, but my faith is far deeper.”

“How could I do it?” I asked. “How do I… make the Goddess listen?”

“No,” Grim urged. “Don’t do it, Cara. Don’t involve yourself in these matters. Brendan would be angry if he learned of it, and the Goddess’s servants are fickle. They grant requests in ways you don’t expect. It’s not worth the risk.”

“I have to try something,” I said.

“Trust me,” Líle said. “Anything is possible, and nothing is set in stone in this world. Complacency is what ruins royalty. We’ll see if Brendan truly learned his lessons, but that doesn’t mean this other soul is lost forever.”

For the first time, I felt a true spark of hope that I could find a future I wanted. And then I remembered I was relying on fae.
Chapter Twenty

The next day, the cat was sprawled across my bed as I stared out of the bedroom window. The gardens were beautiful, but I wondered just how much of it was real. Brendan walked amongst the rose bushes with Sorcha, his shoulders hunched. Líle and Anya were playing cards, but Líle’s eyes had been trained on me for a while. Realtin and Grim whispered in the corner.

“I’m going for a walk,” I announced. Every one of them rose to their feet in a bustle, and I sighed at the idea I would never have privacy again. “Just in the garden,” I clarified, but even the cat moved to the windowsill as if to watch over me.

Outside, my little entourage followed me to the rose bushes where Brendan was still wandering with Sorcha. He didn’t meet my eyes when we approached, and I felt a little pang of longing. I had spent the night with that body, but the current soul couldn’t look me in the eye.

“Should you be allowing her to wander around so freely?” Sorcha asked Líle. “It’s fine,” Brendan said.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I asked.

“I don’t think—”

“Please?”

He nodded and waved his hand. “Disperse.”

Everyone, including Sorcha, took unwilling steps away from us. I looked back at my fae friends, noted the worry on Grim’s face, and turned to Brendan again. He seemed subdued, and I worried a little.

“Can we go back?” I asked. “That place with the willow tree, can we go there again?”

“Why?” He sounded surprised.

“I need… to not have people looking at me when I say this.”

He frowned and made a hand signal, likely to let Arlen know he was about to disappear with me. He beckoned me, and I followed him past thorn bushes, past tiny eyes, until we stepped through a gate and found ourselves back on neutral fae territory.

“Is this always here?” I asked.

“Always.” He trudged toward the willow tree, giving me no chance to bask in that dying fae sun, such a contrast from the bitter cold back home. “Sit,” he ordered when we reached the bench, but he paced in front of it. “If you’re looking for an explanation, an apology, you won’t find it. I’m fae. That’s how we behave. You knew that when you ate the food, took the drink.”

“I trusted you,” I said. “You played the game with me when I trusted you. When you knew. Why?”

“I didn’t mean to. Not at first. But then…” He shook his head. “I had forgotten how it felt to make a connection, to feel… it doesn’t matter why. Are you going to be difficult at the ceremony because of this?”

I hated myself for my ready answer. “No. I just wanted to ask you some questions, that’s all.”

“He’s done it then. Trapped you.”

“I’m not trapped. I know exactly what I’m doing. I’m probably not making the best decisions, but I’m making the ones that feel good right now. Let me have that one thing, Brendan.”

“Fae are all about doing what feels good right now,” he said softly. “But your human guilt might make it feel all the worse later on.”
“Why do you think I haven’t forced you out of his body yet?”

His gaze was filled with pity. I was a child playing in games I would never understand.

I decided to change the subject. “When I was attacked, you said someone other than Realtín sounded the alarm. Was it the cat?”

He nodded. “Think of the cat like a guardian. She won’t harm you.”

“But is it the same cat? Is it the cat I saw… other times?”

“I believe so.”

“Why me then?”

“That’s between you and the cat.”

I stared at him, wondering if he was making fun of me. “You said something else. When we danced. You said… you said the fae had caused most of my misery. What exactly did you mean?”

He paced, his hands opening and closing into fists. “I don’t think you’re ready for that, Cara.”

“Ready for what? Just tell me what you know, Brendan. I’m not a bloody child.”

“Aren’t you?” he whispered. “Gathering playmates around you.”

“You’re the one who sent them all to me! I didn’t ask for Líle or Anya or even a sprite and a brownie. They were your choices.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes I wonder. Yes, I bade them to stay with you, to protect you, but you’re the one who has befriended them, charmed them into loving you. I couldn’t separate you if I tried. Even Líle, loyal to me and barely known to you, has that same look in her eyes that the others have. And I have to wonder why. Is it because your humanity is a novelty for them, or is it something else? They want to please you so badly. Does a streak of fae in you compel them to obey?”

“Obey? I don’t order them. I’m not like you.”

“No. And yet, you are a lot like me. You do what you have to do to survive another day. And you have a knack of knowing just what that might be.”

“Stop talking in circles and just tell me, please. What is that you know about me?”

“I know where you came from,” he said, looking distraught. “But it doesn’t matter, Cara. You’re never going back to your human family. You never need to look in their eyes again. What does it matter how it all began?”

I rubbed my goose-bumped arms. “Tell me.”

He sat next to me and cleared his throat. “I told you how fae deal with humans, pushing, prodding, provoking.”

“Are you saying my dad acts the way he does because a fae is picking on him?” My heart lifted with hope. If there was a reason, an excuse, then maybe I could fix it. Maybe I could have my family the way I needed it to be.

Brendan hesitated. “Partly. This goes back to before you were born, Cara. This is… many of us are attracted to human children with fae ancestry. There’s something a little… extra about the emotions they feed us. There’s a bubble around them, a hive of more.”

“Are you saying… do you mean that I’m the one provoking him? That I’m causing all of it?”

He stared at his hands. “I’m trying to explain. Your mother is like you, human with fae blood, and when your father fell in love with her, his love was so exaggerated, so deep, that it bordered on obsession. That alone is attractive to a wandering fae. But your mother already unconsciously called us to her.” He frowned. “That was another reason why we mixed. A hybrid would form a melting pot of emotions around them,
affecting everyone in her family, sometimes even her neighbourhood. It’s this *call* that’s so strong. It provides so much without us having to stir things up, as it were.”

“So there have always been fae around my family?”

“Yes. Your mother already attracted the fae, and her relationship with your father strengthened the call. Some fae knew to hang around the family, knew it was an easy gain. And one night, things went bad.”

“What happened?” I whispered.

“They, your parents and your brother, lived far away from where your family home is now. They had a relatively normal life. The highs were probably higher than others, the lows far harder to crawl out of, but your father wasn’t the way he is now, and your brother had no trace of fae, so there was no combination effect like there is with you and your mother together.” He looked at me. “Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head. “Keep going.”

“One night, the house was broken into by another like your mother—human with but a trace of fae. He didn’t know, didn’t understand, but the fear he caused, the guilt he felt, the excitement and bursts of adrenaline he experienced when he stole were a feeding ground to all sorts of fae. That, in turn, fed him until he experienced his own kind of high. He broke the rules to feel alive. Does that sound familiar?”

I licked my lips. Suddenly, the air felt a lot drier.

“Are you sure you want me to finish this story?” he asked. “It doesn’t have a happy ending.”

“There are no such things as happy endings. Don’t stop.”

“As you wish.” He reached out to hold my hand, and I knew it would be bad, worse than anything I had expected.

“When he came upon your family home, he found himself… encouraged by the fae. There was a lot of excitement, and it attracted more fae, darker fae from both courts, and things got out of control. He had never been that sort of man before, but on that night, encouraged by the mass of emotions and the fae who gathered, he forced your father and brother to watch while he raped your mother.”

I had been waiting for it, waiting for the worst to come, but even then I wasn’t ready. My hand flew to my mouth, trembling like a leaf.

He continued, refusing to look at me. “You were conceived that night, a child made from two human parents with fae blood. Your family moved and pretended the past never happened, but your father begged your mother to have an abortion. She refused; she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t blame you for what had happened, and perhaps a tiny part of her understood. The fae had come for her as a child, just as they came for you. Both of you were ready to awaken to the truth, you know.”

I shook my head. “I can’t…”

“The fae never left you alone. They followed, driven by your father’s emotions… and your brother’s. They pushed your father until he could take no more. And he grew more agitated as time passed. The more he hurt, the more the fae pushed.”

“How do you know all of this?” I asked, defying my voice to shake or crack.

“Your family is apparently well-known fodder for the fae. With your birth, everything went further out of control. And as if you knew, you learned early on to block what you feel. You protected your family, whether you knew it or not, Cara. Life would have been much worse for them if it weren’t for you.”

“If it wasn’t for me, there would have been no trouble at all,” I whispered. “Dad’s right. He didn’t know what he was right about, but he was right all the same. I was the only problem. Their lives are probably perfect now without me.”
“You think they don’t have guilt? His mind has been cruelly twisted, but he still acknowledges the guilt he feels, and without you there, it’s easier for him to see clearly. It doesn’t matter, Cara. It doesn’t change you. You did what you had to do to survive, as did the fae who troubled your family. I’m sorry it happened, but I can’t take it back, and I can’t stop it from happening to another family. Not like this. This is why they need a strong leader. You saw the queens. You know they ruled with lust and bloodlust. They encouraged that kind of behaviour. They gained power from it.”

The story was slowly sinking in, slowly making sense of everything that had ever happened in my entire life. The fae had ruined us, and I was helping them, caring for them, wanting to be with them forever.

“Has all of this been accidental?” I asked. “My parents, the cat, me being led to you, has this all been a happy accident?”

“Sometimes I wonder at that, too.” He squeezed my hand. “You’re shaking.”

“Yeah, well. It’s a lot to… it’s just a lot.”

“I’m sure. This… I’m trying to explain why we react to you the way we do. The faery you descended from had a knack for pushing emotions to the limits. You do that, and combined with your human ability to feel, it’s like a drug to us. You’re valuable to the fae, but that doesn’t mean you’re important. If I’m king again, if I take the throne and regain my full power, I can protect you in the future. I can make you untouchable, stop what happened to your mother from happening to you.”

“All I have to do is help you,” I said wryly.

“It’s for the greater good. We all have to sacrifice. We all have to give. We all have to work together to undo the damage that has been done.”

“You said it’s just fae nature.”

“It is, but sometimes it goes too far. We should be protecting those with our blood, not pitting them against each other and putting them in danger. I admit I once enjoyed those games, but that made me a terrible king. I’ve learned from my mistakes.”

“Do you and Drake, Realtín, and the others, do you all spend time with me because I give you a high?”

“It’s… not the only reason.”

“So I’m like… a commodity. I can just sell off my natural talents to the highest bidder amongst the fae. I can just—”

“You’re not that foolish, Cara.”

“Aren’t I? I was foolish enough to think I could fix my family. Foolish enough to want to see the fae. I was even foolish enough to think I could love you all, to think that I could somehow help you and save Drake both. I was the fool who thought either of you were worth it.”

“Cara…”

“I’d like to go home now, please.”

“To my home,” he clarified. “You can’t ever go back to yours.”

“I know that,” I snapped, pulling my hand from his grasp. “Just another thing the fae have taken from me.”

When we returned to the house, I got into my gigantic fae bed, pulled the luxurious fae covers over my head, and squeezed my eyes shut, trying hard not to imagine the person I probably resembled most, the person who had raped my mother, the person the man who raised me saw every time he looked at me.
Chapter Twenty-One

The lack of true emotion in my life had drawn me to the fae, but the depths of despair I was experiencing among them was almost too much to bear. For the first time, I could imagine what it had been like for my brother the night he had taken his life. I had never understood it before, had been incapable of going through the motions, but finally, I got it.

I could imagine giving up, could see myself letting go, unsure if life was worth the pain. The circumstances of my birth had destroyed my family. Everything made sense. Every comment I didn’t understand, everything that had confused me, it was all figured out in my head. I envied ignorance.

I pictured malevolent faeries egging on criminals and puncturing family units. I heard their whispers, saw how someone who didn’t believe would be the most vulnerable. I wasn’t fae enough to count, but the trace of fae in me ruined everything they hadn’t managed to taint. For all of the times I drew my father’s hatred and wrath, it had been something in my blood that stoked the embers of his ire. We had all born the brunt, and I didn’t know how to get past it.

If I ended my life, my parents—if I could even call them that—would be happier. My mother might feel sad, but in real terms, her life would improve. Maybe Zoe’s life would be better without me there; she wasn’t exactly happy. And the fae… they wouldn’t notice anyway, as long as they got what they wanted first.

And maybe I would see my brother again. A child forced to watch such violence, forced to live with what my birth brought to his family, yet he had managed to love me all the same. He was the best person I had ever known, and he had taken his life because he couldn’t bear the memories anymore, couldn’t handle the stain on all of our lives. Thanks to the fae. Thanks to me. I had killed the person I loved most just by living.

That truth shattered my heart. When Realtín tried to speak to me, I stared at her blankly, unable even to form the words I needed to send her away. I was a shell. Empty and broken and unable to fathom the pain I had caused. Anya tried to feed me, but everything tasted like ash, so I kept pushing her away. Grim tried to plead with me, but I didn’t have the energy to listen. Líle tried to push my buttons, saying things that would normally have spurred me into action, but there was nothing anyone could say that would be worse than what I already knew.

I was tired and weary and unable to see a future for me, trapped in another world, one that all of the negativity in my life had stemmed from. And I still couldn’t walk away, still couldn’t leave it behind. So the guilt multiplied and folded in on itself in an eternal circle of punishment. My brother deserved vengeance, and all I could think about was how painful it would be never to see the fae again. What was wrong with me?

“Please,” Realtín said in a panic. “He’s going to come and see you. He’ll force us to keep you alive. It’s been three days, Cara. Please, just eat something. He won’t leave you alone otherwise.”

I stared at the sprite. “I don’t care.”

She wrung her hands. “What did he do?”

“He told me the truth,” I managed to get out before covering my head with the blanket again.

That caused a flurry of discussion amongst my companions. The cat wormed its way into the bed and slept against my chest, purring along with my silent sobs. I couldn’t even weep properly, couldn’t let the pain escape through tears.
“Maybe she needs to speak to her mother,” Grim whispered.
I rolled over at that idea. The more I learned of my heritage, the more lost and displaced I felt. Had there ever been a chance of happiness for my family in a home where the mother had been afraid to comfort the daughter for fear of dredging up old memories for the husband?
“She needs Drake, and we all know it,” Realtín snapped.
But was that even true? He was going to leave me, too, and he hadn’t shown up when Brendan told me everything.
“The grotto would help her,” Líle said in a quiet voice.
“Do you want him to turn on her for good?” Realtín asked harshly. “Keeping him sweet will save her life.”
“He’s changed,” Líle insisted. “It won’t be the same this time.”
“He’s changed now,” Grim said. “There’s no telling what will happen when he’s flooded with power. It changes every man.”
“If he hurts her, I’ll die first,” Anya said, but she sounded excited. “We could hide her away. Take her after the ceremony before anyone gets a chance to remember her.”
I dozed off after that, waking and sleeping in never-ending nightmares. I needed my brother. I needed to beg his forgiveness for what had been done to him. He had been the one constant, more loyal even than my mother. Losing him had helped me build that armour around me.
“What do you need?” Grim whispered in my ear.
“My brother.” The only thing I couldn’t have.
Later, Líle pulled the covers off me. “It’s time to eat. Stop wallowing in self-pity like a pathetic human. You’re better than this.”
“I’m not hungry.” That wasn’t a lie. My stomach didn’t hunger for anything. My lips were dry, but I wasn’t bothered enough to sit up and drink.
“I’m dragging you out of that bed and throwing you into the shower,” she warned.
“So help me, Goddess, I’ll strip you down.”
I looked at her blazing eyes and knew she would keep her word. “Fine. I’ll get in the fucking shower if it means you’ll leave me alone.”
“Good. You smell like a farm animal.”
She helped me out of the bed. I was surprised to find my limbs too shaky to stand without her help.
“Anya will wash your hair,” she said. “You can sit down in the bath, and when you get out, we’ll have some soup ready for you. You’ll feel much better, I promise.”
I couldn’t imagine that, but I sat in the bath and let them hose me down. Anya was gentle, murmuring words of encouragement, but Líle taunted me constantly. The scent of soup filtered into the bathroom, and my stomach growled loudly.
“She needs food,” Líle said. “Her hair doesn’t need to shine like the sun.”
Anya kept scrubbing. “But it’ll smell so good when I—”
“I’ll shave her head if that helps.”
“Fine,” Anya snapped. “But she’d feel better with pretty hair.”
“She’ll feel great once she actually eats something. She badly needs to keep her strength up to deal with all of the magic around her,” Líle argued. “I’ll lift her out while you get the dressing gown.”
I had already begun to feel stupid, so when Grim began spoon-feeding me on my bed, I decided it was time to deal with everything.
“I can feed myself,” I muttered, taking the spoon out of his hand. “And I can wash my own hair.”
“Do it, and we won’t have to,” Líle said.
“I will. I just…” I heaved a sigh and dropped the spoon. “I don’t know how to deal with this. He told me that the fae caused all of my family’s pain. That I caused them pain just by existing. My father’s not even my father.” I shook my head.

“We’re sorry,” Grim said, his voice stilled. “If there was something we could do…”

“But should I do something? Say something to my mother? How do I…? I mean, this ruined their lives. My brother’s dead because of me. If she hadn’t had me, their lives would be perfect.”

“Nobody can know that,” Líle said, but her tone had softened. “Except the Mother.”


“She’s a daughter, too,” Líle said, pointing at Anya. “There are more of us than you think.”

Anya nodded. “I can’t help it. The Mother sent me to Cara.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Realtín scoffed. “Why on earth would she send you to Cara?”

“I don’t question her,” Anya said indignantly. “I know you look down on me because I’m a pixie, Realtín, but I’m more than that. We’re all more than a name. Look at Cara.”

They all looked at me.

“Well,” Anya added, “on her good days.”

I giggled, and the others joined in wholeheartedly, as if I had finally given them permission to be happy.

“I’m sorry I’m a pain in the arse,” I said. “Maybe I’m not as strong as I thought.”

“Will you come somewhere with me?” Líle asked. “Right now?”

“It’s not like I can go anywhere without you,” I said.

“You need some air,” she said firmly. “You three, cover for us.”

“We stay with Cara,” Realtín insisted. “We were her guardians first.”

“I won’t let her come to any harm, little sprite,” Líle said. “Look at how pale her cheeks are. She needs air, and he will only hover if we all go. They’ll think she’s abed if you and Grim remain here with Anya.”

Realtín pouted, but Grim nodded. “We trust you, warrior,” he said. “Don’t make us regret it.”

Anya bundled me up, and Líle snuck me outside. I could hear Brendan shouting at someone inside his office.

“You feel guilty about your brother,” Líle said when we had lost ourselves in the rose bushes. “And the rest of your family. I think I can give you comfort, if you’re willing to try.”

“Why would you help me? Brendan said… is it because of what I can give you? This high or whatever?"”

She shook her head. “I don’t like to feed on misery, Cara. And while it’s true that being by your side gives us certain advantages, I would rather see you happy. I enjoy humans, but you… I watched you before he made me your bodyguard. I was part of a group who kept an eye on you from a distance. I saw the way you treated the sprite and the brownie, saw how the king reacted to you. And when I saw you with Anya, I knew. The Goddess wanted this. I think the humanity in you is good for us.”

“I don’t know about that.” Cavorting with a body that contained two souls probably wasn’t the most human thing I’d ever done in my life.

“We call the goddess Brighid the Mother because she looks over us all. Humans included. She saw us all as her children, and she entwined our lives. Things have changed, and the Mother has all but disappeared. Sometimes her servants grant favours on her behalf, but it’s said she disliked the way the fae treated humans, and
that’s why she turned her back on us. Whatever the reason, I believe we were meant
to co-exist peacefully and happily. I don’t think we were ever meant to feed on anger
and pain. The emotions are stronger, but that’s only because we encourage them.
Perhaps if we encouraged love and happiness, we would get the same rush as he gets
with you.”

“It’s not on purpose.”
She gazed at me. “I envy you. You can feel the things we cannot. That night, at the
king’s party, he made you appear more fae. He showed you off in ways you’ll never
know. They all got a taste, and they all know you’re on his side. And then later…”
She grinned. “I stood watch outside the door and had more of a taste.”

“Sometimes the rules are the wrong kind of prison. Never underestimate the power
you have over the fae. You may have none of the magic and all of the weaknesses, but
you have something they want to keep.”

“I’d rather have nothing they want,” I said softly.

“You’ve been faced with all of the negatives, but you could have a wonderful life
with us. Consider it at the end, and if you stay, perhaps I can serve you, too. But
whatever you do, don’t regret what you had here with the king, with Drake. He’s no
warrior, not like the king, but he has… something.”

“He definitely has something,” I said. “But is any of it real? Where are we going,
Líle?”

“To the Goddess garden. It’s forbidden, and you may not have enough fae in your
blood to step inside, but it’s worth a try. If the Goddess hears you, she may help. And
it’s a place of peace. You might see things clearly, truly figure out how to move on
from all of the darkness you’ve seen.”

“I don’t know how. I regret so many things.”

“That’s your problem,” she said. “Regret is pointless. Enjoy the moments because
they can end. Why regret the things that made you happy, even for one moment?”

“Because… because it’ll hurt more in the end.”

“The end may be a long way off,” she said. “What was done to your family was not
your fault. There is no other ending to that story. And if you regret the time you’ve
spent with Brendan and Drake, then you are a complete fool.”

“I can’t have them both,” I said. “I can’t have either of them.”

“You have now. That’s all that matters. What will come will come. Live for now is
my advice.”

We stepped through a dark wood, thorns twining around my ankles and threatening
to trip me until Líle cut through them with her sword.

“You could teach me to fight,” I said. “It might make your job easier.”

“Start with this.” She handed me her sword and pointed in front of us. “It gets worse
ahead. Cut through them. If you can.”

The dare in her words kept me going, despite how much my arms trembled. I
slashéd until sweat dripped down my back and blisters formed on my fingers.

Then, I realized I felt no pain from it. “Oh, no. Poor Anya.”

“This is nothing to someone like Anya, but we’ll stop. You did well. I’ll make a
warrior out of you yet, given half the chance.”

“Are there leylines here?” I asked.

“Leylines? Of course. Can you sense them?”

“How do I…? What do they feel like?”
“Like… power.” She pulled me a couple of steps to the left. “Now close your eyes and concentrate. Tell me when you feel something different underfoot.”

I closed my eyes and felt stupid as she pushed me around the forest, barely keeping me on my feet. And then I felt it. That vibration that reminded me of the night I had first been led to the fae.

I stopped moving. “I think I feel something.”

“Good,” she whispered. “Keep going. Try to find your way. I’ll be right here.”

She kept her hands on my hips as I walked, trying my best to follow the leyline. I fell off the path a number of times, but the longer we walked, the more obvious the sensation was. It was like a prickling on the soles of my feet, and by the time she bade me to stop, I could barely stand the sensation.

“Here we are,” she said.

I opened my eyes to see a clearing. We kept going until we came to a large arch covered in white flowers that gleamed in the moonlight. The archway blurred and shimmered, and I tasted magic in the air. I couldn’t see what was past it, as if my eyes weren’t capable of seeing.

“I don’t know about this,” I said.

“This is her garden, tended to by her daughters. The path is covered again every day to protect this place. Step inside. If you can’t, we’ll turn back, but Cara, if you can, the Goddess herself will look down on you. If we’re lucky, she’ll guide you to peace, at the very least.”

“Brendan will freak,” I said.

“Yes. That’s why he won’t be told about this.”

“Even if it works?”

“We don’t know how to help you with your grief. The grotto is the best place for you right now.” She shrugged. “I doubt even you could make the king listen. He closes his mind and ears to the Mother.”

“But you still serve him.”

“He’s the best hope we have. Understand this, Cara, war will come. He’s the only one strong enough to contain it. Go.”

She pushed me, and I stumbled through the arch, feeling as though I had jumped through a wall of cold water. I went from a dark, cold wood to a beautiful, sunny garden.

I looked up at a familiar sun and relished the atmosphere. Fae and peace combined. There was silence apart from a trickling fountain ahead, and the place was full of flowers and shrubs and trees.

Taking a deep breath, I went to the fountain. Water poured from the hands of three sculpted women. A jewelled cushion sat at their feet, and I knelt on it, letting the water run over my fingers. I felt safe for the first time, maybe in my life. There was nothing around, nobody to hurt me or hate me or make me feel worthless. There was just me and the sound of running water, me and the feeling I could remain there forever.

I wasn’t sure how long I knelt there, staring up at the stone women as if waiting for them to speak. I wished my brother could come back to me. He was the only one who didn’t expect anything from me, the only one who understood me and accepted me and didn’t blame me for anything else. Why had he been the one to leave? Why couldn’t he have stayed with me?

I opened the locket and stared at the picture of us. I might have been a better person with him around. I might have cared what happened to me before it grew too late. He would have taught me more, and I would have listened.
“I miss you,” I whispered past the lump in my throat. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth as something flew past my face. A snow-white butterfly criss-crossed in front of me, deftly avoiding the streams of water and landing on top of the fountain. The water stopped running. Something gripped my heart and squeezed. I got to my feet and stretched out a hand. The butterfly flew onto my fingers, fluttering its wings.

“Do we go to the Nether?” I whispered. “Can you see me, Darragh?”

A feeling of peace overcame me, and I could have sworn I smelled his favourite aftershave. Maybe it was all in my head, but I didn’t care. I had found a place with good memories alone. I had found somewhere I could remember him without the images being tainted by my father.

I stood there for a long time, whispering to the butterfly and praying it was a sign from my brother. It didn’t even matter. The words fell from my lips without pause, and each one lifted a weight from my shoulders.

“I’m so sorry for what happened to you. You’re the only person who made life bearable for me, but it wasn’t bearable for you, and that was my fault. I’m sorry I blamed you for leaving. I’m just… I love you, and I miss you, and I don’t know how to fix this. You didn’t deserve this. Please forgive me.”

The butterfly left my fingers, brushed against my cheek, and flew upward until I could no longer see it. The water from the fountain ran again, and I knew it was time to leave. Whatever Brendan said, I was certain Brighid had gifted me to help me carry on. And I knew that Darragh wasn’t suffering anymore.

I trailed my hand along the white flowers that grew all over the garden as I made my way to the arch. The scent of them made me drowsy, and when I finally stepped through the arch, I fell into darkness.
Chapter Twenty-Two

I woke up in my fae bed to see Brendan standing over me, a deep frown marring Drake’s features. Arlen stood behind him, his stern face impassive.

“What did you do?” Brendan asked. “They say you haven’t left this bed for days, and yet you smell like… another place.”

I sat up and stretched. “I’m hungry.”

Realtín flew over to me. “I thought you would die!” She pulled my hair and kissed my cheek.

I yawned and lay back down. “I thought you felt my pain.”

“At first,” Brendan said, “and then it disappeared. Anya weakened, but she didn’t suffer. You didn’t suffer. We felt nothing at all for the last day. I thought… we were concerned that we had broken your mind.”

“Not yet,” I said, giving Grim a weak smile. His eyes were red-rimmed, and Líle was fidgeting anxiously by the doorway. “Why are you all so worried?”

“If you die, so do they,” Brendan said coldly.

“That’s not why!” Realtín screeched in my ear. “You know we worried for her.”

He narrowed his eyes at the sprite until she hid behind me.

“Don’t bully her,” I said, yawning again.

“Here’s your breakfast,” he said as Anya ran in, followed by Sorcha. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Wait!” I said. “What day is it?”

“Friday,” he said.

“Great. We’re going on that human night you promised me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he exclaimed. “You almost wasted away this week. What are you talking about?”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Whether I like it or not, I’m bound to be used up by the fae, and I want to see my friends one more time. I want to celebrate the last birthday I might ever see. I’m allowed to be drunk and weepy, but if I act like I’ll never see my friends again during the day, they’ll know something is up. Besides, all of this… faeness isn’t good for me. Obviously. Maybe I overdosed on being around so many fae.”

He glared at Grim. “Is that possible?”

Grim nodded, surprising me. “She’s just a human, and she’s been thrown in with us like one of the summer wives. They don’t last very long because they aren’t used to us. It’s been a lot to take, even for someone with a trace of fae in her.”

“And you promised,” I said. “We made a deal. Fae don’t break deals.”

“No.” Brendan sighed. “But we do our best to worm our way out of them.”

“I thought you wanted to know what a human night out would be like.”

He hesitated. “I do, but there’s so much to do. Arlen’s reorganising everything, and we don’t have long left. It seems like a risk.”

“So you’re scared,” I said.

“I am not scared.”

“Whatever you say. All I know is that if I were you, being attacked and all, being disrespected in my own home, I’d want to show the world I wasn’t afraid. I’d want the world to see me out there, enjoying life and daring my enemies to come get me.”

He smiled. “Compelling reason, I admit. There would need to be rules enforced. You would have to—”

“I will be so good, you’ll think my soul has been swapped out. Maybe I need to have some fun, Brendan. Isn’t that what the fae are all about? Fun, excess, and debauchery?
And after everything you told me, I need to get out of my head for a while.” And I needed to be away from so much concentrated fae magic to figure out what I really felt and thought.

“It would send a message,” Líle said. “Their attack meant nothing to us.”

Brendan looked at Arlen and Sorcha.

“It would give us a chance to see a different view of the fae and humans,” Arlen said. “It might be telling.”

“You can’t be serious,” Sorcha said. “Now is not the time.”

“People are afraid he’s weak,” I said. “Let him show them his strength.”

“And perhaps it will show you what the world is really like without a fae leading the way,” Brendan said, raising a brow.

“Fair enough,” I said.

“I’m inclined to agree to this,” Brendan said. “Arlen, have you tracked down Sadler?”

“No,” Arlen replied. “But there are rumours that his son is on the move.”

“It looks like we’ll face each other at the ceremony then. Is the daoine sídhe still alive?”

“ Barely. She refuses to admit why she’s working for the likes of Sadler.”

Brendan rubbed his jaw. “She won’t break. Forget to feed her.”

I swallowed my protest. Yeah, she had tried to kill us, but letting her starve seemed beyond cold. I kept my eyes on the food Anya had served until Brendan, Arlen, and Sorcha left the room.

When I heard their footsteps go down the stairs, I looked at my friends. “How the hell did I get back here?”

“You passed out,” Líle said, rushing over to me and wringing her hands in agitation.

“I thought I had killed you, thought I…” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry you were hurt.”

Realtín flung a grape. It hit Líle in the eye, but she didn’t react.

“I wasn’t hurt,” I said. “I feel much better actually. It was beautiful, peaceful. I saw a butterfly. That was my brother’s pet name for me. I… it’s a thing, okay? The water stopped running, and I thought I smelled… I can’t explain what happened, but I felt like he was there with me. I was so upset at what he must have thought of me, knowing what he did, but I remembered something in the garden. He loved me, no matter what. He never blamed me for my birth, and his death…” I sighed heavily.

“There’s nothing anyone can do to change that.”

“You were blessed,” Líle said solemnly. “The Mother took pity on you.”

“There were three women,” I said. “The fountain, I mean. It was carved into three women.”

“The Mother didn’t want idols of herself,” Líle explained.

“The three are her servants. Some call them demi-goddesses, others the three priestesses,” Anya said. “But they serve her all the same. It is they who interfere even though the Mother appears to turn her back.”

“Is the Fade and the Nether the same for humans?” I asked. “Do we all end up in the same place?”

“Perhaps humans end up in the deepest Nether,” Líle said. “But nobody returns from there to tell the tales.”

I frowned. They had plenty of stories of faeries going to the Nether. I pushed the food away. “I need a favour. I understand if you can’t help, but I need to speak to that daoine sídhe.”
“Brendan would have my head if I allowed you into the dungeon, never mind near your attacker,” Lile protested.

“Why would you want to see her?” Grim asked.

“I need to know why she was sent here. I need to know why she would work for Sadler. Look, after what happened to my family, I want to make sure somebody strong is in charge. And if that’s Sadler, then so be it. But I need to know before I make a decision.”

“If you betray Brendan, he won’t think twice about ending your life,” Realtín squealed, spinning upside down in her anxiety.

“I know,” I said. “But the same thing can’t happen again. If he isn’t strong enough to deal with two courts, then chaos will reign instead. I just need to make sure that I’m making the right choice. That’s all.”

“But Drake—”

“This is bigger than Drake or me. Bigger than Brendan. This is about what’s best for everyone as a whole. The right person has to rule. If not… I don’t want to see anyone else’s family ruined like mine, okay?”

“You would really turn against him?” Anya asked. “You would put aside the rewards to save us all?”

I stared at the pixie, who was so serious underneath the glitter and giggles. “If we all do what we want, the world will destroy itself. I’m running out of time, and I need to know for sure.”

“I’ll help you,” Anya said. “I’ll get you into the dungeon.”

“She won’t talk to you if she didn’t speak under torture,” Lile said.

“It’s worth a try,” I said. “She asked me to come with her first.”

“A trick,” Realtín said. “To prevent her from spilling your blood within Brendan’s walls.”

“I still want to know,” I said firmly. “Maybe I should do this myself.”

That got me a resounding no, much to my relief. My friends worked together to find a way to sneak me into the dungeon while I showered and dressed. I wondered where the cat had gone, but I figured he would turn up later.

I checked my phone to find a voicemail telling me in no uncertain terms that I had lost my job. Wincing, I sent Zoe a text letting her know we were meeting up at the weekend, whether she liked it or not. She replied almost immediately with a resounding yes. I would miss her.

Anya returned first. “It’s better if the others aren’t with us,” she explained under her breath. “There’s a way to the daoine sídhe, but I’ll need to distract a guard. You’ll have one chance to slip past. One chance to speak to her. Use it wisely.”

“How will you distract the guard?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter, Cara.”

“No. We’ll find another way. I don’t want to use you like this.”

“I need to help you,” she said. “Let me.”

I hugged her tightly. She had tears in her eyes when I let her go.

“We all have parts to play,” she whispered. “I’ve always dreamed of a different role. Pixies are tolerated as long as we’re fun and playful. I want more, Cara, and I think you can give it to me.”

“Nobody can give it to us. We have to take it. I’m kind of like the pixie of the human world. People only want me around as long as I’m entertaining.” Except for Zoe. “And it’s time I took more for myself. You don’t have to be what they tell you to be. You can choose for yourself.” And I planned on helping all of my friends.

She nodded eagerly. “Come, before we’re found.”
We slipped downstairs and through the kitchen. She pulled me out a door that led to the courtyard then back in through an old trapdoor behind the stables.

“Nobody comes this way,” Anya whispered. “And there’s only one guard. If we get past him, we’ll have a couple of minutes before somebody comes to check on the prisoners. Can you make it?”

“Will I be able to find my way?”
She nodded. “It might be darker than you expect, though.”
“I’ll be okay. Will you?”
She stuck out her chin. “I’ll do what I have to do.”

As we descended, I wondered what I had done to deserve such loyalty. Brendan would have no problem with betrayals if he chose to be good to his subjects. Underneath the house was dark, but a couple of torches on the walls gave us enough light to find our way around.

“Straight ahead is the main guard,” Anya said. “As soon as he’s distracted, run and don’t look back. Do what you need to do as quickly as possible.”
“I will. If there’s trouble, get out of here.”
“I can’t—”
“I mean it. Run.”

She kissed my cheek and danced toward the guard while I stayed in the shadows. He laughed, and she pulled him away from the door and pressed her hips against him. She ran her hands through his hair, and I made a dash for the door.

He let out a questioning sound, but she must have smothered the words with a kiss. I hurried to the left, looking through barred doors to find the daoine sídhe. The cells were mostly empty, to my relief. The daoine sídhe was in the last cell.

She glared at me from where she sat on the floor. “Does he send you to mock me to death?”

“I'll set you free,” I said, “if you tell me everything you know.”

“I knew you were up to something,” Drake said from the end of the hall. “But I didn’t imagine this.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, cringing. “I need to know who the best choice for king is before the ceremony. I have to know for sure that I’m doing the right thing.”

With a sigh, he approached the cell. “You heard her,” he said. “Make the deal, and I’ll unlock the door.”

“Is this a game?” she spat. “A rather obvious play.”

“I’m not the king,” Drake said. “I’m the faery whose body he stole. This is the human I care for, and you are the one who tried to kill her. I’m more than happy to let you rot, but she…” He shook his head. “She is human. That tells you everything you need to know. You can speak, or you can die. We don’t have long before we’re found.”

Her mouth opened and closed. “You’re the…? I heard the rumours, but I never imagined. I can’t talk. He has my daughter. He’ll give her to his son to torture. They call his son Deorad because he was such a monster that his own father sent him into exile. He’s more animal than anything. I can’t let him have my daughter. I have to do something.”

“If you die here, he can do whatever he likes to your daughter. Do you wish to speak, to gain a chance at freedom?”

“You'll let me walk out of here. Just like that?”

“Decide,” Drake urged, looking behind us.

“I’ll speak,” she said, “for a chance to save my child.”
Drake was taking the keys from his pocket when I heard Sorcha’s voice in the distance.
“Only he can save you now,” he said, stroking my cheek as he let green rule over violet.
Brendan pressed me against the wall as Arlen and others barged into the hallway.
“Cara,” he whispered in a pained voice, “are you trying to get us both killed?”
“She’ll speak for freedom,” I said urgently. “Show mercy, and you’ll get loyalty in exchange, Brendan. Trust me.”
He pressed his forehead against mine before turning to his approaching bodyguard.
“Not even five minutes, eh?”
Arlen came to a stop, wearing a confused expression. Sorcha looked as though her head might explode. Then I realised she had Anya by the hair.
“Let her go,” I said.
“Who are you to command me?” Sorcha snapped.
“Just do it,” Brendan said wearily.
Sorcha released Anya’s hair and shoved her toward me. The pixie ran to my side.
“Sire?” Arlen said.
“Cara had an idea. We came to test it out,” Brendan said. “I’m releasing the daoine sídhe.”
“You can’t be serious!” Sorcha exclaimed.
Brendan held the key out to Arlen. “She’s going to tell us all she knows. Bring her to my office. Clean her up first and make sure there’s food ready. She can eat and talk at the same time. Anya, come with me.”
He strode past his servants, holding my hand tightly. He remained silent until we reached his office. “You insist on putting me in the most awkward of situations,” he said, but there was laughter in his eyes. “Freeing the daoine sídhe by yourself. She could have killed you.”
“He has her daughter. He’s making her work for him. If we can help her…”
He took a seat. “Did she say his name?”
“Not yet.”
“When they bring her here, you can talk to her. I’m interested to see this play out.”
“Are you mad at me?” I asked, embarrassed by how ridiculously un-stealthy my friends and I were.
“Would you care?”
“Maybe.”
He laughed. “A damning answer, to be sure. Did you find what you were looking for?”
“Maybe.”
“And again. Anya, did she order you to help her?”
“Yes, I did,” I said before she could answer.
He lifted his eyebrows, but Arlen and Sorcha saved me from his next smart remark by leading the daoine sídhe into the room. Líle, Grim, and Realtín followed, all looking a little sheepish.
Brendan nodded at me. I blushed under the stares of the others. Clearing my throat, I held out a chair and bade the daoine sídhe to sit.
“Anya, can you give her some food?” I asked, taking a seat facing the warrior fae.
Grim had told me that the heroic race were noble and ancient. When I had heard that, I wondered if Sadler was a better choice than Brendan; after all, Brendan had no daoine sídhe by his side. But as I stared at the pain in her eyes, I realised there was another side to that story.
“You’re hurt,” I said, noticing the way she held her arm carefully against her body. “We’ll tend to her wounds before she leaves,” Brendan said. She looked over at him. “You’ll truly let me leave?” He nodded. “As long as you keep your end of the bargain. The truth in exchange for your freedom.” She glanced at Anya who tried to feed her from a bowl of soup. “No food,” she said. “I have little time.” “What’s your name?” I asked. “Dymphna,” she said as if surprised. “I’m Cara. You mentioned your daughter? Is she okay?” She shrugged. “I can only hope so. He’s a determined man, this Sadler. When he first called me to him, I refused his demands, so he had my husband murdered in front of me. I could do nothing, only watch, because he held a knife to my daughter’s throat. She’s but a child, too beautiful for her own good. He said his son would like her hair, that he would kill her if I refused or give her to his son as a wife if I didn’t. He said she would live with his grandchildren until she came of age. That he would care for her and protect her if I brought him the true child. He said to kill her if I couldn’t take her.” She gazed at me, her eyes full of horror. “I’ve heard the stories of Deorad. They say he covers his face because he cannot bear the sight of his own reflection. I don’t know if death is better or worse for her, but I needed to buy her time. I needed to do what he said to give me a chance to take her back.” “So Sadler wanted you to either bring me to him or kill me?” I asked. “Why would he want me alive?” “To speak for him at the ceremony,” Brendan said. “Or rather, to speak against me.” “How can we trust her?” Sorcha asked. “She went against her own kind’s rules to attack us. She’s undeserving of the name.” Dymphna lowered her head. I could see her shame, but I understood her reasons. I would have done the same thing. “How is protecting her child a bad thing?” I asked. “She did the right thing.” “She could have killed you,” Sorcha said. “I don’t blame her. She did what she had to do. We need to help her get her child back,” I said. “We can’t let this man gain a crown by stealing children.” “Can somebody stop this human from speaking before I rip her throat out?” Sorcha said. “Stand with me at the ceremony, and I’ll give you aid,” Brendan said, surprising everyone, including me. “More deals,” Dymphna said bitterly. “You can go your own way afterward,” he said. “We’ll retrieve your child. You’ll stand by my side, and Sadler will watch his own cruelty backfire.” “I won’t bow to you,” she said fiercely. “I believe I asked you to stand.” “Why have you not been helped by the other heroes?” Arlen asked. “You’re not alone. Why would Sadler have a chance at corrupting you?” Dymphna flushed. “I am an outcast. My daughter’s father was human. She’s not pure-blooded.” “But the daoine sídhe are allowed to take wives and husbands at will,” Líle blurted. “Taking humans is their right.” “For a time, yes. But I fell in love and kept only one husband for many summers and winters. The others did not approve, and over time, we grew distant. I had my daughter in the human realm, and when they came for her, I refused to give her up.
They abandoned me for good, but they promised to return for my daughter on her sixth birthday. When Sadler sent word that he needed my help, he offered protection for my daughter and husband. That’s the only reason I went to him. I was desperate for help, and it ruined us all.”

“Fae rules suck balls,” I muttered.

“My daughter’s hair is almost as pale as yours,” Dymphna said to Brendan. “Deorad hates humans, from what I hear. He pursues the ones with the lightest hair and then ruins them. If even half the rumours are true… I can’t let him have my daughter. I would rather kill her myself than give her to him.”

“I’ve never met his son,” Brendan said. “But I give you my word that he will not be permitted to ruin your daughter. Deorad…” He glanced at Arlen. “Is that…?”

Arlen nodded.

Brendan sighed. “I will need to deal with this personally. The sins of the past, indeed. Arlen, help Dymphna recover. She is to sleep in the room next to Cara. She’s not to be disturbed unless she has a request. Send a pixie and a guard to wait on her. Dymphna, regain your strength. We have a lot to do.”

I looked at him. “I could—”

“No. Líle, take Cara back up to her room.”

“But tomorrow is—”

He gave me his kingly frown. “I will speak to you later.”

Okay, so I was definitely in trouble. For the next hour, my companions and I sat in subdued silence until Brendan came into my room.

“Leave.” He held his hand as Realtín opened her mouth to protest. “All of you.”

When they had obeyed, he sat on the bed and stared at me. “What am I supposed to do with you? You let an important fae see the truth. She could have turned on us. She could have killed you the second you let her out of that cell.”

“I needed to know if he was a monster or a better king than you,” I said softly.

“That’s what I was afraid of. And your answer?”

“Got any stolen kids lying around the place?”

He smiled. “That, I do not. Not of my own, nor anyone else’s. I’m surprised at Sadler, in truth, but I suppose time has twisted every memory. I feel responsible for his actions now, and I would rather he lived through this, but I think he will prefer to fight me to the death. Are you going to betray me, Cara?”

“I think you’re probably the lesser of two evils,” I said.

“Do you truly think me evil?”

“You all have the capacity for evil. Look at my family. Never important enough to be protected.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he said. “But enough of that. I’m going to put my trust in you, Cara. I’m placing all my bets on you at Imbolc.”

“What do you mean?”

He lay back on the bed, looking like a teenager. “There are choices given to us, and I’ve let most of mine lead to you. My opponents will allow it because they’ve been led to believe you’re more fae than you are. They’ll think your words won’t carry weight other than the bias you must feel. At the ceremony, we’ll show your humanity, and your word will be taken. I may have to fight, but it will be an honourable death, should it happen.”

“You think you won’t win a fight?”

“I’m not used to this body. I don’t know its limits. It’s possible I’ll push it too far. You understand, don’t you, Cara? He might fade before the end. I can’t stop that.”

“And you understand, don’t you? I could help him make you fade.”
He grinned. “Threats and all. I’ll take my chances. He’s not strong enough to rule both courts, and he isn’t inclined to try. He’s said his goodbyes to you, whether you like it or not. If he was ever going to show himself again, it would have been when you learned the truth of your heritage. That’s when you truly needed him, not when you wanted to release the daoine sídhe. Does that not speak volumes?”

“Don’t.”

“I’ll give you a gift when this is all over. When I’m king, you can ask me one request, and if it’s in my power, I’ll give it. Don’t waste it.”

I stared at him. When his eyes were closed, he could be Drake. I leaned over and pressed a kiss against his lips.

“Say goodbye to him for me then,” I said bitterly. “I’m used to nobody saying goodbye back.”

I hid in the bathroom until Brendan left and my companions returned. I had never been so unsure in my life, and I needed to be at my strongest. I was saying all of my goodbyes because I didn’t believe I would make it past the ceremony.
Chapter Twenty-Three

The fae were pacified when Brendan declared a night of revelry. I still didn’t get the rules or why they followed him even though he wasn’t really the king. Perhaps they were hedging their bets, but maybe they believed in him. I only knew what I planned on doing.

I had begged Brendan to give Realtín and Grim the night off. He had reluctantly agreed. I thought he secretly enjoyed being nice to them.

Anya and Líle were to accompany me all night. Brendan, Sorcha, and Arlen would also join us, while others would infiltrate the crowds to keep us safe. The idea of being with faeries out in the real world had me buzzing with excitement and sick with anticipation. Something had to go wrong. It always did.

Anya giggled as she strolled next to me. She held out her arms as she decided what glamour to wear.

“How do I look?” she asked when her skin turned dark brown.

“It suits you,” I said. “But I miss the blue hair.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Best of both worlds.”

Outside the nightclub, Zoe was already waiting, looking embarrassed as Darren shouted obscenities at the bouncers.

“Already?” I muttered, annoyed in case Darren ruined everything before the party got started.

“Oh, forget him,” Zoe said, wrapping her arms around me. “Happy birthday.”

I sank into the embrace, feeling a strange relief, as if something weighing on my mind had lifted. “Thanks,” I said, pulling away because I felt strange.

Erika and Fiona did the birthday hug thing, and as they sang to me in exaggeratedly high-pitched voices, my gaze wandered to Darren squaring up to a bouncer outside the club.

“Calm down!” Zoe yelled at him.

Brendan approached the bouncers, his eyes calm and cool. I watched him make peace while Arlen silenced Darren. Líle distracted Zoe, and the others gathered around Brendan, so I couldn’t see what was really happening.

“We should get inside,” Erika said under her breath, “before he starts again. Zoe barely managed to get him here. He’s started so many fights.”

I frowned, flinching when Anya grabbed my hand. “Come,” she said, brushing my hair off my neck to get close to my ear. “There’s magic in a birthday. Invite it.”

Her eyes had darkened already. Her hips swayed to unheard music as she led me inside the club. I followed obediently, ready for a release of any kind.

The club was dark and hectic and wild. I saw the nightclub clearly for the first time in my life, everything I had never really understood before, right past the glamours to recognise the illusions. Some fae spiked the drinks of unsuspecting humans while others danced seductively until their human partners collapsed in seemingly drunken heaps.

Brendan moved close to my side and placed his hand on my lower back as if trying to soak up my distaste.

“You knew,” I told him. “You knew it would be like this.”

“All easily explained away,” he said in my ear. “Alcohol and drugs are nothing to what the fae provoke in humans. These places are feeding grounds, and while there’s no king, there’s nobody to tell them no. They’re not holding back anymore, Cara. Your humans need me to rein in the mischief-makers. Your humans will always be at risk. Do you think Sadler would care about this? You heard about his son, how he’s
been raised to despise humans and treat them as playthings. Do you want that for your pretty friends?”

“What I want is to renegotiate!”

“I bet you do,” he said. “But you can’t give me what I want.”

I shivered and looked around the club. Spotting Zoe by the bar with Líle, I made my way over, pushing through sweaty drunken fools with an anger I didn’t fully understand. Every dark emotion I was capable of feeling rose and threatened to engulf me completely. I blamed the fae, but one day, I would have to acknowledge my own part—but not on that night, not on my last birthday.

“You’re not drunk enough,” Zoe yelled, handing me her drink.

I downed it. I couldn’t handle all of the magic and mayhem without some alcohol. Zoe danced against Líle and nodded toward Anya who was dancing with Arlen. He seemed intoxicated, but his eyes were alert, carefully watching his king.

“More relatives?” she asked.

“Friends,” I said. “Moving on soon, so I thought we could show them how we party.”

“Hell, yeah,” she said, sounding tipsy.

She led Líle onto the dance floor. I kind of felt a little sorry for Darren. He was knocking back drinks with Eoin while staring at the crowd. He didn’t seem to notice Zoe, but there was something brewing within him. I looked around for the fae who might be torturing him, but I couldn’t spot any.

Across the room, Sorcha whispered into Brendan’s ear with her hand resting on his chest, and I felt a twinge of jealousy. That was Drake’s body, and I hated seeing her touch him—or Brendan, if I was honest with myself. God, my mind was fucked up.

I shook my head and joined Zoe and Líle on the dance floor. Darren and Eoin soon came over to us, and the fae moved closer, attracted by the tension and emotion, and possibly by Brendan’s presence.

The mood shifted, the seductive pull of fae magic filtering over us. I let go and danced, throwing my hands in the air and twirling around in a daze. The magic pushed me as the music pumped through my veins with every beat. I felt it, but I didn’t succumb, didn’t lose myself completely. Yet I knew what I was doing. I relived every memory of Drake’s touch, of every pain and slight I had ever felt in my life, every feeling, good or bad, and I sent it outward. It rebounded almost visibly, and I laughed at the power in the air, at the despair and desperation, at the anger and lust, at the longing and need. It was all for us, all for the taking, and it was exactly what I needed to run away from.

I caught Brendan’s eye from across the room. The corners of his mouth lifted, and I abruptly stopped dancing. I was as bad as they were, as bad as every single one.

Zoe pulled me off the dance floor for another drink, her hair sticking to her cheeks.

“Oh, my God, the club is buzzing tonight,” she said, breathing heavily.

I made a mental note to keep an eye on her in case she danced herself to death.

“I don’t know what it is, Cara, but I feel really fucking alive right now.” She ran her hands across her chest and up into her hair. “There’s something so... so...” She pointed at Brendan. “Oi! Drake!”

Brendan frowned at her, a fearful look in his eyes.

Zoe ran over, grabbed his hand, and pulled him over to us. “Why aren’t you dancing with Cara?” she demanded.

“She doesn’t want me to dance with her anymore,” he said, his eyes on me and a smug little smirk twitching his lips.
I couldn’t hold his gaze for long, so I slipped away, leaving Zoe to drunk-lecture the soon-to-be king of the fae. Anya followed me back onto the dance floor, and we cavorted together, laughing as others tried to get between us. Eoin joined us, but his hands kept roaming, and in the end, I slapped them away and moved off.

I saw Erika being sweet-talked by a skinny faery by the bar. My anger spiralled out of control almost instantly. I didn’t stop to think about why. I pushed through sweaty bodies, shoving people out of the way in my rage. My blood had heated, and there was nothing else in my head other than the idea of causing that faery pain.

I reached Erika and threw her drink into the faery’s face. “Get lost, creep.”

His eyes turned black with anger, and he shoved Erika away, knocking her into a group of people. He closed the space between us, all shimmering skin and dark rage, but I stood my ground.

“She’s my friend,” I said. “Keep the fuck away from her.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he hissed, but even over the music, I heard him as clearly as if he had screamed in my face.

I grew dizzy as he tried to force his magic on me. “Stop it!” I slapped his face.

He lifted me by the neck, constricting my air supply. I was off the floor for mere seconds, but I thought he might kill me, that I would die right there with people dancing all around me. Worse were the images running through my head: death and darkness, a million screams filling my ears.

Then his grip eased. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Anya freeze, her eyes wild and terrified. She clutched her throat, her face reddening as she struggled to catch a breath. I watched her fall, and I could do nothing to help her because she was dying for me. The room blurred from my sudden hot tears, and then I was in strong arms and the fae was gone.

“Arlen has him,” Brendan said in my ear. “He won’t live.”

“Anya,” I gasped.

“She’s okay. Everything’s okay. He’ll pay for it, don’t worry.”

“No,” I said. “It was me. He doesn’t know me.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Brendan said, his lips against my neck. “That never matters.”

“That was fucked up,” Zoe said, pushing her way to us with her arm wrapped around Erika’s shoulders. “What the hell was that about?”

“Just drunk,” I said, feeling too hot all of a sudden.

“I’m so sorry,” Líle said.

Sorcha dragged Brendan away from me, my fingers slipping out of his grasp no matter how hard I tried to hold on.

“It was me,” I repeated. “I saw him, um, trying to slip something into Erika’s drink, and I freaked.”

“Are you serious?” Erika exclaimed. “I had no idea. I thought you had too much to drink or something.”

“Be careful,” I said. “There are too many freaks in here tonight.”

Zoe and Erika started trying to pick out the weirdos. Líle apologised again.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said.

“I should have been closer to you, to stop it.”

“I’m fine. Where’s Anya?”

“With Arlen. He’ll keep her safe.”

“Are you sure?”

“You can trust him. I swear on it. None of this would have happened if I—”

“No! Shit happens. Just because I’m human doesn’t mean I need to be wrapped up in cotton wool. Go have fun, as long as you don’t break my friend’s heart, okay?”
She smiled. “I wouldn’t hurt a human. They bring pleasure. I don’t need their pain.”
I watched her lead my friends back to the middle of the dance floor. But as I looked
around, the fae seemed to multiply. They were coming from somewhere, drawn by the
tension and drama, drawn by us.
I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t escape. I would always know the truth. The fae would
always be there. Even if I couldn’t see them, couldn’t pick them out, I would always
know, and I would never see anything through the same eyes again.
I sobered, hot, tired, and sick to my stomach. Faeries would always mess with
humans, and I would always see them. I would always step in to protect the people I
knew, and I would always be hurt in return. And Anya would hurt most.
I ran my hands through my hair. I had wanted a life full of the roads less taken. I
had wanted to be different, to experience life without fear or hate resting on my
shoulders. I had all of the excitement I could take, and I couldn’t be more afraid. I had
exposed my heart, and I would bear the brunt in the end.
A shout caught my attention. I couldn’t tell what had happened, but Darren was
screaming in Zoe’s face as tears ran down her cheeks.
That made me even angrier than the fae did. He had no excuse. He had always been
that way on nights out. I rushed over, but before I got there, Líle landed a punch that
knocked Darren out. A minor scuffle ensued. I managed to pull Zoe out of the way,
and the fae and the bouncers cleared up the problem, pulling Darren and Eoin toward
the door.
“Oh, he won’t stop,” Zoe said. “The things he says. I can’t… I just can’t…” She
gazed after him. “I have to go. I’m sorry, Cara. I can’t leave him out there.”
“Stay,” I said. “Let him go, Zoe. He’s not worth the trouble.”
“But I—”
Líle put a hand on Zoe’s shoulder. “Stay. Enjoy the night. He’ll calm down in the
morning, and then you can decide what you want to do.” She touched my friend’s
cheek. “Tonight, be yourself.”
I watched my best friend walk away with my fae bodyguard and wondered if I had
thrown my friend to the sharks. The alcohol wasn’t sitting well in the pit of my
stomach, and the heat was making me dizzy. There were too many people, too many
faeries. Too much trouble. I pushed my way through the crowd and got out of the
club. I sucked in the fresh night air, enjoying the chill of the cold in my lungs. Spring
was on its way. It couldn’t come too soon.
I moved away from the smokers and found a quiet spot to think, a little away from
the club. I stared at the dark sky, remembering the lights and wondering how I had
succumbed so easily.
“You haven’t been around much lately,” Eoin said, startling me.
“Had a lot going on. I thought you left.”
“Darren got arrested,” he said with a lazy laugh. “See what happens when you leave
the gang? Zoe’s lost without you, and Darren’s so sick of seeing her every day that he
flips out.”
“He should be so lucky,” I said.
“He loves her really.”
“Does he?”
He shrugged. “Probably. Been this long. I’m not keen on your new friends, Cara.
We should ditch them. Me and you. Head someplace else.”
“I’m seeing somebody,” I said, refusing to look at him. Please, God, let him take
the hint.
“Who cares?” He moved in front of me. He was drunker than I’d realised. “I have fond memories of you and me, but they’re getting old. Need a little refreshing.”

“Back off, Eoin. I’m not interested. Get that into your thick skull.” I pushed him, trying to leave.

He grabbed my hands and lifted them over my head. But he wasn’t a faery, and I sure as shit wasn’t scared of him. I jerked my knee toward his groin. He let go of my hands to block my knee, so I drove my palm into his nose instead.

He groaned, blood slipping through his fingers as he clutched at his face. “You little bitch. You can’t keep going around hitting people.”

“Then people shouldn’t go around putting their fucking hands on me after I tell them to stop.”

Eoin gripped my wrist with a bloody hand, and I tried to pull free.

Brendan came up behind him, grabbed Eoin’s hand off me, and used it to spin him around. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“He was just leaving, right, Eoin?” I said.

Eoin nodded, the whites of his eyes making him look like a frightened horse. After a second, I touched Brendan’s arm, and he let go. Eoin dashed away. I wondered what exactly he had seen in Brendan’s eyes.

“That was unnecessary,” I said, realising Brendan had to have hurt Eoin if he left without making at least one smart comment.

“You’re the one who made him bleed!”

He sounded so incredulous that I laughed. He smiled, shaking his head.

I scuffed my shoe on the ground. “I wanted you to hurt him.”

He moved in front of me. “Then why didn’t you let me?”

“Because I don’t want to be fae.”

He let out a breath and took a step back. I gazed at him, wondering if Drake was still there, if he could see me, if he actually cared or if he had only ever been drawn to me the way all fae were drawn to humans.

An odd smile crept across Brendan’s face—the darker smile, the one that always led to temptation. He touched my chin and dragged his thumb downward. “Will you attack me for putting my hands on you, too?”

“Maybe,” I said, hoping to make him laugh.

But the smile fell from his face. “Always giving the wrong answers. When will you learn, little one?”

Shivering, I walked farther away from the club, deeper into the shadows.

“Cara, you need to stop dodging the security,” Brendan said from right behind me.

“It makes them look bad.”

I shrugged. “Grim and Realtín have never lost me. If they were here, they’d be standing right next to me, I bet.”

“For two who weren’t trained in this, they have done an exceptional job.”

I turned to hold his gaze. “That’s because they like me. Think about that one the next time you’re hiring.”

“I once had a lot of friends. It didn’t stop what was done to me.”

“What was done to you is better than what you’re doing to Drake. You got the chance to come back.”

He leaned against the wall, a pained look in his eyes. “He’s part of me. I like him. More importantly, I respect him. But I don’t know if I can help him. If I could, I
would. If I could have any of these modern fae by my side, I would be honoured to have him.”

That hit me right in my soft spot. “That’s so sweet.”

“I’m not all bad.” He studied at me. “There’s no need to look shocked when I don’t act like a monster.”

“You’re not a monster. And you need to remember that when you have your power again. If they got rid of you once, they could do it twice.”

He looked surprised for a second. “Would you like to hear a secret?” His voice had become boyish.

“Yes,” I whispered, intrigued.

“I never wanted to be king. I wished my parents would have another child so the responsibility could be passed to someone else’s shoulders. And when I did take the throne, I panicked. I did everything I could to forget what I was supposed to do, and everything fell apart. That’s how I know you have a self-destruct button. I had one, too.”

“But you want to be king now?”

He hesitated. “I want to take the shame away from my parents’ names. I want to undo what I’ve done. If I could go back, I would be different. But I can’t. I have a second chance now. I have to do this right, no matter what it takes.” He blew out a sigh as if relieved to have told someone.

“You’ll be a great king this time. You won’t give them a reason to turn on you again.”

“I’ve already given them plenty of reasons,” he said, but he was recovering his mask, and I felt a pang that I might never speak to the real Brendan again. He rested against the wall and stared upward as if he had never seen the sky before.

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“I’ve already given them plenty of reasons,” he said, but he was recovering his mask, and I felt a pang that I might never speak to the real Brendan again. He rested against the wall and stared upward as if he had never seen the sky before.

“I want to take the shame away from my parents’ names. I want to undo what I’ve done. If I could go back, I would be different. But I can’t. I have a second chance now. I have to do this right, no matter what it takes.” He blew out a sigh as if relieved to have told someone.

“You’ll be a great king this time. You won’t give them a reason to turn on you again.”

“I’ve already given them plenty of reasons,” he said, but he was recovering his mask, and I felt a pang that I might never speak to the real Brendan again. He rested against the wall and stared upward as if he had never seen the sky before.

“I want to take the shame away from my parents’ names. I want to undo what I’ve done. If I could go back, I would be different. But I can’t. I have a second chance now. I have to do this right, no matter what it takes.” He blew out a sigh as if relieved to have told someone.

“Is my friend Zoe under some kind of magical influence? It’s just… she’s been boy-mad since she was ten, and she’s wasted years on Darren, despite everyone pointing out his gazillion flaws, and now she’s flirting with a woman she just met. That’s odd, no?”

He smiled. “Humans are strange. Sometimes love is more than gender or race. Sometimes it’s big enough to bypass any obstacle, even the less obvious ones.”

I liked that. “You mean like Grim and Realtin?”

“Exactly. And… you and Drake.”

I looked away.

“I’m not trying to… your souls connect, even I feel it. But sometimes I feel like ours must connect a little, too.”

“Is any of it real?” I asked. “The way I feel, the way he said he felt—is it possible for humans and fae to have real feelings for each other?”

“I once thought it impossible. But now… now it feels like it could be real. I feel the echoes, and they taste good, but neither of you are pure-blooded when it comes to it, so perhaps that makes a difference. It doesn’t feel wrong.”

“But it’s over,” I said softly.

“Maybe so, mo Chara.”

I gave him a wry smile. “I thought maybe he would show on my birthday.”

“Does it help or hurt to see me? Could I comfort you or upset you?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I don’t know. Can I say goodbye to him? I know I keep saying it, but it hasn’t felt like a goodbye yet.”
“You’re welcome to try,” he said, holding out his arms. “But he hasn’t pushed me in
a while.”
I stepped into his arms and pressed my body against him, resting my lips on his
neck. I felt awkward and unsure. I didn’t want to say goodbye, and yet I knew I was
running out of chances. If I kept trying, maybe it would be harder for Drake to fade.
But he hadn’t come to me when I needed him. I couldn’t forget that. Brendan held me
tightly, and with a sigh, I rested my head on his shoulders.
“He’s not coming out to play, is he?” I asked.
“He’s not trying.” He kissed my hair.
“I’m so confused,” I admitted. “It’s getting harder to separate you both in my head.
I’m scared I’ll…” I didn’t have the words.
“Do you care about me?” he asked.
I shrugged. I had no idea anymore. He was growing into a good person in my mind,
but he looked like Drake, and that confused me. “What did you look like? I mean,
before Drake.”
“Close your eyes,” he whispered. I obeyed, and he said, “Taller than this, stronger,
broader. My mother’s mother came from the daoine sidhe, so I was large even for
royalty. My hair was reddish-gold, shorter than now, wavier. I was cocky and
arrogant, full sure of myself at all times. I never doubted myself.”
“Never?”
“Never that anyone could see. I had a scar across my forehead. I liked it. I was not
as pretty as Drake.”
I laughed.
He chuckled a little. “Imagine my horror to be in a fae so small, and with wings.
I’ve no idea what to do with them. The first day, I kept losing my balance. It was
embarrassing.”
I kissed him. With my eyes closed, I kissed a large, brash Celt who swept my fringe
away from my face as if to get that little bit closer to me, and the kiss was far from
merely pleasant.
“Happy birthday, Cara,” he said at last. “Did you find anything gossip-worthy
tonight?”
I curled my fingers in his hair, comforted by the feeling of his arms around me. “A
thing or two. I even met a boy. Thanks for letting me have this. It felt nice to say
goodbye to my friends, even if…” I shuddered and kissed him hard before the tears
could fall. I tried to forget everything in the kiss, but it didn’t work anymore.
“Is this all part of your renegotiation plan?” he asked against my lips.
I pulled away and looked at him. “He usually takes over when you kiss me.”
He nodded. “I know. Perhaps he’s weak.”
“That makes me sad.”
“Smile. Tell me what you wish.”
“Look, Brendan, I’ll say whatever you want, do whatever you want, but I need you
to do some things for me first.”
His expression turned to stone. “Tell me, and I’ll consider them.”
“My family’s gone through enough. I need the fae to leave them alone. Zoe, too. If
you could just make them off-limits, then they might be safe. They might all be
happy.”
He didn’t react. “That’s not all, I take it.”
I shook my head. “You need to free Anya. Unbind us. She won’t be safe otherwise.”
“That’s her choice. It’s between you and her.”
“So I can talk to her?” He didn’t reply, so I carried on. “Give her, Líle, and especially Realtín and Grim, the freedom to leave in peace. I just… they deserve it, Brendan.”

His eyes were cold.
I shivered under his gaze, but I kept my hands on his shoulders, made sure we touched. “And help the daoine síde’s daughter. The girl is innocent, and the mother is desperate. Reunite them, pardon them, whatever. But it would make me really happy if all of these loose ends were tied up by you before the ceremony.”
“Before I can change?” he asked sharply.
“Before I die,” I said. “Anything can happen, and if it does, I’d like to know everyone is looked after.”
“But what for you?” he asked. “What boon do you wish for you?”
I frowned. “I don’t need anything.”
His hand slipped to the back of my neck, and he pulled me closer to him. “I’ll do these things because I think it’s fair and right. I’ll save a wish for you.”
“You’re going to be a great king,” I said in a shaky voice. “I think you’re a good man, and I hope… you don’t forget when it counts.”
His eyes softened, and something changed between us, tightened and tensed and wrapped around us like a cocoon. “If things were different,” he whispered.

“Brendan!” Sorcha stormed toward us, her eyes blazing. She was so beautiful that I wondered why Drake or Brendan would ever look at me fondly when they could gaze at her instead.
“What now?” Brendan asked impatiently as I stepped out of his reach.
“This night is a disaster. What was the purpose in the end? You’re supposed to be making a stand, and here you are, hiding with the human in the dark.”
“I’m not hiding.”
Then what are you doing? What was the point of tonight? Tell me why you’re jeopardising everything we’ve worked toward? You act like you don’t even care what my sisters have done for you, the risks we’ve taken. All you do now is indulge in the whims of a human brat. What is it you want?”
“I wanted to experience tonight! I wanted this, Sorcha. That’s why I said yes. Do you truly think me so weak-minded that I would agree otherwise? I want it all.” He rubbed his face in a way that reminded me of Drake. “You’ve gotten a chance to live, Sorcha. When I was lost in the Nether, I felt years of frustrated impotence, unable to reach out and touch anything, unable to taste, to smell, to feel, to change anything I saw. This world is new to me. I want to experience it. I want to live it, and if I want to take time away from the court, I will. Remember who is in charge here.”

Sorcha looked so chastened that I tried to sneak away. I didn’t want to listen anymore.
“No! Cara, you’ll stay right there.” The veins stood out in his neck. “Go,” he ordered the banshee. “Get out of my sight before I lose my good mood.”
She stormed away, a look of hurt in her eyes.
“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.
“It’s not me,” he protested. “It’s Drake. Not just him. I just want to live, but I’m lost. It’s hopeless.” He looked horrified then turned his back on me.
I laid a hand on his shoulder, trying not to pinch too hard in my excitement. “There has to be something we can do to help both of you. Someone who can help.”
“Only my enemies. I never should have…” When he turned to face me, his eyes were colder than they had ever been, glittering under a streetlight. “They’re right. You should die. Drake should. And yet you’re both here. No matter what you do, no matter
what you try, I must win in the end.” He gripped my shoulders. “Do you not see what they’ll do? If not me, who will stop them?”
“Somebody else,” I whispered.
He pushed me from him. “Human thinking. It doesn’t work that way.”
“Maybe you and Drake could—”
“Arlen!” he roared, making me jump. His bodyguard came into view instantly.
“Take her home.”
“And you?” Arlen asked.
“Let them come tonight,” Brendan snarled.
If I thought I had seen Brendan angry before, I had been sadly mistaken. I stepped back from the fury vibrating off him, unwilling to taste the darkness hiding in his soul, yet wanting to fall into the abyss with him, just to know what it felt like.
Arlen nodded and took my arm, smoothly leading me away from the king.
“But—”
He squeezed my arm. “Not now. There’s a time for quiet, girl. This is it.”
I glanced back at Brendan long enough to see his furious pacing, his anger a static energy around him. I let Arlen take me home, where I was locked in my room.
Chapter Twenty-Four

I didn’t see Brendan again until Imbolc. My companions whispered about the king, how stressed he seemed, how without Drake he was. Sorcha looked like the cat who caught the cream, but my cat had vanished again. I found more wooden carvings in my room and hid them with the others. I didn’t know where they were coming from, and I didn’t want anyone else to see them until I did.

We travelled to the introduction ceremony in carriages. I kept looking outside, trying to figure out where we were, where we had been, but the landscape was too confusing. The only clarity was Brendan riding beside the carriage on a jet-black horse. He turned to me, and I held my breath in case he was still angry. But he gave me that confident, boyish smile that came so easily to him, and I could breathe again. Everything would be okay.

We arrived at the meeting point. Amidst a noisy bustle of faeries, my group headed to a tent where the pixies prepared me for the introduction ceremony.

“Brendan wants you to look as vulnerable and innocent as possible,” Anya whispered. “As human as possible. They’ll discuss you and make a decision, and then you will be shown around.”

“Paraded, you mean,” I said.

She smiled. “There is that. But we’re close, Cara. We’re almost at the end. You’ll be free soon.”

I swallowed hard. Free to do what?

But there was one thing I couldn’t wait for, so I pulled Anya aside to speak to her privately. “You need to cut the bond between us. Brendan said it was okay to—”

“You’re sending me back?” She sounded heartbroken.

“No! That’s not what I mean. I just don’t want you to feel my pain, Anya. Stay with me. We’re friends, right? That’s better than this bond. I don’t want it. I don’t want to worry about hurting you all the time. Can’t we just be like two normal people? Like me and Zoe.”

“You would be my friend?”

“I already am,” I said, confused by her hesitation. I took her hand. “I want us to be equal.”

“When you leave… will you take me with you?”

I looked at the other pixies, at the way they never relaxed, not even for a second.

“Yes. You can come with me.”

She hugged me, and I didn’t know how to tell her that I might not leave, that I might not get the chance. She led me back to finish getting ready.

The pixies left my hair down. Realtín and Anya entwined some slim green ribbons through a couple of thin plaits, and those were my only decoration. The white dress was magnificent, and I felt like a princess, but I was really a pawn. They left my feet bare. When I looked in the mirror, I appeared a couple of years younger, as innocent as I could possibly look.

“You’re all really good at this,” I said, my palms sweating.

“We’ll do this for Brendan’s queen some day,” one of the pixies trilled excitedly.

Brendan slipped in to speak to my companions. He wore tight green leather trousers, and his hair had some thin plaits with green ribbons the colour of mine.

“My family colour,” he explained when he saw me looking. “That’s what the ribbons are for, a subtle reminder of whom you speak for. And please stop leering at me, Cara. It’s most unbecoming for an innocent human witness.”
I flushed as the others laughed nervously. Even Dymphna was with us, keeping hidden until the right moment. We all had parts to play, and the time to open the curtains approached.

“The time has come,” he said, gazing around at us: Arlen, Sorcha, Líle, Anya, Dymphna, Grim, and Realtín. “I want to be a different kind of king this time around. I won’t waste this chance. I’d like you all to know that I won’t force your loyalty any longer. If you want to leave, you may, and know that I appreciate everything you’ve done in my name. Anya, you are unbound from Cara, untethered from me and the rest of my pixies. You may all do as you wish.”

They all exchanged worried glances, but I did a celebratory dance behind them. “We’re free?” Grim asked. “We can go?”

“You may leave,” Brendan said. “You always have a place here, but your choices are yours to make. I’ll not force you into my service again. I must leave now. It’s about to begin. Cara, I’ll send for you when it’s time. Stay here. There are guards all around, so don’t worry if you’re left alone.”

He nodded at me, and I had never wanted to kiss him so badly. I wondered if he could see it in my eyes, because he winked at me before he left the tent.

“I’m going with the king,” Sorcha said, and she strode out, closely followed by Arlen, who had the ghost of a smile on his face.

“I’m seeing this through to the end,” Líle announced, taking a seat by my side. “We can decide what we want to do afterward.”

“This is too important,” Grim said to Realtín. She nodded, but she looked stunned.

I plucked her out of the air and held her in my arms like a baby doll. Without Anya being bonded to me, the sheer weight of the dress kicked in. My hips felt bruised just from sitting in one place. I could only imagine how much I would ache by nightfall.

An hour later, Sorcha returned, high on excitement. “We need to bring Cara out. The other candidates all agreed that Brendan’s claim to enter the ceremony should depend on her testimony. If her word is dishonoured, then he will forfeit his claim.”

She sighed. “It’s all going to plan.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“You sit by his side, listen to everything that is said, and wait your turn.” She took my hands and squeezed them. “Don’t ruin this for him. For us all. He’s the best choice there ever was. Now maybe they’ll see it.”

I nodded, gulping down a lump in my throat. There were so many ways it could all go wrong.

All of us, except for Dymphna, left the tent. There were a number of groups of fae, all sitting apart. Behind them were the tents of their followers. I was led to Brendan’s space and told to sit at his feet. We all gathered there, free and loyal, and looked out at the other groups.

“Sadler is directly across from us,” Brendan said. “But he remains in his tent. The others will never reach the final bout, of course.”

“So he’s your only competition?” I asked.

“Yes. Be ready, Cara. You may speak first or last, but be ready for anything.”

I nodded, gathering strength from my four fae companions. We seemed to sit there for a long time under the fae sun.

Finally, the faery ruling over the ceremony announced, “Today is a feast day.” He was a tiny creature, but his voice was louder than anyone else’s. “We feast and celebrate the Mother on her special day. We won’t taint it with bloodshed. Today, we drink as brothers and sisters. Tomorrow, the provings begin. On the third day, the
combat will commence. After that, well, the surprises will start. Enjoy today, my
friends. It could be your last.”
“Damn,” Brendan whispered. “They changed the order. I thought the combat would
be today. I had prepared to offer you Sadler’s head.”
“Are you joking?” I whispered.
He merely grinned in reply.

Brendan had a large table of his own at the festival party. The pixies filled the dance
floor. I sat on one side of him and Sorcha on his other. He accepted pledges of loyalty
and support while curious stares fell on me. My stomach churned in case I did
something wrong.

He squeezed my hand under the table. “You’re doing well.”
I heaved out a sigh. “How did you know?”
“You make it so obvious. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”
I frowned. “Stop making me more nervous. You sound like this is my last supper.”
He squeezed my fingers again. “We’ll make sure it’s not. How do you think I’m
doing?”

“More fae come to this table.” I had been watching carefully. “They stay with you
longer, mostly staring, but still. I think they’re trying to see you—the you they’ve
heard of, I mean. But where’s this Sadler bloke?”
“Taken ill, or so he claims. That means he’ll use a champion on the combat day.”
“Let me be your champion,” Arlen said from behind us.
“I must do it all myself,” Brendan said. “It’s the only way they’ll recognise the
warrior I once was.”
“But the body is not a champion’s body. I’m sorry, but—”
“It’ll do,” Brendan said. “Stronger than it looks and used to pain. I’m not newly
born, Arlen. I know what I’m doing.”
“Don’t take any risk. Imagall was poisoned earlier. It’s time to be careful.”
“Ah,” Brendan said with interest. “I wondered what the commotion was.”
“Our testers are all still healthy,” Arlen said. “But we don’t know what the rest of
the week will bring.”
“They seem intent on making a show,” Sorcha said. “A day for the provings?
Unheard of.”
“We’ll follow the rules,” Brendan said. “For now.”

That night, Brendan made me sleep in his tent. “For my own safety,” he said.
I fell asleep alone, but when I awoke, his arms were wrapped around me. I
wondered if he needed some comfort of his own. He tensed in his sleep, and when he
woke up, his green eyes were murky, mixed with a little violet. Drake was still there,
so why didn’t he come to me? Why didn’t he say goodbye? Had I pushed too hard
with Brendan? Or had Drake gotten what he wanted? Had it all been fantasy all
along?
Chapter Twenty-Five

Brendan stared at me during breakfast. I had lost my concern over eating fae food, but the way he was looking at me left me uneasy.

“Did you poison this or something?” I demanded, glaring at him.

He laughed. “Not today. I’m just thinking about something.”

“Spit it out already. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“Do you wish I hadn’t told you?”

I looked down at my food, knowing immediately what he meant. “A part of me wishes I didn’t know, but all of the missing pieces help me understand. I’m not as angry with my dad, but now I feel like I’ve new people to hate. And I…” I shook my head.

“What is it?”

“I know more than before, but I’m more lost than ever. I still feel like I don’t know where I come from. Everything in my life has been part of some pretty big lies, and I can’t find my place anymore.”

“You’re the same person you were when I met you.” He cocked his head. “No, not exactly the same. But I wish I hadn’t told you. I had forgotten how much pain humans were capable of. And yet, you seem to be coping well now.”

I hoped I didn’t look as guilty as I felt. “I put a pin in it until all of this is over. I can’t deal with it right now, so I’m going to try not to think as much about it until we’re done here.”

“What will you do after this?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Depends on… how everything works out, right?”

“Of course. You may need to speak today, Cara. Are you ready?”

“No, but I’ll get on with it.”

Realtín and Grim came over and interrupted us. “There are children in Sadler’s camp,” she squealed. “We saw them, but they’re constantly watched.”

“Do you know if the right child is there?” Brendan asked.

“No,” Grim said. “We can look again.”

“An opportunity might present itself at a better time,” Brendan replied. “We should prepare ourselves. Get Cara ready in case she’s needed. I need to discuss something with Arlen.”

He left the tent, and Anya and Líle came in and sat with me. They picked at my breakfast as they filled me in.

“Sadler has too many warriors with him,” Líle said. “He’s ready to go out the hard way, I think.”


“The Provings are traditionally quick affairs,” Grim said. “It gives each candidate a chance to allow others to speak for them, to prove themselves in ways not born out of violence or talent. Tonight, there will be a vote, and we will lose a few candidates.”

“But Brendan will get through, right?”

“Right,” Grim agreed. “His claim is too strong to be usurped by so many lesser fae.”

We speculated for a while before being brought to Brendan’s side out in the open green. Again, all of the candidates but Sadler sat around, surrounded by their supporters. One by one, each candidate announced how they would begin their Proving.

The first spoke for himself, a long-winded but charming speech about how the time was ripe for change.

“A noble effort,” Brendan said. “But he will likely be the first to go.”
“How do you know?” I asked.
“Watch the fae who don’t stand too close to one candidate or another. Their reactions are the most telling. It’s a game of votes, and all of the most important fae are split. The others, the ones with no official loyalty, are the ones who will change everything.”

I did as he said, watching them as tales of great deeds were told. I almost fell asleep as the day lengthened. There would be no break until all had had their say.

Sadler’s man stood. “There will be no theatrics today from the greatest potential leader that ever there was. You all know who should rule, the same man who should have ruled many years ago. Sadler is older now, and wiser. He has watched the downfall of many kings and queens, and his royal bloodline speaks for itself. We have fallen off the path, the true path, and we will be blessed by the Mother once again if Sadler is given his rightful place as king of our people.”

I flinched at the cheering and glanced at Brendan. He didn’t look worried, but his jaw was tense.

An ancient-looking little man stood for Brendan. “You all know me as the sage. I have witnessed and scribed many important events. This is likely the last. The Nether calls me, but there is one thing I must do first: restore the rightful king to the throne. He was but a boy when he was betrayed. Now he stands a new man, surrounded by free souls who—”

“A man who can’t control his own subjects,” Sadler’s man scoffed.

The sage blinked rapidly, yanking at the collar of his tunic. “As I said, now he… now he stands a new man—”

Sadler’s man pointed at Brendan. “With only a doddering fool to stand for him. What kind of a king would he make if he can’t even keep his servants?”

Furious, I jumped to my feet. “The kind of king who doesn’t need to threaten and abuse to gain loyalty. The people at his side choose to be there. They don’t have to. He isn’t hurting them, isn’t forcing them. They’re standing with him because they know he’s the right choice, the only choice if—”

“Silence your human lamb,” Sadler’s man said, laughing. “Carry on, scribe. We’re enraptured, waiting for the end of your speech.”

Brendan stood, his hands in his pockets. “I think all that’s needed to be said has been heard. What’s important is that I am the only one powerful enough to control both courts, and I am the only one to say that all fae are important in the eyes of a king. Carry on. I am happy for the vote to be held.”

The other candidates and their companions cheered, everyone eager for the day to be over. We feasted again, a mass of laughter and dancing and food, until dusk fell.

The voting began.

I sat and watched everyone vote, even my friends. My heart remained in my chest.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered to Brendan. “Did I screw it up for you?”

“No,” he said. “It played out as it should have.”

“Are you worried?”

He shrugged. “Not today. This is but the first test.”

The voting went late into the night. Four candidates were dropped, but nobody was told what order the rest of the candidates ranked.

I went back to Brendan’s tent, where he doubted even Sadler would dare come for me. “How do you think you did?” I asked him.

“I can’t tell,” he replied, coming over to lie next to me. He leaned on his arm and stared at me, the flicker of light making his features look harsher.
“Tomorrow’s the fight,” I said, feeling my heart constrict. If Brendan died, Drake died, I died, we all died. Sadler would pick us off, one by one.

He rolled over and lay on his back. “It is. They’ll pit us all against each other, but Sadler will have a champion. He had one daoine sidhe. Perhaps he has another lying around.”

“But you’ll win, right?”

“I’ll do my best. If it looks as though things will go badly, Arlen has been instructed to get you all out of here. You will go quickly and quietly and hide out until things calm down.”

“Are you scared?”

“Kings are never scared.”

But when I laid my head on his chest, I could feel his racing heart. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me tightly to him, as if drawing comfort. Whatever I’d had with Drake still echoed between Brendan and me, and we had begun to roll with it rather than analyse what it meant. If I could give him comfort, I would. He had been there for me when I fell apart.

Drake hadn’t.
Chapter Twenty-Six

When I awoke, Grim and Realtín were in the tent, whispering together. Brendan was gone.

“Good morning,” Grim said, but he looked worried.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We saw Sadler’s champion,” Realtín said, spinning around the room. “He’s a monster. He makes Drake look like a human child.”

“Drake isn’t here anymore,” I said sharply. “And Brendan knows what he’s doing, right?”

Grim nodded. “He will make it to the next round. It’s not a battle to the death.”

“Unless they change the rules,” Realtín squealed.

Líle entered the tent and turned to speak over her shoulder. “She’s awake.”

Anya came in, bearing a plate of normal fruit, although fae food hadn’t been as challenging an experience the more time I spent among the fae.

“Brendan is practising with Arlen,” Líle said. “He still refuses to send him out as his champion.”

“What would you do?” I asked.

Líle shrugged. “As he is. Sadler is old. Why would we choose an old man as a leader, one who needs a champion?”

“A king doesn’t need to be a warrior,” Grim said.

“He needs to be strong.” She shook her head. “I don’t understand why nobody has seen Sadler yet. Is he here? Is he truly ill? It makes no sense.”

“We’ll see by the end, right?” I said. “Is there anything we can do to help Brendan today?” All four of them stared at me so long that I grew uncomfortable. “What?”

“If you could make Drake stronger, could you do the same for Brendan?” Anya asked.

“You want me to sleep with him?” I laughed, but nobody joined in. “Are you freaking kidding me?”

“You already did,” she pointed out blithely.

“No! I didn’t. That was Drake. It’s not the same.”

“They share a body. It’s all or nothing,” she added, avoiding my eyes.

“Brendan didn’t see. Didn’t feel. It’s not like—”

“Do you truly believe that?” Líle asked. “Are they really two people in your eyes?”

“Yes!”

They all looked at each other then turned to stare at me.

“Oh, fuck off, the lot of you,” I snapped. “You make me sound like a ho-bag.”

“But you care about them both, don’t you?” Anya asked.

Brendan cleared his throat from behind us, and I proceeded to let the ground swallow me up.

“Maybe it’s time for you all to leave,” he said. “I need to prepare. Cara, stay.”

I didn’t move, but I was pretty sure Líle sniggered as she walked past me. Maybe they were right. Maybe I had convinced myself of one thing when the complete opposite was true. I had been around the fae for so long that my sense of right and wrong had warped and cracked into something more convenient.

“I thought about what you said on your birthday,” Brendan said. “About them turning on me again. They might see me as weak for this, but I still plan to make peace with Sadler, to forgive him publicly and put it all in the past.”

“Is that what you want?”
He sighed. “He was once my friend. And I can’t find it in myself to blame him now. I’ll fight him for this throne, but I’ll invite him back to court afterward. I’ll make him comfortable.”

He sat in silence for a while. The tension crept up my spine, unsaid words echoing noisily.

“They think I can help you,” I said.

He nodded. “I know. Arlen has been telling me the same thing all week.”

“So why haven’t you said anything?”

He crossed the tent to stand beside the table. “I’m not going to trick you, Cara. We’ve all been through too much together to act that way now. Your mind is your own.”

“But you could have asked or…” I threw up my hands. “My life would be so much easier if you would just act like the monster everyone wants you to be.”

He snorted. “A lot of things would be easier.”

“Does it have to be…?”

He shook his head. “Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to, Cara.”

“I wouldn’t like it if you died today.”

“Neither would I,” he said wryly. “Which is why I don’t intend to.” He walked out abruptly, leaving me alone.

I chewed on my thumb, feeling a little sick. There were lines I wasn’t supposed to cross, things that weren’t right. But I had already crossed most of the lines. Something in my blood made it okay for me to act in a way most humans would frown upon. But what did I want to be? Human or fae?

Anya returned with the other pixies, bringing hot water and other things to freshen me up. By the time I had dressed in yet another ridiculous white dress, it was almost time for Brendan to step into the battle ring.

“Are you sure you want to watch?” Anya asked as we left the tent.

I nodded, though I felt a bit ill. I might have to watch Brendan die, and Drake along with him. I spotted Brendan in the distance, arming himself before joining the other candidates. Fear gripped me. I screamed his name, lifted up the stupidly big skirt, and ran to him. Sorcha urged him on, but he waited for me.

“I need to ask you something,” I blurted when I reached them.

“Sorcha, cover for me.” Without waiting for her to respond, he led me into the pretty forest.

Twigs and leaves snagged against the dress, but I kept following him. My chest heaved, and I could sense his apprehension, which only made everything worse.

When we finally stopped, I wasn’t sure what to say. “He didn’t come to see me when you told me the truth. Only when I was about to free Dymphna, but why?”

“I’ve wondered myself.”

“He… he said he didn’t want to watch me grow old,” I huffed out, more unsure of myself than ever.

He frowned. “You wouldn’t have to grow old with us. Not for a very long time. But there’s nothing wrong with—”

I pushed him against the trunk of an old oak tree, my hands running through his hair. “Don’t die!” Then I kissed him.

I was on fire; his skin burned under my fingers. Something had changed again, and I tried very hard not to think about it. I just needed him to be strong. And if that meant him feeding from me, then so be it.
I forgot everything but the delightful dizziness that touching the fae sometimes brought my way. I let go of my pain and anger and bitterness, and I sank into a kiss with a king.

He yanked at the dress as he kissed me. “What was I thinking?” he muttered against my lips.

I giggled, feeling light-headed, but he drew back and gave me a long hard look. “This isn’t your responsibility,” he said in a low voice. “Not this.”

The words stung, but my relief echoed behind them. “I know,” he said. “You’re not the only one who is confused.”

He closed his eyes for a second. I held my breath, wondering if their colour would change. When he looked at me, the uncertainty was gone from his still-green eyes, and that easy grin was back.

He gestured at the skirt. “I’m supposed to like this, but I think I miss the jeans.”

“You can’t die in front of me,” I managed to squeak out.

His hand cupped my cheek. “Don’t watch.”

“Not a chance.”

His gaze was heady and tormented. When he gently pressed his lips against mine, it felt like a first kiss. And in some ways, it was. Everything had changed. I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling panicked.

Arlen’s voice interrupted us. “I’m sorry, my lord, but it’s about to begin.”

Brendan stared at me, his lips still swollen. “Yes, it is.”

He held my elbow and escorted me back to my companions. My heart beat so hard that I felt sure they could hear it. Brendan didn’t say a word as he left for his battle.

Grim and Realtín bade me to follow them to the fighting pit. The name “pit” turned my stomach. There were six candidates left: Brendan, Sadler’s champion, and four others. Three of the four appeared young and strong, but the fourth was older and experienced, or so Grim informed me.

I sat and chewed on my thumb, waiting for it to begin. The candidates were spread across the pit, all separated. But when the gong rang, some moved straight for the closest opponent, ready to fight to the death. Four would die, two would survive to the next day’s test, and I prayed Brendan would be one of the two.

“As soon as he falters, we’re to leave,” Arlen informed me under his breath.

I shook my head. “I can’t. I can’t leave.”

“His orders.” But he looked as unhappy as I felt.

The pit was caged in with some kind of wire, and the occupants couldn’t leave until they were freed. Brendan had a sword in one hand, and a shield in the other, but they looked too big for him.

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“His own,” Arlen replied when I asked about them. “I should have convinced him to use something new.”

“He had no choice,” Sorcha said. “If he wants loyalty, he has to remind them of who he used to be.”

“But he’s not the same man,” Arlen said, “whether you like it or not.”

She ignored him and kept watching. The champion’s helmet covered his face, so I couldn’t see what he looked like, but he was tall and broad, taller than even Arlen and Lile.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

Arlen squeezed my hand, but her fingers trembled as much as mine.

Two of the younger candidates cornered Brendan, while the other fought against the experienced one. Sadler’s champion bided his time. The elder fighter killed his younger opponent with a clever feint quickly followed by a thrust to the heart.
Sadler’s champion circled Brendan, preparing to take him out from behind.

“Behind you!” I screamed, making my companions flinch.

Brendan ducked and swung under his closest opponent’s legs. Jumping to his feet, he stabbed the man in the back of the neck. The other had taken off after Sadler’s champion, forcing him into the battle. Brendan raced toward the older man. They thrust and parried for long minutes, neither gaining an obvious advantage.

“Watch the champion,” Arlen said, getting to his feet.

The champion swung his sword lazily, while the younger fighter before him exhausted himself with blow after blow that didn’t connect. The champion blocked a blow, then swung and beheaded the final young candidate with one clean strike. He immediately stepped over the body to join Brendan and the older candidate, who had slowed considerably.

The three faeries moved slowly, carefully, measuring each other. Some of the spectators booed, apparently bored by the lack of action. As if called to perform, Brendan somersaulted into the air, spreading both his arms. The old man was knocked off-balance by Brendan’s shield, while Brendan’s sword connected with the champion’s, making a clanging sound. I deflated in disappointment, but Arlen shouted in joy.

“He pierced the armour,” Arlen said.

I saw blood dripping from the champion’s sword arm. A cheer went up as the crowd grew eager for more.

“Almost there,” Líle muttered.

As if by a silent command, both of Brendan’s opponents turned on him.

“Why do they keep doing that?” I cried.

“His claim is stronger than either of theirs,” Arlen said, his gaze never leaving his king. “Both will have a better chance without him in the melee.”

I was terrified, and that just might help. I ran toward the pit before anyone could stop me, pushing through fae to reach the wire. I gripped it with my fingers as people shoved against me, some of them clawing at my dress and sniffing my skin as my anxiety hit them.

Brendan held my gaze for a split-second, understanding. He ran toward me, leading his opponents in my direction. We both knew my fear would help him, but it could help the others, too. But Brendan was used to me, and they were not. They wouldn’t know what my fear felt like. And hopefully, that would make the difference.

I thought of every fear, every wish, every time something in the world touched me, and I let the feelings flow and engulf me, even though they were terrifying. I drowned in everything that scared me then panicked at the sensation, which sent everything spiralling out of control.

The crowd around me thickened, and I felt their darkness. But Arlen reached me and shielded me from most of the faeries trying to tear me to pieces in their excitement.

Brendan was faster than the others, more agile, and he managed to fight both off in a series of breathtaking moves. The older man’s eyes grew dazed as my terror hit him. A smile curved his lips even as Brendan swung his sword around and beheaded him.

I was drenched in warm blood, but didn’t move. The champion kept going after Brendan.

“Stop!” I screamed.

The other spectators joined in, calling for the end. Two had survived. The fight was over.

Arlen gripped my arms and pulled me out of the crowd, but the faeries had already forgotten me in their eagerness to reach Brendan. He was released from the pit, and it
seemed as though he garnered all of the praise, perhaps because of his skill. I didn’t care; I was just happy he was alive.

When he came near, I hugged him, but I wasn’t the only one trying to touch him, and I was soon pushed back, slipping farther and farther away from Brendan and Arlen. The crowd had fallen in love with the king who fought his own battles. They hauled him onto their shoulders and proclaimed him the champion of the day. He grinned down at me, a genuine, boyish grin. Even Sorcha smiled as he was carried away.

“Come,” Anya whispered in my ear. “Let’s clean you up before the feast.”
“Fucking hell. How many parties do we need to have?”
She chuckled. “As many as it takes. He won. Did you see it? How truly amazing it was?”
“He did good,” I said, full of excitement. “Now let’s get this blood off me, please.”
Brendan’s camp was noisy and excited when we reached it. Some of his guards spun me around in their arms on the way to the tent. The pixies were running wild.
“Why are they being nice to me all of a sudden?” I asked Anya as Líle and Realtín chased off some overly eager guards.
“You didn’t make him weak,” Anya explained. “They call you his lucky charm now. They won’t kill you today.”
I laughed. “That’s a relief.”
Something changed at the feast that night. None of us were able to get near Brendan. People fawned over him, and I wondered if the attention would go to his head. Then, he caught my eye and raised a glass.
I grinned and did the same, but his attention was immediately taken again by questions and admirers and who knew what else.
I slept alone in the tent that night, and when I awoke, his bed hadn’t been slept in. The ache in my chest squeezed a little harder.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Today is an excuse to mingle and impress the bluebloods,” Anya confided as we ate breakfast together.
“I suppose it’s true,” Grim said. “The lesser fae brought him this far. It’s down to the important fae in the end. Tonight, they’ll announce tomorrow’s events.”
“When will I have to speak?” I asked.
“It should be tomorrow,” Líle said. “But the secrecy makes me think they’ve dreamed up a new task for the candidates first.”
“So what do we do today?”
“Relax,” Realtín said, concentrating on tying knots in my hair.
Anya brushed her away with the back of a hand. “They may call upon you today. You need to be ready, Cara.”
“I’m ready,” I said. “Has anyone seen Brendan today?”
“Getting a head start on Sadler, no doubt,” Líle said.
We spent most of the day hanging around Brendan’s camp and listening to his guards tell stories of the old days, when Brendan had first been king. I didn’t recognise him at all in those tales, and again, I feared I wasn’t doing the right thing.
“You’ve been quiet today,” Grim said, taking a seat by my side. I had chosen to sit away from the group, losing myself to my own worries.
I opened my mouth to answer when Sorcha arrived with her very own entourage.
“They’ve called for you,” she said urgently. “Hurry. This may be our chance to pull ahead.”
“I thought he was doing well,” I said as I followed her, my companions in tow.
“Sadler’s played a good game behind the scenes. Don’t let Brendan down now.”
A woman stood on a chair and addressed the crowd. “Sadler has claimed that the circumstances of Brendan’s… return discredit his claim, and Brendan states he has proof that will clear his name. We have decided that tomorrow shall be a great hunt. The winner shall choose what to do with the witness’s testimony. For now, Sadler has called upon his right to hear from the witness’s own lips. Send the true child to Sadler.”
Brendan leapt to his feet. “No! He can’t have her.”
“The hunt shall decide who will have her,” the woman said, looking pleased with herself. “For now, it is his right, and he shall have it. She will come to no harm.”
Brendan eyes burned. “An escort. She has the right to an escort.”
Líle took a step after me.
The woman shook her head. “The sprite will do.”
Arlen laid a hand on Brendan’s shoulder until he nodded his agreement. “Very well,” he said through gritted teeth.
They led me away and took me to Sadler’s camp. Dozens of squealing children chased each other around a large marquee. Lying on a bed in the centre of the tent, surrounded by shrouded figures, was an ancient-looking man who appeared to be very ill.
“You’re Sadler?” I blurted.
“That I am,” he said, gazing at me. “Raven-haired. Not the usual type.”
I frowned.
“Sit by me,” he said. “You’re safe here for a time. You’re as dark-haired as my family, so you fit in.”
I did as he said, clenching my hands nervously.
“Do you see them all? My grandchildren? All of them born from human mothers. Some more fae than others. He collects them, you see.”

“Who collects them?”

“My son.”

“Deorad.”

His laugh was weak. “They like to give names to the things they fear. He has no name. He’s not worthy of one. His own mother was human, as fair as I was dark. He hates her memory, so he tortures the fair-haired human women, brings their children here to us, and waits to see what they can do.”

“They’re all your son’s children?” I asked in surprise.

“All but one. Do you see her? She’s as fair as his mother was.”

I stared at the children and spotted one in an old-fashioned pram, sucking on a slice of what looked like watermelon. “The baby?”

“A baby now. But she’ll grow, and perhaps she’ll give him a child who looks like her. Perhaps he’ll be satisfied then. Perhaps. I’ve told him how hard it is for a dark-haired fae to have a child like that, but she’s as mixed as he, except she’s the child of a daoine sidhe, while he’s the son of a dog. But he loves the old legends.”

I gaped at him, and he laughed.

“Of course you wouldn’t know. They say that the two who don’t belong in either world will bring a child more powerful than even that of a king and queen. Old stories. He’s taken with a lot of things.”

“You took somebody’s kid to have your son’s child? I don’t—”

He waved his hand. “Oh, her mother’s dead. And she’ll be his true wife some day. A queen, in fact. And he’s had fair-haired children before. Most died in the crib, and one disappeared.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Why? Because I’m going to die and name my son my heir. Because even he, with his… peculiarities is better than Brendan the Betrayer. Brendan did this to my son, you see. He took my wife and ruined her. I wasn’t even sure if the child was mine at first. I left him with the people of the thorns, and they spoiled his mind even further. When he came to me fully grown, I could see he was mine. He had coal-black hair and my mother’s eyes. Her wings, too. Typical.”

He struggled to sit up. “I’m telling you this because Brendan ruined the fae once. You can’t let it happen again. My son will hunt tomorrow, and if you don’t change your say, he will find you and silence you. The choice is up to you, my child.”

I stared at the dark-haired children and the one fair-haired child, daughter of a daoine sidhe and trapped into a life of marriage to a madman. “I can’t,” I whispered.

“So be it,” he said. “I gave you a chance. I know his charm. I don’t blame the weakness of your mind. Come take my hand and let us bid each other farewell.”

I held out my hand hesitantly.

He grabbed it, pulled me closer, and sniffed my wrist. To my surprise, he let out a low chuckle. “Ah, you’re one of those children. I needn’t have worried.” He looked over my shoulder. “Take her away.”

A dark-haired man walked over to me. He had violet eyes, and his features were sharp and angled and completely familiar to me. The fae gripped my arm harder than necessary. I sucked in a breath as I realized he was most likely Drake’s father.

Sadler chuckled. “Funny how life works out, child. My son will escort you back.”

“Give my regards to Brendan,” Sadler said. “I’m sure we’ll meet each other in the Nether very soon.”

I glared at him. “You’re making a mistake.”
“We all make mistakes.” He closed his eyes.

As we exited Sadler’s camp, Realtín flew toward me, looking fit to burst. I stole glances at Deorad until he let me go, signalling for a guard to accompany me. Realtín pinched me, and I nodded at her. Brendan was no longer at the feast, but Líle and the others had waited there to take me back to camp.

“You look as though you’ve seen a ghost,” Líle whispered to me.

I shook my head and pressed on, more than ready to feel safe again.

When I entered the tent, Brendan stood and led me to a chair. “What did he say?”

I took a seat, my knees wobbling. “That he knows he’s going to die soon, but he’s making his son heir. He doesn’t care as long as you don’t get the throne.”

Brendan sat beside me. “That can’t be all.”

I cleared my throat. “He gave me a chance to betray you. There are children, so many children there. All his grandchildren. Except for one.”

“My daughter?” Dymphna cried.

“I think so.”

“I listened in,” Realtín said. “The other children called her by your daughter’s name.”

“Is she well?”

“They’re taking good care of her,” I said. “But they plan on making her queen some day. Deorad… he wants a child with fair hair because of his… his mother.” I avoided Brendan’s eyes.

“And what did you say when he asked you to betray me?” Brendan asked coldly.

“Give me a fucking break!” I jumped up and fled from the tent.

Realtín caught up with me. “Why didn’t you tell them?”

I shrugged. “Drake would hear. He might try to go after Deorad. It would ruin it all.”

“You’re choosing Brendan over Drake?” she asked, sounding a little hurt.

“It’s not about either of them anymore,” I said. “Brendan wants peace. He wants to make peace with Sadler. That proves it, Realtín.”

“Proves what?”

“That he’s the right choice, that he’ll restore order. He’s learned from his mistakes. He freed you.”

She let out a pathetic little whimper. “But we’ve nowhere else to go.”

I bit back laughter that would almost certainly contain a tinge of hysteria. “Let’s go back to the tent for a start.”

When we returned, the others were discussing ways to rescue Dymphna’s daughter.

“During the hunt,” I said. “Deorad will be there. They think Dymphna’s dead. They won’t expect anyone to sneak into their camp and take the child. I could go and try to convince Sadler I’ve changed my mind. The rest of you can get the kid out of there.”

“Líle, it will have to be you,” Brendan said. “You need to lead them. Arlen would be too obvious.”

“Will you?” Brendan snapped.

“We’ll all go with Cara,” Anya said. “She can be seen entering and leaving his camp alone, but she’ll be a distraction for the rest of us to work together at retrieving the child. Dymphna can’t go, of course.”

“How am I supposed to…” Dymphna shook her head. “Fine. But as soon as we have her, I’m taking her to the daoine sidhe. Sadler’s actions will convince them to protect her. It’s a matter of honour. I will return.”

“What the hell is your problem?” I yelled. “Stop taking whatever is bothering you out on everyone else!”
Brendan raised his hand. “Lile, take the human away before I do something I regret.”
I headed for the door. “Don’t bother, Lile. I can’t bear being around him for a second longer.” I left the tent and stalked off in a fury.
Not far from the tent, someone covered my mouth, while others grabbed my arms from behind.
The men carried me away in silence, and I just knew Brendan would assume I really had betrayed him.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

I scowled at the velvet cushions at my feet. Five ginormous warrior fae stood outside the tent and weren’t about to let me escape. I’d tried. Three times.

An old female fae strode in and smiled at me, but her silver eyes were cold. “And here she is,” she cooed, clutching a handful of my hair and sniffing it. “So human. Not even a trace under your skin. We’d all heard how fae you were.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “We all know how much they exaggerate, poor things.”

“Let me go,” I said as fiercely as I could manage. “I’m supposed to be with the king.”

“The king?” She raised an eyebrow. “We don’t have one of those yet. And wouldn’t you rather be free, little girl? To go back to the humans and forget all about us?”

“That’s not possible. They come back. They always come back for us. Do you think Brendan will just let—”

“The rules of today don’t bow to a wannabe royal,” she snapped. “We’ve decided on a hunt, and you will be the prize. But of course, it wouldn’t be sporting if you didn’t have a chance yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Brendan catches you, he decides if you speak for him. The same for Sadler’s champion, although I think we both realise your death will do a fine job to silence you. But you… we’re giving you a chance at freedom. Makes it all the more exciting, don’t you think?”

“Freedom?”

She smiled wickedly. “If you find a way out, you can choose to walk away. No fae will ever look upon you again. We won’t speak your name. You will be free.”

I looked away. Part of me wanted that badly. Freedom. A fresh start. But the fae…

“Think quickly,” she said. “It’s almost time. The pixies will bring your outfit soon, then the guards will escort you to… well, you’ll see.” She flounced out of the room.

I barely had a chance to take a breath before a pack of pixies stormed in and began ripping at my clothes with their clawed fingernails. The pixies weren’t like Brendan’s, and I wondered what the difference was. They made me wear a kind of red armoured leather-looking thing over a T-shirt and shorts. But the armour was far heavier than leather.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Because this doesn’t make me stand out in a crowd.”

They ignored me. The clothes were heavy, and I moved so slowly that two of the fae grabbed my arms and half-dragged me outside.

We stopped at an enormous white horse. The fae worked together to lift me onto its back. My thighs ached from the stretch.

“Keep a firm hold of the bridle,” the silver-eyed woman shouted at the fae. The horse trembled and snorted as if dying to race away.

“I haven’t actually ridden a horse before,” I said. “When can I get down?”

“When the hunt begins,” she said, her eyes glowing.

They led me back toward camp, but we didn’t pass Brendan’s tent. He and my friends were gathered where the feasts were held. He carried a huge bow across his shoulder, and his jaw was clenched.

I gazed pleadingly at my usual companions, but none of them smiled. They probably couldn’t see my face through the stupid helmet anyway.

“The hunt will begin shortly,” Silver Eyes called out, resulting in many cheers.

“Explain yourself,” Brendan said through gritted teeth. “What right have you to steal from me?”
Silver Eyes waved her fingers in Brendan’s direction, refusing to look at him. “This belongs to all of us. The human has a right to freedom, and Sadler has the right to silence her. You may win her back, but only if you deserve her. That’s why we’re here—to find a king. Whoever wins decides if she speaks or not, and if she escapes, she’s lost to the fae forever.”
“You can’t let him hunt her down,” Brendan spat.
Realtín spun around his head, streams of red and gold light emanating from her because of her obvious distress.
“It’s time for her to leave.” Silver Eyes patted the horse’s rump. “She gets a head start.”
“There is no fairness in this,” Brendan protested.
“There is no fairness in a second chance at life, but here we are,” she replied, slapping the horse.
I clung to the reins, digging my knees in frantically as the horse reared. The world threatened to turn upside down, but then it straightened, and the stallion ran.
“Get off the horse!” Realtín screamed, flying after me. “Don’t stay on the horse!”
I looked behind me in terror, only to see someone snag Realtín out of the sky with a net. I was on my own. The horse plunged through the forest. Maybe I could avoid Deorad and try to find Brendan myself. After all, the horse had to be able to outrun a half-human fae.
But when I tried to control the horse, steer it, slow it down, anything, it ignored me. It kept racing as if it knew exactly where it was going. I held the reins tighter. Terrified of being knocked off by an overhead branch, I stayed low to the horse’s neck, almost giddy at the speed we were galloping.
“Let go!” someone yelled.
I glanced around and saw no one. Looking up, I almost fell off the horse as a golden-haired, naked woman kneeling on a tree branch came into view.
“Feet out of the stirrups,” she cried as I passed her. “Roll off.”
“Are you fucking crazy?” I screamed. Stupid faery was trying to get me killed. I didn’t spot anyone else, and finally, we left the forest and came upon a sandy beach.
“Oh, holy fucking shit,” I whispered as memories tugged at my gut.
We were heading directly for the sea, and the horse wasn’t going to stop. I kicked my feet out of the stirrups and tried to prepare myself to jump. I hesitated, and the ocean came upon us frighteningly quickly. As the horse’s forelock was dampened by the sea, a black cat came out of nowhere and jumped onto the horse’s back.
Startled, I dropped the reins. The cat slashed at me with its claws, and I leaned back, losing my balance and falling off the horse as it dove beneath the waves. I went into the water and sank with the weight of the armour.
Panicking, I opened my mouth to scream and sucked in salt water. I scrambled for freedom, but there was no release, only darkness and pain in my chest.
Hands grabbed me and pulled me up and out of the water. Someone tore off my helmet.
“We need to get it all off!” the naked woman yelled.
I tried to help, but everything I wore had been fastened at the back, and I couldn’t reach. “It’s too heavy.”
The woman half-dragged me closer to shore. She tugged at the armour with my feeble help, and a few minutes later, I was free. We stumbled onto the sand, both coughing up water, her naked and me in soaking wet shorts and a T-shirt. I threw myself on the sand and tried to catch my breath.
“You can’t,” she said. “Sadler will know to send Deorad here. You can’t rest yet.”
“I can’t run around like this; I’m going to freeze. Why are you naked? Who are you?” I hesitated. “Are you… are you the freaking cat?”
“Yes, I’m the cat. Now will you please hurry?” She grabbed my hand.
I let her lead me back into the forest. She stopped a few yards in and pointed at a tree.
“Wait here,” she whispered. “I’ll be better able to see as a cat. Don’t move.”
She turned into a cat and raced away, jumping onto tree branches as if she had been born to do it. I could do nothing but stare after her with my mouth hanging open.
She returned a few minutes later, once again a naked woman. “I can help you escape,” she said.
“But why would you? Who are you? I don’t understand.”
“Quick version is that I was cursed to be the cat familiar of the leanan sídhe. When Sadler sent her to the Fade, I had no choice but to watch over her descendants. I watched over many, including your mother before you, but without the leanan sídhe’s guidance, the others didn’t survive, and you are the last.”
A million thoughts flew through my mind in the seconds that followed. I latched on to one only. “You watched over my mother? Then why did you let her get raped?” I shouted, my anger blooming.
“Quiet! The line was diluted. Her child had no fae at all. The leanan sídhe would die out. The man who came to the house was part-fae himself. I had to let it happen. She had to have a child like you.”
I stepped away from her in horror. “What the fuck is wrong with you people?”
“We don’t have time for this. I can help you leave.”
“I can’t leave. They need me. You let me be brought here. Why the hell do you want me to leave now?”
She bit her lip, looking worried. “I… it was supposed to happen differently. I don’t know what’s gone wrong. But it’s too dangerous. If Sadler kills you, the line is gone. Even if you have a child with a human, there’s still a chance the leanan sídhe will live on, and that’s the only way she can—”
“I don’t give a shit about the leanan sídhe,” I spat. “I don’t know what it means, and I don’t care. I have to find Brendan before Deorad finds me.”
She hesitated then nodded. “I’ll help you.”
“I don’t believe you.” I ran through the trees, branches and twigs scratching my bare legs. I needed clothes, weapons, time, something, *anything*. The fae would kill me, and I had a chance to escape, yet I had left the one person willing to help me leave.
I turned back before I changed my mind. I found the woman still standing in the same spot. “How do I get out of here?”
“Follow the sun until you get to the cave,” she said. “You can leave through there.”
I nodded and ran. I had no hope of finding Brendan, so I had to do what I could to avoid Deorad instead. If that meant escaping, it was better than dying. Probably.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

I kept moving, thinking about that bow Brendan had been carrying. If Deorad was coming after me with a bow, then I wanted to be a moving target. After all, he was half-human, too. Maybe he wasn’t quite fae enough. Then again, neither was Brendan as long as he was in Drake’s body. Maybe I still stood a chance at surviving the fae’s messed-up games.

I entered a clearing and looked up at the hillside. I spotted the cave. Whether the cat woman had been truthful or not didn’t matter. I just needed someplace to go.

I sprinted across the clearing, my sides aching, thankful I was in good shape. I heard footsteps behind me and upped my pace, but a firm hand caught me around my waist as another smothered my curse of indignation.

“Hush,” Brendan said. “Why are you wet?”

He let go, and I whirled around to face him, but he was too close, and there was a tree at my back.

“I didn’t go willingly,” I said.

“I take it you didn’t get off the horse voluntarily either.”

“No. A cat… pushed me.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Did she? Brave cat. Where is she? She was supposed to lead you to the cave.”

“You sent her?”

“No. She would have followed you regardless. I just made sure I knew her plans.”

I stared at him, still panting. I couldn’t read a thing in those green eyes. “She said the cave was a way out. For me to leave.”

“She didn’t lie. Go. I’ll keep him off your back.”

“But you have me. You won.”

“You think Sadler cares about any of this? They gave you a way out. Take it.”

“But what about—”

“I still have a chance. Now you have a chance to be free.” He hesitated. “You should take it, Cara.”

“But what about Grim and… and everyone? I just—”

“I’ll make sure they’re safe. No matter what happens, they’re free, too. You can start a new life. No fae to wreck your happiness this time. No Sadler coming after you again.”

He moved aside to let me pass. I couldn’t believe it. The entire time he had forced me to stay with him, and he was just letting me leave. I shook my head.

He gently pushed me. “Go. Before it’s too late. You don’t belong here.”

Drake had said the same words on that very first night. That made up my mind. I walked away. If the fae didn’t pester me, knowingly or not, everything would change. Everyone around me would be safe. I could let myself feel like a normal person again.

I took a couple of steps and looked back one last time, to steal one last glance at the fae who had changed everything. Whether he looked back at me with green eyes or violet, that fae had turned my life into something completely different.

He was still staring after me as though he couldn’t quite believe I was going, and I couldn’t bring myself to take one more step away from him. So I took a step back toward him instead.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of black leaping across branches. The cat’s yowl registered before I really heard the sound, but my brain recognised the warning. I didn’t even realise I was moving until I had almost reached Brendan.
Deorad stepped into the clearing, an arrow aimed at Brendan’s heart. I shouted a warning, but Brendan only stared at the near-perfect reflection of his own face.

“Royal blood,” Brendan said. “No wonder…”

Deorad loosed the arrow toward his son’s body. The hiss jerked me into action. I shoved Brendan as hard as I could. He teetered and almost fell.

The arrow hit me in the chest. I felt no pain, just a heaviness in my chest. Brendan reached for me, but I slipped out of his hands and fell to the ground.

Brendan flung a dagger, but Deorad was gone. Brendan knelt and gathered me into his arms. I coughed, spraying his face with blood. He looked horrified, as lost as a child.

I almost laughed, but the pain in my chest burned too much. “Wings.”

“I don’t… why did you do that, Cara? You were almost free. He would have…” He leaned closer. “Who did you mean to save? Me or him?”

“Neither,” I croaked, the pain easing. I wondered if I was dying.

The tree branches swayed toward us behind Brendan’s back.

I closed my eyes, feeling a sense of calm that I had never experienced in my life.

“Everyone. They need a king. Need… you.”

I felt weightless, as if I were floating on water, easing away with the tide. I could have been on that horse’s back still, could have…

Then I realised I could feel actual water trickling across my toes. I opened my eyes, confused. I stared up at the fae sun, but the trees around me were different. My feet really were underwater, resting in a brook, and Brendan was gone. I was alone, and there was no arrow in my chest.

“Did I die?” I whispered, sitting up.

A tree across the brook moved, and I heard a little laugh.

“Not yet.” The tree turned and revealed itself to be a strange old woman with dark brown eyes. “Come. Sit with me.”

I stood and stepped across the brook. Tiny fish darted around my feet. “Where am I?”

“Is the pain gone?” she asked. “I admit, I left it a little too long to end the charade. Your king must think himself insane by now.” She laughed. “I was not inclined to let you die. Brendan won, after all. Sadler cheated, but that was expected. His heart is full of hate still. And you… you think to save the fae from themselves?”

“Not just the fae. If there’s a good leader, maybe the humans will be safer.”

“Ah, so a selfish quest.”

“I’m not on a quest. I just…”

She passed me a cup of liquid. I took it, not intending to drink, even though I was thirstier than I had ever been.

“Drink,” she commanded. “You need it. You lost a lot of blood.”

“There really was an arrow?”

“There’s always an arrow,” she said. “I was there, and I stepped in, but I was almost too late. You’re perfectly fine, but you need some nourishment. He was going to let you go. All of that trouble, and he stepped aside. Is it madness that has taken him?”

I stared at her, unsure of what to say.

“And there you were, taking a step back even before you saw the threat. I can’t tell if you’re brave or dim-witted. And I smell a flower on you, one that grows only in one place, a sacred place that you should not be able to visit. Tell me how it is so.”

“I… I don’t know.”

“You didn’t pray? You didn’t visit the grotto?”

“Ah,” I said. “A friend took me.”
“Not Brendan. He shunned the Mother a long time ago. Who then?”
“A… daughter.” I bit my lip. “I needed help, so she took me. I stepped through the arch and knelt at the fountain, and I… well, I talked to my brother. Kind of.”
“Hmm. He’s passed?”
“The fae made him… he hurt himself a long time ago.”
“You received an answer in the grotto I tend. You spark the favour of deities believed to have turned their backs on us, you who have barely been touched by the fae in your heritage.”
“I’m sorry if I did something wrong,” I said. “But it helped. Being there.”
“A long time ago, I truly believed I had seen everything. Brighid teaches me still. I tell you, girl, I am not fond of your king, but I cannot deny he was truthful this once. Your word is unbiased. You are quite the innocent after all.” She nodded and raised her voice to say, “Tell them she’s clean, and her mind is clear. I give my blessing to this one. As does the Mother herself.”
I looked over my shoulder to see who she was addressing. A tiny fae male beckoned me to cross the brook.
“Wait,” I said, feeling desperate. “Is there a way for me to remember if they try to take it all away? Once this is over, will I be able to remember him? Them?”
She gave a little chuckle. “Oh, you’ll remember. That much is certain.”
I crossed the brook then turned to look back at the woman, but all I saw were trees. The faery led me down a winding path. If I concentrated, I could feel those tremors under my feet, those tiny murmurs of magic that always existed, if one knew where to look.
“Where are we going?” I asked.
“Back,” was the only reply.
We walked for an age, and then it was as if a door had been opened into another world, because voices filled the air as if switched on suddenly. The tiny fae led me to the festival area, where everyone had gathered. Brendan’s followers were silent, but the relief I felt when I saw my fae companions was unfathomable. Walking away from Brendan in that clearing had been hard. Believing I would never see any of them again had been a strange kind of torture. All of that struggling, and when freedom had finally been handed to me, I felt as though something had been ripped from my heart.
Everyone turned to us, and a ripple of sound broke out amongst those watching.
The small fae who had led me cleared his throat. “She’s clean. Her mind is clear. The hedge-witch is in agreement and gives her blessing, as does the Mother. The child will speak, and her words will be listened to. After, the final vote begins.”
A flurry of excitement rippled through the gathering.
“Cara!” A tiny figure barrelled into my neck, and the others followed Realtín to greet me.
Brendan was the last to approach, and when he did, I saw that he was still covered in my blood. His fingers twitched, and there was a strange look on his face I had never seen on him. He closed the space between us, but he didn’t touch me. He looked as though he were seeing a ghost.
“It wasn’t real,” I said.
“I felt your heart slowing,” he whispered. “I saw your lifeblood seep out of you. And I did nothing to stop him because…” He shook his head.
“I know,” I said. “He looks just like Drake.”
“His father,” he said. “I made a promise to kill the son of the man I need to make peace with. What game are the gods playing with us now?”
I stared at him, my stomach turning. I couldn’t worry about that. Not yet. “What about Dymphna? Did we get the kid?”

“We took her,” Líle said. “Arlen helped.”

The tall bodyguard shrugged. “I wouldn’t leave anyone to that fate.”

“Are you okay?” Anya asked me. “He told us, and we feared… did the hedgewitch harm you?”

“No. Maybe she helped. She said she watched. Saw it all. Said I smelled like the grotto, and I—”

“The grotto?” A vein in Brendan’s forehead bulged.

“Don’t freak out,” I said. “I think it got her on our side.”

“It would,” he replied. “We need to get back to our camp in case Deorad reappears. I’m not ready to deal with him quite yet.”

At camp, we got cleaned up and ate, and I tried to explain exactly what had happened. Brendan wanted to hear it all first, of course.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Deorad?” he asked.

“I didn’t want to distract you and Drake and cause some kind of civil war while we’re at it. And it’s a lot to take in. I mean, Drake’s… Drake. And Deorad is a monster. I knew Drake’s father was cruel. I just didn’t realise he’s kind of a lunatic.”

“Sadler made him that way,” Brendan said. “The harem of children and the women he defiled to make them. It’s a strange hobby, even for a fae.”

“Even for a fae,” I whispered as a memory struck me. “He knew.”

“Who knew what?” he asked.

“Drake knew who his father was. I can’t believe I forgot. He told me some old woman helped him find out who his father really was. He said he was close to finding him again, but I didn’t think of it until now.”

“Drake wanted me to face Sadler’s son, his father,” Brendan said slowly. “He knew I wouldn’t want to anger Sadler all over again. And Drake let you…” He shook his head. “When I saw Deorad, I felt a million different emotions. I didn’t react in time. I promised you I would keep you safe, and you almost died in front of me. I’m sorry, Cara.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said. “You really promised to kill Drake’s father?”

He gave a rueful smile. “That was before I knew of the connection to Sadler. It’s hard to explain how it works inside this head, but I made a decision to find Drake’s father. Drake calmed, and I made a strange kind of a promise to fulfil the vengeance he needs. I don’t know how to resolve this now.”

“Did you know about the cat all along?”

“I knew of Bekind. I only recently suspected she had something to do with you. Do you know anything of the leanan sídhe?”

“No. Is she… evil?”

He frowned. “That means little to us. You know that, Cara. You could call her a muse, I suppose.”

“The cat—Bekind—said Sadler sent her to the Fade.”

“Bekind’s life has been quite black and white. Nella was your ancestor, Sadler was her lover, and he was the one who sent her away. He did it to protect the woman who would become his wife.”

“So… you knew my ancestor?”

He nodded. “When Sadler did that, I knew he was lost. Nella and I had always butted heads, but that was the beginning of the end for Sadler and me. Funny how one action can lead to so many.”

“What was she like?” I asked eagerly.
“Inspirational, for the right person. Nella would find the brightest humans, the ones with something special about them: musicians, poets, people so charismatic that others automatically followed. It didn’t matter. She would encourage them, provide them with that extra spark, and they would be eager to please her. And then she would feed from them. Some burned out quickly, while others spent their lives a little separate from others, but all were envied for one reason or another.”

“So… evil then.”

“Call it what you will. Just be grateful that you’re the one Bekind guards now.”

“Why is she a cat?”

“As with most of our stories, it’s a long one. It’s time to ready yourself. You’ll speak soon, and the final decisions will be made.”

“What if they turn on you, Brendan?”

“Then it’s meant to be.”

“And if you win. That’s it for Drake? He’s… gone?”

He looked uncomfortable. “He won’t hang on for long after the ceremony, I’m afraid. If I find a way to help him, I will.”

“Will you?”

“I owe you a life debt. You saved me, whether you meant to or not. I owe you.” He took my hand. “When this is over, I’ll keep the promises I’ve made. You’ve been loyal and true, despite everything. You will be rewarded.”

I pushed at him in frustration. “It’s not about rewards, Brendan. It’s about friendship. It’s not a big deal.”

“Says the human,” he replied. “I’ll send Anya in to help you. Be brave, honest, and true when you speak. They’ll know if you lie. You can leave afterward as soon as you want.”

I watched him walk away, thinking I had nowhere else to go. Later, I was led by Grim and Realtín through an orchard to take our places.

“We were so worried,” Realtín said. “The king was covered in your blood. He didn’t know what was happening or if you’d even live. This is why he hates the hedge-witch. Her tricks and deceit. If you had died…” She flew around me in circles until I grew dizzy.

“I’m okay,” I said. “Seeing Drake’s father was probably worse for him.”

“He didn’t speak of it much,” Grim said. “But we could plainly see how much it troubled him. Those eyes have been violet more than once today.”

But they hadn’t been violet for me, even as I lay dying in his arms. “Think things will go wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Grim admitted. “But if they do, we’re to flee with you.”

Líle jogged over to us. “Looks clear. Keep walking, but be ready to run, okay?”

I nodded half-heartedly. I didn’t want to run anymore.

I spotted Brendan sitting with Arlen and Sorcha, but none of them looked my way. We sat behind him. The meadow filled up with fae, but the centre was left empty.

I leaned forward to whisper in Brendan’s ear. “Where’s Dynphna? I thought she was supposed to stand by your side after you returned her child to her.”

“I sent her back to her people,” he murmured.

I leaned back in my seat, unable to hide the smile on my face. One by one, a number of fae stood and talked about old laws and new, but I kept running through the things I should and shouldn’t say. I couldn’t lie, but that didn’t mean I should say the complete truth either.
“Time for the true child to speak,” an old male fae said. “The hedge-witch supports the claim made by Brendan. We shall hear, and we shall listen, and we shall see. Then we shall choose the rightful king.”

Grim led me to a stool in the centre of the field. Grim stayed by my side, and I held his hand like a child. The black cat sprinted across the meadow, curled up at my feet, and fell asleep.

“True child of Ireland,” an aggressive-sounding faery called out. “How did you come to be at the winter festival uninvited?”

I took a deep breath, looking around at all of the eyes gazing back at me. “I followed some lights, heard the music, and found a way in. But I couldn’t find the way out, so I stayed.”

“Do you remember what happened next?” another fae asked.

I nodded. “I remember everything. I saw the queens and a faery who smiled even as he killed people. He saw me, and I wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. I drank, and another faery warned me to stop. A banshee hid me in a room and fed me apples. The one who… the smiling faery, he had huge black wings that touched the floor and—”

Sadler’s pixies burst into laughter.

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment. I held my chin high and tried to concentrate. “Anyway, he found me. He wanted me to be a willing sacrifice, but I said no. He insisted, but then he was called away to help his queen, the redhead one.”

More questions were asked about that night, and I answered until my throat ached. The fae eventually called for a break and passed around drinks and food. Brendan’s pixies danced as an old man sang in a surprisingly deep voice. Bekind appeared in her human form and led me over to the singer.

He took my hand, and I realised he was human. He held my fingers tightly, and his voice somehow sounded even better. Afterward, the fae wept and clapped, and the old man was led away, anxiously looking back at me. I didn’t want to be him some day. I didn’t want to be a pet, a human toy for the amusement of the fae.

Bekind transformed into the cat and returned to her place at my feet.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Grim scolded her.

She swatted him with her paw before curling up and falling asleep again. The questions began again. The fae could be frustrating sometimes, getting distracted easily because they had all the time in the world. However, I got a kick out of the theatrics. Every time a fae stood to ask a question, he bowed or curtsied and mentioned half of his bloodline in an attempt to sound important. I watched for Deorad, but he didn’t appear.

“Did you know the fae who wanted to sacrifice you?” a fae asked.

“Brathnach,” Brendan declared.

“You weren’t there, apparently,” the fae said wryly.

“What other black-winged faery wore an eternal smile?” Sorcha snapped.

“Besides,” Brendan said, “I saw him through the memories of my host body.”

“He wanted me to die,” I said loudly. “I said no, and he was going to make me, except the… host body helped me.”

“Helped you how?” the fae asked.

“He told me I had to be willing. Then he helped me escape. He pushed me up the stairs and into freedom even though… he kept me safe. The smiling faery was chasing us and wanted to kill us both.”

A hunchbacked old lady limped over using a walking stick, the wood as gnarled as her knuckles. But her eyes sparkled with youth. She began her questions. With each
of my answers, she stooped a little less, and her skin smoothed, until finally, she was a
tall young woman with a beautiful smile.

She banged the walking stick on the ground two times. “Truth,” she declared before
turning into a dove and flying away. The stick disappeared before my eyes.

The very first questioner stood before me and bowed. “The girl speaks truth.
Therefore, she is a valid witness. Go sit with the king you support, Witness. Your
deed is done.”

There was a round of applause, and the pixies surrounded me to lead me over to
Brendan. He nodded and patted my hand when I sat next to him. I felt the joy in the
air, the relief from the others. But all I could think about was Drake and how I had
just helped end his life.

“We shall begin the final—” a fae began.

The sound of stamping feet interrupted him. A small army of fae marched to the
centre of the meadow, carrying a litter surrounded by a black veil.

“Sadler,” Brendan murmured. “This should be good.”

The veil was dropped, and Sadler made a hand motion. A warrior at his side
removed his helmet. His son. Drake’s father.

Murmurs flew through the crowd as the fae took in the face that resembled
Brendan’s.

Sadler raised a hand for quiet. “Let me speak before you make your choice. The boy
who would like to be king had his turn at power. He was frivolous and foolish and
wasted his chance. He has made a lot of claims, but as you can see, he stole my
grandson’s body to do this. This is wrong. The dead should stay gone, and the young
and able should never be replaced by a ghoul. I claim this: The younger should never
succeed the elder. My claim comes before my son’s, and my son’s before his son’s.
The true path is clear. Choose wisely. This king can have my grandson’s body if I can
have his throne.”

Brendan rose to his feet. “My father is dead. My host body’s final wish was to end
the life of his own father. Even Sadler’s grandson knows that I am the only choice. I
am royal. I can contain the power. I seek to right the wrongs I once made. That does
not make me weak. That makes me wise. Sadler’s bitterness has spawned a monster.
There can be only one choice. Make the one which will lead you to glory, not the
angry end of a bitter old man. If Sadler dies, you’ll be left with his son. Deorad will
never be fit to rule.”

While Brendan spoke, a hooded figure moved toward Deorad. Something in the
movement triggered a memory.

“Um, Grim?” I whispered.

“I see,” he said. “She’s a foolish one.”

The hood was thrown back, and a dagger shone in Ronnie’s hand as she stabbed
Deorad in the back. He doubled over, and she held the dagger to his throat, yanking
his head up by the hair.

“Where is he?” she demanded. “Where is my baby?”

“What baby?” Sadler asked. “Who is this human?”

“He took me,” she said through gritted teeth. “And he sent me home with a baby
growing in my belly. I thought I’d hate the child, but he had golden hair, and he
looked like a cherub. They said he died, but I knew it was a changeling. He took my
baby. He took my real baby. My baby didn’t die. I know you, fae. I know what you
do. He tortured me, and then he took my baby. Get me my baby, and I won’t slit his
throat.”
“Your child was weak,” Deorad spat, an awful smile on his face. “If I had taken it, you would be dead. But you couldn’t even give me a living son. You—”

With a scream made up of years of pain, sorrow, and bitterness, Ronnie stabbed him in the neck. She kept stabbing, hunched over the fallen body, even as her hands slipped in the blood. She kept screaming, stabbing, losing herself, until guards grabbed hold of her and swiftly removed Sadler’s son’s body from sight.

Brendan ordered his guards to take her away.

“She’s mine!” Sadler cried.

“She’s the king’s,” Arlen replied.

“I have to go to her,” I said. “Can I?”

Brendan nodded. I assumed the vote would begin, and hopefully, the loss of his heir would go against Sadler. But I couldn’t stop seeing Ronnie’s face, the horror and realisation as she attacked Deorad. She’d had a child, lost that child, and probably lost her mind as well.

I followed the path of the guards. Ronnie had been taken to a tent where the pixies were cleaning the blood off her. She sat there, her face pale, her eyes wide, and her hands shaking.

“Ronnie?” I whispered, stunned by the buckets of bloody water. “Are you… I mean…?”

She rocked back and forth. “I knew the rules. You said I could come, and that counted as an invitation, so I came to see him, to find him.” She stared at me, opening and closing her mouth like a fish. “Can you find my baby, Cara? You know, don’t you? Why won’t anyone tell me where he went?”

I choked back a sob and held her as tight as I could as her body rocked with her cries of pain. I felt nothing but pity for her, despite the madness, despite the rage.

Some of the pixies escorted me out of the tent so they could finish cleaning Ronnie. They laughed and cajoled, pulled my hair and pushed me until I lost all sense of my bearings. They pushed me through the orchard, and I looked around in confusion.

I was alone. “Where is everyone?”

They didn’t answer. They were gone, too. Feeling a sense of urgency and danger, I tried to retrace my steps, but I kept walking in circles. I heard someone call my name. A woman’s voice. Thinking it must be Bekind, I ran toward the sound.

Sorcha came out from behind a tree and held out a dagger, the tip perilously close to my throat. “It’s begun,” she said excitedly. “They’ve voted, and they’ll claim him as king. He doesn’t need you anymore.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Hasn’t there been enough death already?”

“I’m the queen of death,” she said without a trace of humour. “This is what I live on. Your death would give me strength. Your death would make everything better. But I just want you to leave, Cara. Go back to your life, and stay out of our business. He’ll forget you soon, forget the path you set him on, and return to the one we planned.”

“There’s nothing going on between us if that’s what you’re—”

She waggled the dagger. “You little idiot. That’s what you think this is? I’m not an infatuated human child. I’m not doing this out of jealousy. I’m doing this because it’s best for my sisters. He’s forgetting us, and I can’t let that happen. I’ve given up so much. They’ve given up everything to let me play this game, and I can’t lose.”

I took a step back, but she came forward just as much. “I haven’t done anything to you.”

“Then go. Let us part ways here, and all will be forgotten.” She pushed my hip with her free hand, and her eyes widened. “No. No! This can’t—”
I took a few steps to widen the space between us. “Okay. This isn’t my battle. I don’t care what—”
“You must die,” she hissed.
“What? You just said I could go. I agreed to leave!”
“That was before I knew the truth.” She came at me, forcing me back against a tree. “I see now. I understand. You’ve played a better game than any of us. You’ve persuaded him that making us all toe the line is the best path, but where does that put my sisters and me? Will he decide we can’t taste death anymore? Will he decide another should sit by his side? I’ve crawled my way up the ladder, child, and I won’t let anyone take that away from me. I’ll be queen because that’s what’s best for us, not a pathetic, weak—” She glanced to her left and swore. “Not now.” She swung a fist and walloped me in the head.
I fell back and collided with the tree trunk just as everything went black.
Chapter Thirty

I awoke cold and stiff. I saw trees and leaves, and a trail of sunlight drifting between them.

My memories returned in a flood. I started to sit up, but something held me down. I looked over my body and saw nothing restraining me, so I tried again. There were some kind of invisible shackles on my wrists and ankles, holding me to a stone altar.

“Hush, little one,” Sorcha cooed behind me.

“Let me go!”

“I have to protect him. If you don’t die, we’ll never be free of you. I admit I underestimated you.”

I closed my eyes and wished she would go away. Maybe a tree could fall on her head or something, anything so she wasn’t near me while I couldn’t move to get away.

“It’ll be over soon,” she said. “My god doesn’t need a sacrifice to be willing, and he’s far more generous with power.”

I continued to struggle. I knew I could never beat her magic, but instinct wouldn’t let me stop fighting. “What are you doing?”

“Ensuring things go as they should. He’ll be king soon, his power restored, and I can cut your throat, knowing it won’t affect his position. Spilling your blood will bless his reign, and spilling royal blood…” She shivered.

I glared at her. “What are you waiting for? I’ve already done the witness thing.”

“Until the crown is on his head, anyone can ask to hear from you again. It’s their right. It’s unlikely to happen, but I’m not taking any chances. The second he has his power, you and your solitary faery are dead.”

“You’re a total psycho,” I said and looked away from her.

“No!” She wrapped her fingers around my neck. “I’m doing what I have to for my sisters, even for my king. Everything was going perfectly until that idiot solitary faery hung around, all because of you. That never happens, never! And I just know everyone thinks it was my magic, that my spell wasn’t powerful enough, but it was. If I had known Drake was related to Sadler, I would have killed him there and then! But this is your fault, too. You helped keep him here, and he weakens Brendan. When Brendan admitted he was going to free you, free you before the ceremony, I knew he was lost. I had to do something. No more!”

“You don’t have to do this,” I said. “He’ll be pissed that you went behind his back.”

She laughed harshly. “I can deal with him. I haven’t waited all this time just for a human to move the pieces in the opposite direction. I’ve suffered for him, waited in the dark, too ugly to look at, my powers weakened. My sisters and I are no longer feared or revered. Where is the justice in that? I put him back on that throne, and he’ll do what I say.” She raised her dagger. “Your blood will make sure of that. You’ll do this one last great thing, true child.”

The black cat leapt onto my legs as a grey blur jumped at Sorcha. She knocked Grim away in a rage. He fell and didn’t get back up. Realtín screamed and flew at Sorcha’s face. She scratched at the banshee’s eyes, while Bekind tried to free my hands.

Sorcha cut her hand with the dagger and shouted a few words. Bekind and Realtín were both frozen in some kind of bubble. Sorcha gripped the dagger and leaned over me.

“Stop this!” Brendan yelled. “It’s not right.”
Tears streamed down Sorcha’s cheeks. “It’s always been this way!” She brought down the dagger.

I squeezed my eyes shut. The pain never came.

I felt grass under my feet and opened my eyes. I was standing in a garden with Drake, his eyes violet and clear.

A shadowy figure stood to the side. “What is this?” he said, and I knew it was Brendan.

The air was misty and warm, and Drake shimmered as he reached for my hand.

“You called to our Mother before,” a harmony of voices said behind us.

Whirling around, I saw three beautiful women who seemed to share one set of legs, although it was hard to see through the mist and the vines of white flowers that surrounded them.

“I should have known,” Brendan said under his breath.

The women reached out to me. The one on the left said, “How pleasant to find a true child in our grotto. The Mother’s eyes opened, and we had to see what would happen next. We don’t truly like the end of this story, though.”

“What did you do?” Brendan demanded.

“Oh, dearest son, there’s no need for old grudges. We were always here for the taking. You merely needed to ask in the right way,” the middle woman said.

“We’ve been watching,” the right one said. “We are concerned. The fate of all depends on those with the most power, and if we can call our Mother back, we will find a way.”

“Yes,” the left one said. “This child signals change, and we believe this is the new age we’ve long waited for. But she is about to die, and you, who have not yet gained your full power, cannot save her. It’s an unhappy end to the tale. What shall you do?”

“What do you want?” Brendan asked.

At the same time, Drake said, “Anything.”

The women giggled, and the middle one said, “He who doesn’t beg for help is the one who risked everything for her. How strange, sisters.”

“I risked nothing,” Brendan said. “Have you no concept of courtesy, priestesses? I owe a life debt. That is all.”

“Perhaps,” the three said as one.

“Can you help us?” Drake asked. “My time draws near. Will you grant me one blessing?”

“We could,” the left one said. “But are you prepared for the consequences? There will be many. Now and in the future. They may be large or small, but consequences exist no matter what choice you make.”

“You brought us here,” Brendan said harshly. “Stop beating around the bush. You want to help us—that is plain. Now tell us the price.”

“The price is one soul sent to the Fade to replace the one stolen. Answer quickly.”

Drake and Brendan exchanged a glance, but I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t open my mouth, couldn’t say a word.

“Can you finish what I started?” Drake asked.

Brendan looked over at me, but I couldn’t make out his features clearly, nothing but a blur of gold. “Deorad’s already dead.”

“It doesn’t end with him,” Drake replied.

Brendan nodded. “I will honour the request.”

Drake looked at me. “I’m sorry for everything, Cara.” He faced the women. “Help us. Please.”
“Be quick,” the women said. “The power will be restored, but the dagger is already close to her throat. If the blade hits its target, your chance is lost.”

I didn’t get the time to think about that. I was staring up at a dagger rushing toward me. After a crack that sounded like a lightning strike, the knife flew away from me.

Sorcha shrieked and looked at the king. “No,” she whispered. “It can’t be.”

“Run,” Drake said. “Before I forget the respect he held for you.”

Sorcha fled, and Drake freed me.

I rubbed my wrists. “What the hell?”

“They didn’t say which soul,” he said under his breath.

“Brendan’s gone?”

He nodded. “Back to the Fade.”

“Help them,” I said, still shocked. “Grim was hurt, and the others…” Brendan had been banished again. All because of another human. I shook my head.

Drake began shouting out commands as Líle joined us.

“Arlen’s on his way,” Líle said. She came close enough to see Drake’s eyes. “Oh. You? What’s…?”

“The priestesses sent Brendan back to the Fade,” I said. “To save me from Sorcha.”

“He owed you a life debt,” Drake said, lifting Grim into his arms.

The brownie woke up too slowly for my liking. “But he’s trapped again. I didn’t want that. I would never want that.”

“He thought it would be me,” Drake said bitterly. “Don’t confuse the matter, Cara.”

“I didn’t want anyone to be sent away,” I said.

“What do we do now?” Líle asked. “Arlen will know. They will all realise.”

“I’ll take the throne first,” Drake said. “It’s too dangerous to do anything else.”

“But pure-blood royalty can’t even manage to control both courts,” I said. “You’re half-human. How will you?”

“I’ll learn,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“What if you didn’t have to?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

I flexed my wrists, trying to feel my hands again. “Brendan mentioned something about the fact that nobody came for him. He made it sound like he would have been free if someone had just gone in there for him. What if… what if we could just… go get him?”

“Just go get him?” Drake’s eyes went wide. “As if it’s as simple a matter as walking in and taking his hand? There’s a reason nobody went in there. There’s a reason the banshees took so many years and so many deaths to rescue his soul.”

“But it’s possible?” I asked.

“It’s possible,” Líle said. “But he’s right. It’s dangerous. The fenris alone could—”

“I owe him,” I said firmly.

“This is ridiculous,” Drake said, setting Grim down. “Líle, help me speak to Arlen. I’ll take the throne and then deal with… everything. Grim and Realtín, take Cara home. Avoid Sadler’s camp, and if you see his men, run. He’ll use… his son’s death as an excuse to cause mayhem. I need to do as much damage control as possible.” He strode away.

Líle gave me one last sympathetic look before following him, leaving me with Grim and Realtín.

I sat on the stone altar, feeling deflated. “And that’s it? It’s all over. Brendan’s gone, and Drake’s king?”

“Don’t judge him too harshly,” Grim said. “We still need leadership, and Sadler’s the only alternative. Once Drake has the power, he can deal with the matter.”

“I can show you the path,” a voice from an overhead branch said.

I looked up in disgust. “Am I supposed to trust you?”

“I’m sorry,” Bekind said, swinging her legs. “I can’t change what I am. Or what you are. But if you want to go into the Fade, I can show you the way. I’m still connected with the leanan sídhe. I can take you into the Fade.”


“What does it matter?” Bekind brushed her golden hair from her face. “All that matters is finding the way.”

I stared up at her. I wanted to believe her. I wanted to go. I owed Brendan, and I feared Drake wouldn’t be able to manage the power and the responsibility of ruling the fae. The fae needed two courts and two leaders. If I could find Brendan, maybe I could bring him home, and he and Drake could figure out an alternative. Drake never wanted to be king, and I couldn’t imagine that to have changed in the three minutes since he had been given some power.

“I’ll go with you,” I said at last.

“Quickly then,” Bekind said. “Before he returns and stops us.”

“This is a terrible idea,” Grim said.

“We can’t let her go alone,” Realtín said.

“She won’t be alone,” Bekind in a huffy voice. “I’ll be with her.”

“You don’t count!” Realtín snapped.

“We’re free,” Grim said. “We can go wherever we want.”

Realtín nodded, darted down, and kissed his lips.

“We’re coming with you, Cara,” he said.

“It might not be safe,” I warned.

“Then don’t go at all,” he said.

“But this happened to Brendan because he did something good. I can’t let that be it. I can’t let him go thinking that goodness destroyed him, that another stupid human girl was his downfall.”

“We owe him our freedom,” Grim said solemnly. “He showed us a merciful side. He helped save a child from Deorad. And as much as I like and respect Drake, he isn’t a king. When the courts find out the truth, they will rebel. Brendan’s our best hope.”

“The priestesses watch over Cara,” Bekind said. “We’ll be safer with her than anyone else. It’s time for us to leave. We need supplies, and the path is long and arduous. Let the fae celebrate. We’ll bring them back a better king.”

Bekind jumped down in front of us and turned back into a cat. She led us away from the stone altar, away from the faery I cared about, the faery who would be king.

We would journey to the Fade, a place of nightmares. All for a fae I had once thought of as a monster.
Thank you for reading – for more information, check out Claire Farrell’s blog or email the author. Sign up to be notified of new releases or like the Facebook page for more regular updates.

Watch out for the sequel, Fade, in 2014.
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