



A.C. JAMES WRITING AS JULIE BLACKHEART

Julie Blackheart

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Julie Blackheart

WIP Publishing & RAS · Dark Swoons Imprint

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Beta Reading by Penni DePaul & Melissa Tackett · Book Cover &

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GPSR Warning: This book contains dangerous levels of wit. This warning is required by EU regulations, a delightful bit of bureaucratic red tape dreamt up by a highly irritable subcommittee, presumably after being duped by an alarming number of books.

And sandwiches. Hold the ketchup.

(Or whatever it is the EU finds particularly offensive on sandwiches)

This wit leans toward the macabre, peppered with dry cynicism and a dash of existentialism. Symptoms of exposure may include uncontrollable laughter, sudden epiphanies, and the disconcerting

realisation that the universe is both infinitely vast and utterly ridiculous.

If you begin to suspect the book is having a go at you, take a deep breath, place it gently down, and make a nice cup of tea. If symptoms persist, read on anyway—it's far too late to stop now. For assistance, consult the Book Wit Helpline, staffed by a cheeky bot who is exactly 42% helpful. Proceed at your own risk and with tea. Always tea.

Printed and bound by BookVault. This book was manufactured using paper and ink products in accordance with commercial standards. Copytech (UK) Ltd, Trading as Printondemand-worldwide.com. 9 Culley Court, Orton Southgate, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, PE2 6WA, United Kingdom · gpsr@podww.com · 01733 237867

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The spelling is British, the humour is dry, and there's
a 100% chance of sarcasm, and, fair play, some bits
might be in Irish too.

(Grand if you don't mind, but we won't be changing
it.)

So, if you think a word is misspelt or it's rocking an 's'
instead of a 'z' or an extra 'l,' it's just fancy.

Don't email me to correct it.

Neener, neener, you tosser.

*For all the girls who want a fae who'd leave the world
in ruins to stand by your side, who touches you as
though his hands were made to worship every secret,
sinful part of you, and whisper words meant only for
the darkness between you.*

*For the serious fantasy fans clutching their leather-
bound tomes or their pearls and debating the socio-
political ramifications of elves—this isn't for you.
Apologies if you must have them, though I can't say I
mean it ;) It's for the romantics who love a well-crafted
world, a touch of drama, and just enough smut to
make you nervously check who's reading over your
shoulder on the train. Manage your expectations
accordingly. Now, do be a dear and STFUAATDLAGG.*

*Maidir le m'fhear céile, nascann ár gcroíthe leis an
solas agus leis an dorchadas. Is breá linn go fíochmhar*

*cosúil le breacadh an lae, le ceangal níos doimhne ná
bás. Is sinne an t-iarann.*

*Is breá liom tú, mo fhear céile fiacaile—fiú le do
peannaireacht go dona.*

Go dtí an deireadh, tá mo chroi istigh ionat.

*Do mo pháistí agus mo pháistí bónais, an lúcháir
chaotic a choinníonn mé ó bheith ró-eolach ar cad atá
réasúnach nó sane. Ó na rudaí gan bhrí a chuireann
meangadh gáire orm, ar nós rith amach as páipéar
leithris agus na rudaí míchearta a chur sna háiteanna
míchearta – is eachtra gan deireadh é an saol.*

*scríobhaim. Cruthaím toisc go bhfuil an tsaoirse chun
smaoineamh, dúshlán a thabhairt, agus ceistiú, faoi
bhagairt leanúnach. Ní féidir agus ní bheidh ár
nguthanna ina dtost. Is cath é an troid ar son an chirt
chun ár gcuid smaointe a chur in iúl - an cath a throid
siad siúd a tháinig romhainn agus iad siúd a thagann
inár ndiaidh.*

*Chomh fada agus a bheidh anáil agam, leanfaidh mé
ag scríobh agus ag cruthú toisc go gcruthaíonn*

*cumhacht na bhfocal dul chun cinn. Creidim i
seasamh daingean don rud atá ceart, fiú nuair a
bhíonn sé deacair.*

Tuatha Dé Danann, Tuath Dé, the clann Eladan, the tribe of gods, or maybe madly talented troublemakers. Not gods of iron and thunderous war, but of art, music, and raw creation. Born of mist and half-forgotten stories, with hands that coax beauty from stone and pull songs from silence. If you believe the tales (and why not? They're good ones), they left pieces of themselves scattered in the world. You'll find them across generations of painters, poets, musicians, and the slightly odd tinkerers with more glue than common sense.

They're the whisper in your ear, the fire behind every reckless urge to make something out of nothing. Gods of misfits, rebels, the creators who shape worlds without apology.

Maybe their blood runs in your veins. Every brushstroke, every note, every defiant

word thrown against the ordinary carries something sacred. To create is to stand with them, to claim your place among the dreamers, the artists, the makers who pull magic from thin air.

— JULIE BLACKHEART

TÍR NA SCÁIL



IRONLANDS
(MORTAL REALM)

WRAITHWIND
COURT

LIR'S RISE

THE SHADE

LAKE LIRIEL

UISCE COURT

OBSIDIAN SEA

OBSIDIAN
COURT

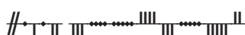
IN-BETWEEN

OTHERWORLD



PROLOGUE

SHADE



OCTOBER 31, FOUR YEARS AGO

There's blood on my hands. Blood between my toes. Blood splattered in my hair. It's everywhere—splashed across my chest, streaking the kitchen tiles, and horrifyingly, it's smeared across my lips. The bitter, metallic taste sticks to my tongue, wrong no matter how justified this is. Guilt comes anyway, settling like a stone in my chest.

My kitchen looks like a butcher's slab, except I'm the one holding the knife or, in this case, the axe. And sprawled at my feet is the *Dearg Sidhe* assassin. I'd

admire how far his blood sprayed if it weren't soaking into my jeans.

The adrenaline drains away, leaving me cold, clammy, and nauseous. My entire body trembles as I take a shaky step back, my bare feet sticking to the blood-slick floor. The broken beer bottle lies near his outstretched hand, the jagged edges smeared red. For a moment, I stare at him—the dean's son, of all people—lying there, motionless.

I killed him.

My boyfriend.

Dropping the axe, I drag in slow, shaky breaths, trying not to completely lose my shit.

I remember smashing the bottle against his face, the sharp crack of glass meeting bone as I fought to keep him from pinning me down. He'd staggered, his hands going to his face, and that brief moment was all I'd needed to shadow walk to my weapon.

The axe is heavier than it looks, now lying where I dropped it. Blood drips from the blade in slow, deliberate plinks onto the floor, pooling next to the mess that used to be his neck. The beer bottle hadn't stopped him—it had only slowed him down. Fae are stubborn like that. You can stab them, slice them, and leave them bleeding out, but unless you go for the kill—*really* go for it—they'll just keep coming.

There's no surviving that much blood loss, let alone losing his head, not even for a vampirish dark fae with his tricks. Hysteria bubbles up. I should check. Press my ear to his chest. Confirm that his blackened heart has stilled, but I can't.

Instead, I force myself to look at the boyfriend who tried to kill me. We've only been dating since the start of term. Freshman year. I shake my head. He seemed too good to be true, and surprise, surprise, he was. I should've seen it. The glamour, the cracks. But I was too busy pretending to be normal, trying to escape the shadow of my royal lineage. And now?

I'm soaked in blood. And I have no idea what to do.

My gaze flickers to the kitchen table where my English essay lies half-soaked in crimson. The A+ in the corner is smeared beyond recognition. *Bleeding for literature. That's realism for you*, I think, a laugh bubbling up. The hysterical sound is hollow and wildly inappropriate, but I can't stop it.

My stomach churns. I bolt for the sink, leaving bloody footprints on the tiled floor. Clearly, luck is on my side; I don't slip and break my neck. I scrub at my hands until they're raw, but the blood clings like it's mocking me. It's beneath my nails, streaking up my

arms and matting the silver strands in my black hair. Fuck. It's not coming off.

Ash perches on the counter, licking blood off his black paw. He tilts his head, his lavender eyes watching me scrub blood off my hands as though I'm a kitten who wandered into a wolf's den. His tail flicks once.

"Don't judge me," I mutter, voice cracking. "It's not like I meant to kill the dean's son."

"Judging you? No, darling. I'm *admiring* you. Who knew you had it in you?" He yawns, showing sharp teeth, as if murder is an everyday occurrence—a fitting expression for a glamoured as a domesticated house cat and all-around know-it-all familiar, who clearly believes himself the true mastermind of the household.

"What am I going to do?" I continue scrubbing my hands, but it's useless. There's blood everywhere. It's in Ash's fur...

"If you think this is bad, wait 'til his *daddy* finds out." He lets out a mocking purr that drips with *schadenfreude*.

"Fuuuuuuck," I scream.

"Oh, what's one dead dean's son when you're already the queen of darkness?" His eyes glint like he's enjoying this far more than he should.

I glance back at the body. It's lying there, unnervingly still. I tell myself he's not getting back up. I used blood manipulation to slow him down, a smashed beer bottle to his face, and my duskwrought axe to lop off his head.

Because what self-respecting university student doesn't keep an enchanted axe under her bed?

Dark humour is the only thing holding me together, but even that's wearing thin. I lean over the sink, clutching the edges as nausea rises. What the hell do I do now? Call the police? Sure, and say what? *Hi, there's a dead fae assassin in my kitchen. Oh, don't mind the decapitation. It's a cultural misunderstanding.*

No. They'd never believe me. Not with the blood, the axe, or the fact that his father is the bloody dean. Fucking changeling. I can't explain this. I can't fix this.

"This is a mess," I mutter. I have an exam tomorrow. I should be studying.

"Killing is easy. Cleaning up? Now that's where the real art is," he says with infuriating amusement because he's clearly not about to help.

Ash leaps down from his perch, his paws landing silently on the blood-slick floor. He steps delicately around the pool of crimson, like that's going to

matter, given the blood all over him. He pauses by the assassin's head, batting at it with one paw.

"Don't," I warn, voice shaking. "Just...don't. I'm going to get kicked out of school, I'm going to get arrested, I'm going to jail for the rest of my life. I don't know what to do!"

"Relax. A life sentence isn't truly the rest of your life. If you're *really* good, you'll get out in fifteen," he says with unbothered practicality, as though he's offering cooking tips. "And you do know what to do. You just don't want to call *her*."

He's right. I don't want to call her. We've got issues—not the garden-variety mother-daughter kind, either. Try, "Sorry, but you can never see the rest of your family again because of some stupid fae laws that say half-breeds like me are a cosmic no-no." Oh, sure, not everyone feels that way, but clearly enough do if my first university boyfriend is an assassin. And knowing her, she'd waltz in, take one look at this mess, critique my cleaning skills, and say something encouraging like, "You're too soft to be a proper Shadowborn Witch."

Classic Mum.

Except...

I sigh. I grab my mobile with shaking fingers and call the one person who might have an answer. *Gods*,

I wish mindspeak was easier this far from the Veil. The phone rings twice before she picks up.

“Mum.” My voice is barely a breath.

“They’ve come for you,” she says, her voice cold as winter steel.

“Yes,” I whisper.

The line goes dead.

The shadows in the corner of the kitchen deepen, pooling like ink. They ripple and shift, and a figure steps through as though carved from the darkness. Her sharp eyes take in the scene—the blood, the body, the gore—with practised calm.

“Well,” she says, her lips quirking in dark amusement, “you certainly didn’t half-ass it, did you?”

“Mum!” I hiss, horrified.

Her grin fades. “It’s a body. Big deal.”

“That’s not helpful!” I snap.

Her expression softens. “Shade, listen to me. This is bad, yes, but it’s not the end. We’ll deal with it.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Really? How exactly do we deal with a decapitated fae assassin on the kitchen floor? Do we magic him alive again and pack him off to some faraway place with no idea who I am? Because I’d love to hear *that* plan.”

Her jaw tightens. “Even I have limits. You don’t undo death without consequences, and those conse-

quences aren't ones I'm willing to risk. If I tried, I might end up the one lying dead on this floor. Is that what you want?"

I shake my head, swallowing the lump rising in my throat. "No. Of course not. But—"

"There's a way out," she interrupts, her voice quieter now, almost gentle. "But it comes with a price."

My stomach twists, but I nod. "What do I have to do?"

She doesn't answer. She reaches into her coat and pulls out a coin. It glints silver in the dim light. My stomach lurches at the sight of it.

"Mum, no."

She meets my gaze. "We don't have a choice."

Mum trained me for this, for the inevitability of blood and betrayal my whole life. Now that it's come to this? I feel like I'm failing. Numbness washes over me. I nod.

She begins a chant in a lilting, ancient tongue. It feels like the room tilts sideways as the spell falls from her lips, and I know—deep in my bones—that this isn't something she does lightly. The air thickens, pressing against my skin. Shadows in the room come alive. They crawl across the floor, spilling over the tiles, and reach for the body like eager fingers.

The darkness condenses, folding in on itself until it forms the shape of a man. A *deamhan* who's tall, otherworldly, and breathtakingly beautiful in the way only something truly dangerous can be. He surveys the room, his chin tilting with clear disinterest.

"Leanan," my mother says, her voice tight.

"Talora." His lips curl into a sharp smile. "What a mess you've made. And you've dragged me into it. Again."

Sirens wail in the distance, growing louder with every passing second. That's when it hits me—just how much noise you make in a tiny flat when you're trying not to be murdered by a fae assassin hell-bent on spilling your blood. The neighbours—well-meaning, overly curious cunts that they are—must have called the police. Fuck.

My mother sighs. "We don't have time for this."

He makes a show of adjusting the cuffs of his finely tailored jacket before finally deigning to look at me.

"And who is this?" His voice drips with curiosity and condescension, like he's discovered a stray dog lounging on an antique settee. He pauses, his nostrils flaring delicately as he sniffs the air.

I freeze. The sensation is oddly intimate, like his

scrutiny reaches deeper than the blood I've been scrubbing.

"Oh, my." He practically purrs, eyes widening in mock surprise. "You smell *delicious*. What *are* you?"

He sniffs again, and I suppress a shiver, unsettled by the way his gaze lingers, as if he's dissecting me. "No, no...you're not fully fae. And I sense a touch of demon—" His gaze flits to the mess on the floor, one brow arching high. "—but I could be confusing that with this little *bloodbath* you've got going on. Honestly, darling, was the axe *entirely* necessary?"

I open my mouth, but he waves a hand with a flourish that sends the shadows swirling around him. "Talora," he says, turning to my mother with exaggerated delight, "your glamour on this creature is simply divine."

"She's not—" my mother begins, her tone sharp.

But Leanan barrels on, ignoring her. He takes a step closer to me, his hands perched on his hips as he looks me over like he's appraising a painting at an auction.

"Look at you! Bewitching little Shadow Witch, aren't you? Oh, I *love* it! The subtle power, the delightful undercurrent of barely restrained darkness. She must be your daughter. There's no denying the resemblance. You're both sharp as knives, with an

aura of...latent destruction.” He claps his hands together. “This will be *fun*!”

My mother’s hands ball into fists. When she speaks, her voice is cold enough to frost the windows. “Enough!”

Leanan blinks, affronted, then places a hand over his heart. “I’m only trying to make the best of this *deliciously messy* situation you’ve dragged me out of retirement for.” His gaze shifts to me, and his grin sharpens. “Really, the least you could do is introduce us properly. I’m dying to know if your daughter inherited your penchant for rebellion.”

I swallow hard, glaring at the demon.

His grin grows sharper by the second. “Though, judging by the way she’s scowling at me, I suspect she’s inherited more than your rebellious streak. This one has *fire*! I adore her already.”

“Are you done?” I snap, digging my fingernails into my palms to keep the hysteria from taking over. “Or do you need to sniff me again before you actually *do something*?”

His brows shoot up, his grin widening. “Oh, she’s got a mouth on her! You didn’t warn me about this, Talora. I’m obsessed. Please tell me she’s cursed too. It’ll be the cherry on top.”

“I’m not cursed,” I grind out. “I’m covered in

blood, there's a decapitated fae on my floor, and I'm *out of options*. So, unless you're here to help, just... just leave!"

Leanan lets out a theatrical gasp. "Leave? In the middle of such *juicy* family drama? Darling, that would be a crime in itself." He moves closer, his tone dropping into something silkier. "Now, what is it you *really* desire?"

I force myself to meet his eyes, ignoring the way his presence makes my skin crawl. "I need this gone. The body. The blood. His existence. All of it."

His dark eyes glint with mockery as if he's savoring some private joke. "And what will you give me, child?"

I falter. My mother steps forward, holding up the coin. "This," she says.

His lips curl into a slow, satisfied smirk as he takes it, the subtle shift in his posture radiating an almost predatory delight. "Ah, the coin of Ana. Such a precious thing, and you're handing it over. Just like that. How desperate you must be."

"Fix this," she snaps.

I stare at the coin. The silver gleams, but not like something new and polished. It's been worn smooth by hands that touched it before humans figured out fire.

And then—because apparently staring at an ancient coin isn't disorienting enough—I'm somewhere else. I'm a small child again, sitting on a library floor with sunlight falling in soft, dusty beams across my chubby little hands. Meadowsweet wafts from my *Mamó* Bee's tea, but before I can focus, the memory twists.

Now, I'm not a child anymore. I'm somewhere else entirely. Across a dark sea, high on a mountaintop with swirling purple clouds where the air feels so thin, and the sky stretches so far it could swallow me. There's power here, *immense* power, and without knowing how I know, this is the moment when time itself was discovered. Not invented. *Discovered.*

And yet, somehow, I'm still standing in the blood-soaked mess of my kitchen.

It's like the coin is dragging me through memories, pulling them out of order and shoving them back in all wrong. I can *feel* it sifting through them, prodding at the edges, lingering on the ones I hold most dear.

I shiver. It's not just invasive. It's *intimate*. Violating.

He hums, turning the coin in his fingers before slipping it into his coat. "As you wish."

Heat explodes at the base of my neck like the demon's claws are carving into my skin, yet he hasn't touched me. I grit my teeth as fire licks across my skin. Not fire. Ink. No—deeper than that. A brand that whispers in the back of my mind: *The debt stands. It is seen.* My vision swims, the edges darkening, and for half a second, I see something. A coin. Spinning. Falling. Gone. The searing sensation flares and then cools.

Stumbling, I clutch the edge of the table, and glance at the demon. Satisfaction drips from his shadowed features as if my pain is some kind of trophy.

"What did you do?" I rasp, my voice raw from the scream I couldn't hold back.

"Marked you." He shrugs like those two words didn't seize my heart. "A promise, a bond, a warning. The Gloaming doesn't like to be ignored."

My hand trembles as my fingertips brush over the hot, tingling mark. The bastard branded my flesh, marking a bargain I can't escape.

The demon steps closer. "Your mother's little glamour is so immaculate, I think I'll leave it be. Such a delicate touch—quite the artist, isn't she? But you..." His gaze lingers on my neck. "We can't have you strolling around with my mark on display for every demon, fae, witch, or wandering busybody to

see, now, can we? My signature is very exclusive, darling. Unique, one might say. A little too desirable in certain circles. And I've got enough enemies who'd love to call on me without handing them an invitation. No, no, we'll have to tidy that up."

His fingers trace the air, a whispered incantation spilling from his lips. The mark on my neck burns, heat flaring beneath my skin as though the very blood in my veins is shifting. The sensation fades as quickly as it came. I use my reflection in the darkened kitchen window to find my neck is bare; smooth, untouched.

His smirk sharpens into something cold and ruthless. "You're mine now."

He waves a hand, *draíocht* rippling through the air. Blood vanishes in shimmering streaks. The body sinks through the floor, head rolling after, both dissolving into the tiles as if they'd never existed.

My memories of the assassin begin to dissipate, slipping away like the last threads of a dream. The prick, then murmurs an incantation, his voice smooth and unhurried, like he has all the time in the world to undo the fabric of reality.

Ash snarls and darts between me and the demon, his eyes burning with defiance.

“Ash—” I start, but the plea gets stuck in my throat as the spell hits me.

His fur bristles, the lavender glow in his eyes flaring bright enough to rival the moon. He crouches low, his body poised to strike, but the magic sweeps through the room like a tidal wave.

Ash glares. Not at me but at the magic. At what it’s taking from us.

I’ll find you again. The whisper in my mind barely finishes before the magic grips me again. Something, no *someone*, I love just vanished.

My heart shatters, leaving a void so deep, I don’t think I’ll ever recover. Why? Who disappeared? The answer slips from my grip, taking with it the kind of love that feels irreplaceable.

The man, demon? locks his gaze on me. “Your name, heritage, family, and magic no longer exist.”

I flinch as he lists each item, despising how I can’t fight to hold on to myself. How I can’t remember exactly what I’ve lost.

“You will wake as Felicity,” he continues as if he hadn’t already shattered me, “a mere mortal with dead adoptive parents.”

My hand flies to my mouth to hold in the sob trying to fly free.

“And you, Talora.” He turns to the older woman.

“The coin of Ana is not enough to cover your demand to break the sacred law of balance. The Ironlands will not tolerate your debt, therefore, you are banished to the Shrouded Moors. Forever. Never to return.”

Her breath hitches, then she lifts her chin.
“Agreed.”

In the next blink, everything fades.



I wake up groggy, disoriented, and inexplicably stressed. I search for a reason, but nothing—

“Alright, you annoying git. I hear you,” I groan at my screeching mobile alarm. I overslept. Again.

After jamming my head and arms through the first cleanish hoodie I find in my flat’s unholy mess, I race out the door with my backpack half-zipped and my hair still damp from the quickest shower of my life. The campus cafe near the university looms with the promise of salvation or coffee, which for me is one and the same because I don’t do mornings. If I can get caffeine into my system, maybe this day won’t kill me outright.

The queue is mercifully short, but as I’m stuffing coins into the payment tray, disaster strikes.

“Oh, whoops!” exclaims a male voice, entirely too loud and cheerful for the hour. A splash hits my sleeve and drips down to the hem of my hoodie.

I jerk back with a yelp. “Seriously?”

The idiot standing in front of me dares to grin. He’s holding an enormous iced coffee with caramel drizzle that’s now oozing down the front of his cargo pants. Honestly, he deserves it.

“Oh no,” he says, his voice seeping with faux concern, as sickly sweet as his coffee abomination.

Did this tosser fling it at me as a pathetic excuse for a pick-up line?

“Did I get you? I’m so sorry. Here, let me help.” He reaches out with a wad of napkins, aiming for my chest like I’m a child who spilt soup on herself.

I step back so fast I almost crash into the woman behind me. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Hey, relax.” His smirk spreads, the kind that makes my fingers itch for something heavy to throw. “It’s just coffee. No need to get all worked up. I’m Jay, by the way.” He leans in, like I’m supposed to swoon because some plonker decided to ruin my morning with a sad introduction. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

There’s a moment where my brain freezes. A wave of nausea and confusion hits me before I shake it off.

I lift my chin. I'm torn between fury and disbelief. Who *is* this guy? Before I can decide whether to scream or storm away, a sharp, no-nonsense voice prevents me from biting his head off.

“Oi! Leave her alone!”

The guy straightens, his smirk faltering.

I turn to see a woman stepping out of the queue behind me. She's tall, broad-shouldered, and effortlessly chic in a tailored blazer over a cropped jumper and wide-legged trousers. Her shock of blonde hair falls in artfully tousled waves, catching the light in a way that seems almost intentional. She's striking. Maybe it's the glow of her skin, as if she walked out of a luxury skincare ad, or her vivid green eyes that look like they could belong to a forest sprite.

She moves with an effortless confidence, the kind that seems to shift the air around her, making people instinctively step aside. Her expression is a sharp blend of wicked amusement and barely concealed disdain, like she's a gale ready to send this tosser's dignity tumbling end over end.

She crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow. “Did you not learn basic decency at some point? Or do you just harass random women before nine a.m. because your mum didn't hug you enough?”

“I wasn’t—” He flounders, but she doesn’t let him finish.

“Mate,” she says, her tone going from sharp to almost pitying, “she doesn’t want your help, and she definitely doesn’t want your phone number. Jog on.”

He flushes, mutters something under his breath, and retreats, leaving a trail of caramel drizzle in his wake.

She turns to me, her lips quirking into a smirk. “You alright, or do I need to chase him down and pour that coffee over his head?”

I blink, stunned. “Uh, no. I mean, yeah, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Good,” she says, grabbing a napkin from the counter and handing it to me. “You’ve got a bit of coffee—just there.” She gestures vaguely toward my arm, and I realise I’ve been standing frozen with it sliding down my sleeve.

She extends a hand, her smile easy and open. “I’m Cyn. You looked like you could use a friend.”

There’s something about her, a warmth that seems almost out of place on a grimy university morning. When she steps closer, the faintest hint of sweetness, mountain air, and pine wafts through the air, like she’s been walking through a spring forest instead of a crowded campus.

I take her hand a bit hesitantly. “Felicity.”

“Nice to meet you, Felicity. Now, come on.” She jerks her head toward the counter. “Let’s get you a replacement before someone else decides to throw a drink at you.”

I manage a weak laugh, and for the first time all morning, I feel like the world isn’t actively trying to crush me. Until I catch my reflection in the cafe window, and something there doesn’t look quite right.

CHAPTER ONE

FELICITY FORREST



“Heirs of the court must claim their lineage by blood oath by their twenty-fifth season or forever be forsaken.”

— DECREE OF THE CRIMSON COURT,
EDICT VII

FOUR YEARS LATER

My gaze drifts from the meandering ferry passengers to the open book as I lean against the railing: *The Other Crowd Guidebook for Mortals*. If anything, it reads like a diary with entries seemingly written by different authors. I run my finger over the copyright page:

Published by Those Who Remember What
Humans Forgot

Tricksters, Tinkerers, Child-Stealers, Harbingers
of Fortune, the God-folk, the Fair Folk, the Cunning
Folk, etcetera, etcetera...

Originally Published in 1436, the sixth edition
was updated whenever we felt like it. Figure it out.

Foreword by BS

*‘To the foolish and fearless mortals who seek knowl-
edge of us, beware. Curiosity and courage won’t save
you. This guide may serve as a signpost, but don’t
expect it to show you the way back.’*

“You know what I’m saying, Flick?” My best
friend Cyn’s question pauses my reading.

“Absolutely.” I have no idea what I just supported,
but I’m not really needed in this part of the conversa-
tion. Cyn’s been talking about all the adventures she’s
planning during this birthday celebration trip. I, uh,
may have misled her about the reason we’re heading
to Ireland. Yes, we’re celebrating her birthday, but I
have another purpose I haven’t told her yet. I’m still
trying to figure out the right time.

Flipping to a random page, I skim a passage. ‘The
Shadowborn are bound by forbidden magic. It grants
power but exacts a price that neither dark fae,
deamhan, nor mortal can endure without conse-

quence.’ The words blur, swimming in front of my eyes. A faint glow shimmers along the paper’s edges. It forms strange, shifting shapes. One coalesces into something almost recognisable, maybe a glyph, but it slips out of sight before I can focus on it.

Barely legible words appear as though scrawled in the margin by a ghostly hand:

A warning to humans and fae alike. ‘Beware of the hidden and the glamoured. They are not wholly of one world nor the other, but disrupt the balance of both.’ - Beatrice Blackthorn Shadowhart

I blink, shaking my head. *Beatrice Blackthorn, where have I heard that name before?* It doesn’t sound fae.

A wry smile tugs at my lips. If we were fae, Cyn’s birthday wouldn’t be a crisis. It’d be a full-blown ritual. And knowing her, she’d turn it into an extravaganza. Good thing we’re only human, right? Except I’ve always had this stupid, aching need for something bigger than myself—like the world has an edge I need to find, but I don’t know if I’ll fall or fly when I get there.

Cyn’s nervous voice pulls me from my thoughts. “They say it’s all downhill from here.” She never does well with change. “But you’ve still got time!”

At twenty-two, I’m a few years shy of catching up

to her, but my milestone won't be anything close to Cyn's quarter-of-a-century "crisis." As an international model, Cyn faces relentless pressure to stay at the pinnacle of the fashion world, but she carries it with an effortless, almost unearthly grace.

I laugh until my gaze catches a reflection in the reinforced glass panel lining the ferry's passenger deck. A dark shape or shadow flies by, but when I blink, it's gone. Probably a seagull. Working at the magazine, *Everyday Supernatural*, sharpens my senses to the unusual. I keep *that* under wraps, even from Cyn—especially from Cyn.

But there's a prickling sensation. I try to shrug it off, but the itch at the base of my neck won't stop. Not a normal itch. This is deeper. Under the skin. I shift, rubbing the spot absently, but the sensation only gets worse. Like something waiting. Watching. My fingers brush over smooth skin. No raised lines. No mark. Just an irrational sense of wrongness slithering down my spine.

I close the book, pushing down the worry it stirs up. "So, bottomline," I interject myself back into the conversation, "we're celebrating with copious amounts of alcohol and regrettable decisions, right?"

"Oh, you know me well, Flick."

I force a laugh, even as part of me recoils. I'm not

one for drunkenness, but I'd never ruin it for Cyn. Birthdays are the worst, and she knows it. Our history is full of university nights out and heart-to-hearts, but birthdays? They've never been kind to me. "I can't wait."

That prickle on the back of my neck won't let up. Maybe chasing ghosts for a living is finally screwing with my head.

"I can tell you're positively vibrating with barely-restrained glee," Cyn teases.

Water slaps against the side of the boat.

"I *am* excited," I say, louder than I should, but with all the conviction of a fat, domesticated cat on a windowsill trying to convince the neighbour's dog it owns the block, even though it's too lazy to chase mice. Meanwhile, my mind is on the fleeting shadow, on hills and hollows where nobody has the sense—or possibly the stupidity—to wander.

I hug the book tighter to my chest. A strange pull tugs at me, the thick cover almost warm beneath my touch. Protective, somehow. This so-called 'guide-book,' which I'm slogging through, reads like it was assembled by someone who, at no point, considered anyone might actually study it. It's messy and rough, like private panic scrawled out in an absinthe-induced free-write, with occasional notes scribbled in

the margins. Somehow, it skips the basic survival details in favour of cryptic observations and peculiar etiquette. The real fear isn't in some polished monster but in the creeping certainty that I've stumbled onto something that should stay buried. Poorly edited? Absolutely, but in the same way a weathered, creaking house is poorly lit. Stupid, stupid paranoia. Stop it.

"So," I ask, forcing the anxiety down, "how did Nathan take you turning him down to come with me instead?"

Cyn sighs, dragging a hand through her windswept hair. "Oh, about as well as you'd expect. I let him down easy, like always, but honestly, I wish he'd take a bloody hint. I wouldn't ruin your job by sleeping with your boss any more than I'd wreck our friendship. Thai Tuesdays with you both are sacred." She pauses, her gaze narrowing on me. "But seriously, Flick, when were you planning to tell me this trip isn't a holiday? That it's another one of your work adventures chasing a story?"

Dammit, Nathan. Of course he ratted me out and didn't have the balls to warn me. His massive crush on Cyn has him talking without thinking about the repercussions. "I'm sorry, Cyn. I'm committed to celebrating you, but...we've got a lead on a púca on Inis

Mór. A local priest is stoking the fire right alongside some hotshot developer trying to build a golf resort. Trouble is that every time they break ground, something goes wrong. The locals? They're quick to blame a *púca*."

"A *púca*? Sounds exotic." One corner of her mouth twitches as though she's trying not to laugh. "Please tell me that's a kind of cocktail."

A wry grin tugs at my lips. "Not a cocktail. Or maybe it is but that's not what I'm talking about. It's a shapeshifting fae from Irish folklore."

She snorts, her gaze drifting out to the ocean where gulls wheel and scream. One swoops down to the ferry's deck, snatching up a fallen sandwich with the precision of a thief, while the girl who dropped it stares after it, stunned and empty-handed. "Only *you* would drag me to Ireland for a mythical creature. But I'm all ears if it gets me a drink named after it."

"That's the spirit!" I shift the book and snag a large-ish envelope out of my pocket. "There's a photo involved." Sliding the image free, I slap it on top of the guidebook. "It's a big deal, like cover-of-Vogue big, if Vogue did supernatural exposés."

"Really? Now, that's my language." She studies the picture. "A photoshoot with a fairy? Ireland is sounding better by the minute."

The glossy surface catches the light, revealing an image that practically hums with otherworldly energy. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was touched up.” Cyn wrinkles her nose, leaning in for a closer look. “I’ve seen enough photo brushing in my line of work that . Not everything is as shiny as it seems.”

But I know púcas from the stories my adopted Mum used to tell. Not the cuddly kind, but the dark ones that make you think twice about what’s hiding in the shadows. She’d talk about the fae as if they lurked just out of sight. Back then, they felt more like lessons than tales, like things I should remember for my own good. And púcas? They’re the worst kind of fae. Shapeshifters with a twisted sense of humour. They’ll mess with you for fun, but sometimes, they don’t stop at messing.

I arch a brow. The image shows a creature that might resemble a horse—if a horse were a wraith with glowing red eyes that seem to pierce straight through the shadows. “Sure, because a glamoured fairy would absolutely need Photoshop.”

“Does this fae thing also shift into something else?” Her eyes narrow, scrutinising me like she’s debating whether or not to take me seriously. “Fox? Goat? Something nastier?”

The ferry rises and dips over a small swell. “Reports vary, but the consensus leans towards a horse, black as night, with eyes that glow like coals. You know how these stories go. Half the time, they’re an excuse for something else happening, but the accidents are real enough to spook the locals.”

Her jaw goes slack, lips parting slightly. “Accidents? The usual construction screw-ups, or are we talking something...weirder?”

I glance down at the fairy horse and exhale. Cyn always teases me for my ‘spidey senses,’ but she doesn’t know the half of it. An inexplicable pull tugs at me, like an invisible thread binding me to something, whispering in a language I can’t comprehend. A photo of a creature snapped in another photo. I squint at it. Real or not? Hell if I know, but it’s enough to pull me in. “Misplaced tools, equipment failure, or the occasional injury. Nothing fatal, but enough to grind progress to a halt and keep the rumours alive. It’s as if someone—or *something*—doesn’t want that resort on their land.”

She presses her fingers to her temples, a groan escaping her lips, as if the sheer ridiculousness is giving her a headache. “That’s nothing new. Isn’t there always some dubious photo that surfaces?”

“Right, but Nathan can’t prove it’s fake after

examining it. It's not the usual spectral blur or dubious shadows. There's something about it. And the priest is quite insistent about the local legend. I can't shake the feeling that we're onto something real."

I catch my reflection in the wide, salt-streaked windows encasing the cabin. Thick, dark waves are pulled into a loose ponytail and have strands of purple and silver woven through it. They're natural, like threads of twilight in the sunlight. I've stopped asking myself *how* or *why* they're there. The questions don't have answers. And honestly? I'm not sure I'd like them if they did. The usual smudge of fatigue circles my eyes, but then...something shifts. My eyes, normally dark grey, look...lavender? My skin, familiar but somehow different, is paler, with a smooth, glassy quality. I blink, frowning at this weird, stranger me staring back.

Before I can wrap my head around it, another face looms beside mine in the glass. Pale and hollow-cheeked, with eyes that look like they're painted with a shade called *Soul-Eating Void* flecked with amber. The gaze isn't unfriendly, just...off, like it isn't quite calibrated to normal human expectations. It tilts its head in an almost-polite angle, but it's a little too sharp like it read some manual on how to blend in

with humans once and is determined to get the basics right.

The hum of roots beneath the seafloor and the whisper of god-folk buzz through my mind. A pull to the arcane woven with shadows and starlight, binding me to something—or *someone*—I don't yet understand but can't deny the longing coursing through me.

The figure steps into the relaxed shuffle of passengers leaning against railings and staring at the waves. There's a hesitation, a strange lag as though they're translating it through some outdated info on human body language. I blink, and now it's an ordinary bloke in a black jacket, scrolling his mobile with the lifeless disinterest of someone perfectly at home in the monotonous rhythm of ferry life.

I blink again, and he's gone. The ferry continues to rise and fall against the relentless push of the ocean, but my pulse is thrumming against the current, my gaze glued to the glass as if expecting the *Soul-Eating Void* eyes to resurface. Nothing—except the steady hammering of my heart and the idle conversation of passengers, entirely ignorant of the reasonable assumption that I might be losing my mind. I try to dismiss it as a weird shadow, but my skin tingles like it knows better.

Nathan's words in our last conversation skitter down my spine. *"You know how some stories just... vanish? One day, they're everywhere, and the next, it's like they never existed. What if someone is making them disappear? A whole history, a whole world, just wiped away..."* His voice had faltered then, followed by a forced chuckle. *"Never mind. It's probably stupid."*

Nathan always rambles about shadowy forces meddling with our stories, erasing truths we're not meant to know. I used to laugh it off, but there are moments when the cracks in the world feel too real to ignore. Things happen that logic can't explain. And as much as I want to believe the world is exactly what we see on the surface, there's a gnawing worry that Nathan might be right. The world is full of cracks, and things slip through them all the time. Things we aren't meant to see.

"Hey?" Cyn breaks through my haze. "You spacing out on me again?"

I wince. "What were you saying?"

"I was saying that, real or not, this adventure is the perfect excuse to unplug. We'll have drinks, sweaty dancing, and make questionable life choices." There's a slight hitch, a momentary pause before she continues. "Besides, how long has *it* been?"

"How long has *what* been?"

“When’s the last time someone actually made your toes curl?” She clicks her tongue.

“Toes curl? I don’t think anyone has ever made my toes curl,” I say, rolling my eyes. “But as a matter of fact, it was just the other night.” Cyn doesn’t need to know it was by my own hands.

“Sure.” Cyn snorts.

“Fine. It’s been a while. Since Will and I split. Satisfied?”

“No, and neither are you. We should remedy that this weekend.”

The thought of hooking up exhausts me. My ex always tore me down to feel bigger and I needed out before I lost myself completely. Better to be alone than let someone make me feel small.

“Felicity?”

I snap back to the present. “Sorry.”

“Stop thinking about that good-for-nothing shite that broke your heart. I swear I could kick him right in the teeth.”

At the moment, I’m glad my friend lacks a filter. “Then you’d be sitting in jail for your birthday, and what would be the fun in that?”

Cyn sighs. “If I see that man again—”

“Let’s not.” I cut her off, avoiding more pain. I tap my gloved fingertips against the book, wincing as the

ache from a long night hunched over my laptop flares up. The leather fingerless gloves Cyn made offers some relief. Chic support, as she calls it, is perfect for my loosey-goosey joints. They help, but not nearly enough.

“Yeah, but I could seriously teach him some manners. I’ve got a way with wild things.” The air seems to hum with every satisfied syllable that drops from Cyn’s mouth. It leaves me wondering—not for the first time—if she’s joking, or if the next gust of wind might *actually* knock my ex flat on his ass if he weren’t hundreds of kilometers away in London.

My laughter fades as movement near the railing catches my attention. A black cat sits perched beside a row of bolted, plastic seating, its fur so dark it practically absorbs the light around it. Well, except for the patch of white on its chest. Its eyes flicker, glowing...*lavender?*

The cat doesn’t move, doesn’t even blink. It stares at me like it’s trying to look into my soul. My guidebook mentions that the *cait-shith* are fierce feline-like warriors that guard the gates to the Otherworld. Am I crazy to instantly wonder if this cat is fae?

Its tail flicks lazily before it melts into the shadows.

Nope. Just nope. I imagined the feline. Nothing

disappeared. I rack my brain, trying to remember what Cyn just said. Right. Teaching my ex some manners. “Impressive. Do you offer classes?”

“Look, Flick, trust isn’t built on promises. It’s built on scars. The ones they see, the ones they don’t...” She adjusts her sunglasses with a casual push. “...and the ones they swear they’ll never cause.”

Cyn gave me that nickname because I’m always moving, chasing the next lead like a flame that won’t stay still, flickering, restless, and a little hard to handle. But honestly? That’s how I think of her too. She shifts like the wind. Impossible to pin down.

She has a habit of confusing love with other things like a good laugh, a clever flirtation, or a quick fling. No matter how much Nathan worships her from the sidelines, Cyn’s never seen him as more than a friend. I’ve tried to warn him, but he’s blind to it. Blinded by her spark, her charm, the way she lights up a room and never stays long enough for anyone to catch her.

I don’t think anyone will ever get under her skin. Not after what she’s been through. It left its mark, and she’s made damn sure no one gets close enough to leave another.

I press my lips together, tuning out the raucous

laughter from a group of passing teens listening to the waves crash against the ferry. She's not wrong, but hearing it out loud stings more than I'd like to admit. "Yeah, well...what happens when the scars are all you've got left?"

Cyn doesn't answer right away. Instead, she takes my hand, like she's daring the world to break me while she's holding on. There's nothing soft about her touch—it's fierce, protective, and says everything. Delicate is not her style. She's all sharp edges and quiet loyalty, the kind of person who makes you feel safe in a way that no armour ever could.

The ferry captain's voice crackles over the loud-speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be docking shortly. Please gather your belongings and prepare to disembark."

Then I hear it—soft, almost like wind chimes, but wrong. Not music, not quite. Nothing you'd hear drifting out of a pub late at night. No, this is different. It's too perfect, almost like each note is plucked straight from some dream. It has a pull to it that digs in, raising every hair on my body.

That prickling sense of being watched is back. My hands ball into fists as my tongue presses against the metallic tang in my mouth. Eyes on me, not human. Something out of place has slipped into the ordinary.

CHAPTER ONE

My gaze snaps up, catching a raven perched on the ferry's bridge roof, its dark eyes locked on mine. There's a sense of something shared, though I can't explain why. It's only a bird, but its black eyes are far too knowing. Its stare feels like a challenge or maybe a warning. Geez, what is it with animals today? First a cat, now a raven. Either way, it sits wrong in my gut.

I swallow it down, trying to tell myself it's nerves, but the chill sticks, settling into my bones. Maybe the fae are already watching.

