

Blackthorne Faire

A faery Tale

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Prelude
The Stolen Child

All Hallows Eve, 1936

In later years, the vast suburban sprawl of Atlanta will bleed outwards like kudzu to cover the hills and hollows that surround the O'Brien farm with subdivisions and mini-malls. But not yet. Now the city is too much in the future to be a part of life here. It is distant, a dream, like New York or Paris, or the Pyramids in Egypt.

The southern hills burn with rich color, fire and rust--a thousand million shades of orange, yellow, and apple red set against a deep and enduring background of evergreen beneath the brilliant, sapphire blue sky of an autumn long past. Breathe. Taste air crisp and heavy with the scents of pumpkin, sweet apple wood smoke, dying leaves, and the last wild Georgia blackberries. Breathe, and autumn fills you like spiced wine. The old year has dressed in its finery for one last hurrah before the winter frosts come to soothe it away to memory.

Come, come closer. Fear not, for I am your handsome good neighbor, the merry wanderer of the night, and I shall be your guide. Hush now, hush and listen, down below, to the sounds of a young girl singing and a child's laughter. The youngest O'Brien girl, pretty Betty, dances up the pathway as she pulls her young charge behind her. Betty O'Brien, with her long, thin legs, freckled nose, and hair the color of yellow hay. The path she follows leads to the meadow at the top of the hill, where the woods give way to rocky bluffs. On a day as clear as this, you can see all the way to town from the top of these cliffs. There, where the top of the white church steeple rises above the gentle slopes of tree-covered hills. Let the wind carry you to the meadow above the bluffs. This is a spot where lovers meet.

On a Halloween, Betty O'Brien should be at the harvest festival in town with her family. Not tonight, though. Tonight the

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freedom of an evening without parents and siblings seems sweeter than all the caramel apples and spiced cider in all the autumn festivals in all the world.

But that's not all. Tonight, tonight she knows the anticipation of a forbidden rendezvous, and delicious danger makes her heart beat faster. Betty has arranged everything carefully, hasn't she just? Like a spy planning a daring caper. She started by telling her parents the truth--she doesn't like to lie. And if she doesn't tell the *whole* truth, well, that's not the same as lying.

Betty is a-watching four-year-old Keith Winkler, the child in the worn overalls and dirty shirt. She pulls him along behind her. She should stop to wipe his nose. Betty's parents don't think highly of the Winklers--her father, farmer Job O'Brien, has denounced the whole lot of them as shiftless no-accounts on more than one occasion. Everyone's heard him, sure. But Betty likes having money of her own to spend, at least when the Winklers remember to pay her. Betty's doing exactly what she told her father. She's not lying, not even the least little bit.

Of course, blustering old Job O'Brien doesn't know that Betty has secrets, two of them, in fact. First, he doesn't know that she's taking the straight path that leads to the meadow above the rocky cliffs. If he did, oh, how he would howl with rage, wouldn't he just! Betty isn't allowed to wander in the virgin forest or on the path, even though she's now sixteen and practically a woman. It's whispered that a girl vanished in these woods once. That happened ages and ages ago, but folks around here have long memories. Mine is longer still, and I remember that the red Indians shunned the forest and the meadow long before the paler folk came from across the sea.

For Betty, the whispers and rumors add a thrill of spice, like cloves in mulled wine, and make the autumn adventure sweeter. She hums and sings a snatch of tune as she pulls wee Keith along behind her. His hand-me-down clothes are torn and his nose is still runny, but he giggles with joy.

Ah, if Betty's jaunt to the meadow in the forest would make her father's jowly cheeks shake and blaze red with blustering rage, it is a whisper next to the howl he'd howl if he knew her *other* secret. But *I* am the master of tricks and secrets. Would you like to know it? Come closer, and I will whisper in your ear. *Betty is meeting her love, the oldest Winkler boy, nineteen-year-old Seamus.*

There he is now. He waits for her, chewing the end of a straw

of autumn hay, pushing a curl of dark hair away from his dull brown eyes as he leans against the trunk of that twisted, knotted oak tree. See how smugly he smiles? The girls like that smile.

It is nearly twilight when they finally come together in the meadow. Their hands touch. Come. Let the wind blow you closer as you listen. Fear not; they can't see us. We flit like ghosts, unheard and unfelt, we spying spirits of the future.

"Hey there, Seamus," says Betty. She blushes and looks away as she speaks.

Seamus laughs and puts his hand gently beneath her chin. He is sly and at ease. He doesn't know that danger comes. He lifts her face until her gaze meets his. Her mouth is open, like she almost spoke but stopped herself. He looks at her eyes; she is nervous. She wonders if he is going to kiss her.

Little Keith, forgotten for the moment, tugs on her skirt. "Miss Betty?" he whines. He misses her attention. He tugs again, harder. "Miss Betty!"

Seamus laughs again. He pulls a candy bar from his jacket pocket and tosses it to his younger brother. "Here you go, squirt." From another pocket, he produces a tin fire cart, complete with horses, and a second chocolate bar. Keith squeals with delight. "Now you just stay right here and play by these trees for a few minutes, okay? Me and Miss Betty here are goin' to go over to the other side of those rocks there and have us a little talk. If you're good, I might just have another surprise for you, okay?"

"Yay!" Keith settles down on the soft, browning autumn grass and pushes his toy around. When he isn't smearing the chocolate on his tongue, lips, chin, and cheeks, he makes noises for the horses and firemen. He doesn't look up when Betty and Seamus steal away. He doesn't notice when they slip out of sight.

For a long moment, neither Betty nor Seamus says a word. Seamus slides his arm around her with practiced ease, and shifts just slightly so that it seems only natural for Betty to rest her head on his shoulder. He shifts again, as though the rock presses uncomfortably into his back, and suddenly Betty finds herself in the perfect position for a kiss. But Betty, suddenly shy, turns away. "Look at the sunset," she says, her voice low. The brilliant blue has faded, but in the west, the clouds near the horizon blaze golden-red.

"Ain't it pretty," Seamus agrees with a lazy nod. He tries to maneuver so that Betty's face is close to his again, but she looks

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away, back towards the path.

"I can't stay too much longer. My daddy--"

"Won't be back for ages."

"No, no Seamus, they won't stay in town too late."

"Yes they will," Seamus says. Look at the rascal, how he grins again. "One of your ol' dad's horses done come up lame. You know that old man won't risk one of his prizes till he knows what's what."

"Oh! What happened?"

"It ain't nothing," Seamus assures her as his sly smile widens. "Just a pebble under a shoe."

"However could you know that?"

"How could I not?" Seamus laughs again. "I ought to, sure enough. I put it there myself."

"Oh, Seamus!" Betty raises her hand to cover the round O of her open mouth.

"Don't worry, darlin'. It won't hurt nothin'. But it'll slow your old man down sure enough."

"You shouldn't have."

"But Betty, I just wanted to spend a little time with you, that's all! It's not like I get a chance too often, right? Not with your old man around. Is that so bad? I told you it ain't gonna hurt nothin'." He smiles again, and winks. "You're just ... you're just so pretty and all."

Mab's teeth and garters, listen to the scoundrel!

"Seamus, you're a devil." Betty tucks her hair back away from her face and glances up at him through her lashes. She feels deliciously wicked.

"You know it, darlin'," Seamus says with a grin. He pulls her close and kisses her, long and deep. The second kiss is even longer, and the third is longer still. Twilight deepens, but neither of them notices. The wind changes, now it comes from the west. Just then, there is a sound.

Betty and Seamus spin around, startled. Seamus pulls Betty closer. Perhaps it is her father. If so, he doesn't want to miss his final chance (for such it shall surely be) for gratuitous contact.

The sounds grow louder, and closer. Betty must know, now, that this is not her father. He would never tie bells to the harnesses of *his* horses-- "*How gauche*," he'd declare with a disapproving frown, "*how ostentatious*." And he would never make such a commotion when traveling, no, not he. He couldn't if he tried.

Look at Betty's eyes as they dart hither and yon, skipping like water bugs with something that may be fear, or may be wonder. Or perhaps a potion, a brewing thrill of emotion, something of both. Watch her; see how she trembles.

The sounds come closer and something else rises above the din, something like music but beyond it, courtly and ethereal, beautiful and terrible. Perhaps Betty thinks of church, but this sound is both merrier and wilder than what choir and organ produce to fill the whitewashed sanctuary. Mayhap she thinks of the noise of a parade, or the circus. But no. This music is more solemn-joyous and sudden, but stately. Besides, these things aren't a part of a Georgia farm girl's experience. Parades and circuses are things from storybooks, not the wood at dusk.

The sounds draw nearer. Strange, unearthly music swells, wild and wilder, a multitude of tunes played all at once, and now our Betty and Seamus can distinguish other noises as well. Beasts, certainly, hoofs and brays, and other sounds they can't begin to identify, I dare say. And voices, men and women, laughing and singing, ageless, merry and grave, young and old all at the same time. Our Seamus hears them too. His smile is gone and his face is pale, like a stump touched with winter frost.

The wind lifts us higher now, even as the day fades, and we watch from above. There, there is the child, little Keith, all but forgotten by sitter and brother. The sounds have distracted him from his toy and he gazes into the wood, searching for the source of the strange, discordant tumult in the shadows beneath the trees. His eyes are wide with wonder and his mouth is open, frozen in the shape of a smile half-formed.

The commotion comes closer, closer. It is near--no, it is *here!* As sudden as a wink, the twilight is filled with a galaxy of lights, streaking hither and yon, like the brightest fireflies ever born, or like shooting stars escaped from the bondage of their patterns in the skies.

Little Keith giggles and reaches out, trying to catch the darting lights with his clumsy weeling's hands. They are too fast for him, but he squeals with glee. On the other side of the rocks by the bluffs, Seamus holds Betty closer. They are dazzled, but not afraid. Not yet.

As the lights swirl closer, they see tiny shapes inside--not insects, but figures that seem almost human, naked, tiny, unashamed, and perfect. Other shapes follow the lights into the

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meadow. The little manikin, the one with the tall black top hat and tails, and the brass watch chain shining against his silken blue paisley vest, seems to grow smaller as he comes closer, defying the logic of perspective.

There--see the wee knight in the polished armor of shining brass and silver? Look at his banner of cobwebs and summer leaves; see how proudly he carries it tied to the end of his great spear. See how straight and tall he sits in his saddle. His noble mount is a hedgehog with bright tattered ribbons and perfect gait. There! His squire rides a mouse.

The squirrel woman with her bushy tail, walking with her staff--that is old Mother Acorn herself, the wise one, the seer. The golden embroidery on her robes of blue and twilight purple are the patterns of stars and constellations unseen in mortal skies.

Ha! Notice the dandy there--the one with the green doublet and the peacock's feather in his red cap. His face is like a fox's, isn't it just? Look at how his pointed teeth sparkle when he smiles, how his marble-black eyes shift and flit, how he spins and prances as he marches. He wears that shape often. Watch the wee men in their red caps erecting lanterns on tall poles in a circle; the flickering light turns the meadow to gold.

Look at that scoundrel Seamus. His dim little brain can't grasp what it sees, so it retreats, at last, into mindless terror. Betty clings to him, trembling.

The fair folk, the good neighbors, arrive one by one and three by three, some thumb small, some taller than the tallest mortal human. Their straight path of shining twilight silver has led them all to this place, this meadow above the rocky cliffs. This is where the Rade ends and the revels begin.

See those three there? The ones with dresses of leaves and moss and hazelnuts, and wings like those of tiny hummingbirds? You can catch the resemblance in the way their long hair swirls and twists as they dance, in the wide smiles on their pointed faces, and in the way their eyes sparkle with merriness and mischief. For a moment, they seem young, barely pubescent, don't they? Even innocent, ho! But then they turn, revealing a more mature curve of hip, a generous swell of breast. Which is it, then? Don't be fooled. See the gleam in their eyes? They were ancient when your race crawled out of the mud and caves. The feathers of their wings and the hues of their skins are as different from one another as night from day, or winter from summer. But they are sisters, the three of

them, born on a single midwinter night.

Ho there! Two of them have taken little Keith Winkler by the hand--they are no taller than he. The third wild sister joins them; they all clasp hands and dance in a circle, now stepping, now floating when their wings lift them briefly aloft. Red-capped toadstools spring up where their feet touch the soil. Keith laughs and squeals with happy vertigo.

By the bluffs, poor Betty buries her face in Seamus's jacket and sob. As for Seamus, his eyes narrow as the terror fades to anger. When confronted with the unknown, our simple Seamus knows only two options. There is no clear avenue for cowardly flight. He sees nothing here that he can't fight, or so he thinks, so the instinct to flee is slowly replaced with a darker urge. Alas for him. His fists clench.

More shapes than can be named or described fill the meadow now--the tall and the dust-small, Goblin and Pouka, Pixie and Sidhe, Seelie and Unseelie alike, for on the night of the Rade, even the two mighty and opposing courts put aside their ancient rivalries and blood feuds. See them all, child. Some are naked with skin baby pink, forest green, or nut brown. Others are draped in wool or silk or dewy cobwebs, or foppishly adorned in fur-lined cloaks and gleaming silver armor, or gowns woven from moonbeams and starlight. Some are lovely and bright, others strange and terrible. They laugh, they sing, they fly, they dance. The field in the wood has become a city of miracles, a festival place alive with color and dashing light. Behold the revels of the Courts of Faery!

Now the air is pierced by a new sound, haunting and deep, a noise that echoes through the twilight and the ancient wood and resonates in the very bones of the earth itself. That call is answered by another, and another after that. Hear them, mortal, and feel them stir the heart, for no one can hear the Horns of Elfland and remain unchanged.

Now come the riders, the tall and shining Sidhe folk, the oldest and the brightest, like earth-locked angels. Look upon them all in their finery, silk and gossamer, and see how they leave trails of rainbows as they ride. This is the High Court, the favored attendants of the Lord and Lady themselves. Ah, you've noticed me among them, have you? Yes, that is me indeed, yours truly, my handsome and dashing younger self, wearing jeweled rings and feather in cap, there upon my own gray donkey, as proud and true as any faery mount.

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Now the last ones arrive, the highest of the high, and the field becomes brighter, as though the sun and moon themselves deigned to descend for the revelry. See them, clad in star-white samite, their golden hair bound with circlets of bright gold. These are the Lord and Lady of the High Courts of Faery, stately and grim, wild and merry. With their arrival, the revels begin in earnest. Beware them, O mortal, for they are beautiful and perilous. The horns call again, and the mighty sound reverberates through the autumn-draped mountains and hollows.

The child Keith tries to catch the golden lights, each one no bigger than his tiny finger. He laughs and grabs, but they are too fast and clever for him.

The Lord and Lady dismount as the carousing reaches the rocky bluffs where Betty and Seamus cling to one another, trembling. A figure approaches our friends, a lady with long pointed ears and flowing hair the silver hue of a river lit by moonlight. She laughs and blows sparkling dust at them. Their countenances change at once. A look of dreamlike wonder crosses Betty's face. Poor Seamus, he just looks rather dazed and confused. Ah well, we mustn't expect too much of him, I suppose.

A dandy, one of the Lady's attendants, leaps nimbly atop a tall stone, one that stands alone and juts out above the bluffs like a sentry. He claps his hands sharply thrice for attention. "The Lady Mab commands dances!" he cries, and at once the meadow is filled with the strings and horns and rhythm of riotous, unearthly noise, music that mortal ears were never meant to hear. Close your ears! Close them tight! Ah, it is too late already, alas for you. You've heard the wild music echoing from the long past. It will haunt you.

In the meadow, the fey court bows and moves, touches and leaps. To Seamus, their steps seem sudden and chaotic, but from above, its wild precision is revealed in all its complex perfection. Betty is swept away from her Seamus, but she doesn't seem to notice. A tall man with a fox's tail and a green cap bows to her and takes her by the hand. She spins, and now there is another man waiting to guide her into the dance. Seamus tries to follow, but the dance pulls him away. "Betty! Betty!" His cries are lost in the din of shouts and strange music.

Two ladies of the Faery court grab him by the hands and turn him roughly around. Before he can recover, he finds two more waiting for him. One of them curtsies, but Seamus doesn't see the

sly gleam in her eye. The fool is distracted; see how his gaze wanders downward, to where the motion of her stoop reveals the slope of her breast in her gown? Now he is caught.

The leaping and spiraling faeries surround little Keith, coming now close, now pulling away. The dance turns, and brings to the child a spindly figure in a tall stovepipe hat and a black suit like a chimneysweep's. The man grins and flips, then bends down to stick out his tongue. Keith giggles and claps his hands. Then, sudden as a bang of thunder, the man's features change, becoming a snarling wolf's face. The eyes flash with cruel hunger, and the jaws with their dagger-sharp teeth gnash and snap.

Keith recoils and screams. He falls, but rough hands catch and toss him, up and down, up and down.

For a brief moment, Seamus sees Betty and remembers, suddenly, that he was struggling to reach her. She seems far away, and then she is lost in the turning throng of dance. The fey women laugh and push him along.

A tall Sidhe man takes Betty by the hand. The dance has caught her. She steps and spins. The man bows, and spins her into the waiting arms of her next partner--the golden Lord himself. He takes her left hand in his right and slips his left arm around her waist. He smiles and Betty blushes again, but she doesn't look away. They twirl and step as the dance becomes faster and wilder still.

"Come away, human child," the tall lord says.

Keith's cheeks are wet with tears, but his shrieks are lost. The faeries laugh at this new game, and each finds a new form, a terrible shape with which to frighten the child anew. They growl and snap and shout, then lift him as their dance forms a circle. Keith screams.

Seamus cries out for Betty, but still the dance pulls her farther away from him, and farther still, for there are greater distances than mere space. He tries to force his way to her, but too many twirling bodies block his way; the steps of the dance are too frenetic. Four fey ladies pull him this way and that, spinning and twirling him like the winds teasing an autumn leaf.

"Betty! Betty!"

She does not hear him. Already she is too far away. Desperate to reach her, Seamus fights. It does no good; he is helpless. His eyes are wide and his skin ashen, but I confess I am disappointed in his performance. He is too great a fool for true terror, more's the pity.

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His fright would be so much richer, so much more delicious, had he the wit to comprehend even a little of what transpires around him. There is drool on his chin. Ah, he is crying.

The high Lord's steps are strong and sure. He spins Betty faster and faster as the dance reaches its climax. Look at her face; see the ecstasy there. Betty feels that she is dancing on the back of the wind--and now she is! The pattern of the dance carries Betty and the Seelie Lord off the edge of the bluffs and beyond; in his strong grasp, she twirls but does not fall. The dance continues.

"Come away, human child," the lord whispers again, his breath tickling her ear. His voice is deep and smooth, like a still green sea, seductive, like the voice that calls young sailors from home and shore, filling them with longing for sky and far horizons. "Come away, far from the fields you know, for this mortal world is full of dust and weeping--"

Keith's screams grow louder and more pitiful. The monsters draw closer; the nightmare doesn't end. He screams, but no help comes.

The faeries lift the child as they glide above the meadow in their spiraling dance, but they forget him as the music changes. They clap and spin as the new pattern takes them, and the child falls hard to the stony ground. Do you see how his tiny legs are bent at such a terrible angle? They will never heal properly, I fear. Poor creature. How he wails! His tears smear the chocolate on his dirty cheeks.

The dance brings our Seamus to the Lady herself, Queen Mab of Faery, fairest in creation, her terrible beauty shining and vast beyond mortal ken. He stands transfixed, unable to move. A smile crosses her haughty face as she reaches out to take his hand. He shivers at her touch; her light is cold. Gently, irresistibly, inevitably, she pulls him deeper into the dance.

All of this happens at twilight, in the moment that is neither day nor night. But lo, the first bright star of evening appears in the dusk-gray sky. Slowly and solemnly, the circles of dance straighten to lines and the faeries resume their march, passing at last beyond the fields you know to return to those beyond. One by one, the fey dancers begin to fade.

The steps of the dance hold Seamus like chains of cold iron. He turns again, and for the most fleeting of moments, he sees Betty in the distance. Foolishly, he struggles again to reach her. The Lady's smile becomes a frown and her gaze grows colder. She

is displeased.

The first of the riders remount their beasts. Twilight dims to darkness; their time is past. They wink away and vanish. Betty still dances, held fast in the arms of her Lord. The last light fades, and the dance carries her away.

Seamus fights and struggles, desperate to reach Betty. He can no longer see her. For a second, the way seems clear, but then the dance turns again, and the Lady's gaze holds him once more. He tries to turn and look away, but others are there to block his way.

The revels are ending. My handsome younger self bows and mounts his gray donkey.

Keith screams and cries.

Queen Mab allows Seamus to turn away, but two more dancers with pointed ears protruding from fine, pale-green hair are there to block his way. Skipping like schoolgirls, they take him by the elbows and pull him back.

"Betty! Oh sweet Jesus! Betty!"

At last the Lady allows her plaything to turn, and he sees Betty clearly. He is close to her, so very close. The dancers between them are fading away from the mortal world. Seamus lunges, but the Lady is there. He panics. She smiles, a cold and cruel smile, and steps aside.

Seamus leaps forward, rushing towards his Betty.

But he doesn't know that the Sidhe lord carries her away from the world of dust and mortals. He doesn't realize where the Lady's dance has led him; he doesn't see that Betty has left weight and gravity behind to dance on air.

He races forward, and when he reaches the edge of the bluff, he falls.

Once again, our Seamus disappoints, alas. There is no flash of comprehension in his last expression, no moment of understanding in his final second of life. He never realizes what has happened. He doesn't know he falls. There is only mindless terror and hapless confusion, and then he is gone. Years later, when young Keith hears the awful noise again in nightmares, he will recognize the sounds of tearing flesh and shattering bones as Seamus's final scream is abruptly silenced.

The Lady smiles again. "Accept our Tithe," she says. Then she mounts her white steed and vanishes.

Night falls.

The Faery Courts pass from this world to a deeper one. Now

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the meadow is still. Betty O'Brien is gone. She is a stolen child, lost. The Lord of the Sidhe himself has taken her.

Alone and forgotten in the meadow above the cliffs, poor Keith wails in the darkness. His cries echo unheard.

First Verse
Spring

May 1, 2005

Chapter 1
Morning at the Faire

loaked in pre-dawn fog, the Blackthorne Faire Renaissance Festival waited quietly, an empty stage, curtain drawn and lights dim, a story ready to be told. Empty pathways wound hither and yon around the plaster-stone façade of a castle and through faux Tudor-style buildings and shop fronts, hiding secrets and surprises the way a carnival does before the barker lets loose his first shout. Erin Winter loved it.

The hush would vanish soon; in a few hours it would melt away with morning's gray mist. The cast, sleeping off the remnants of the past night's revels in the employee campground behind the back gate, would whisper, giggling and moaning and sharing hangover cures as they washed the cottony thickness of bourbon's sweet rot from yawning mouths and slipped into costume and character. And then, when the first guests passed the gates like tourists through a magic wardrobe, the air would ring with music, laughter, and carefully practiced (and more or less convincing) English accents. The guests would breathe deeply, tasting the wind of another time, heavy with the scents of beer and sun and roasting meat. The performance spaces would welcome jugglers, jesters, and musicians, and every stage would boast a marvel. Since this was the last weekend of the fair's spring run, the crowds would be large and boisterous.

Soon. But not yet.

Walking alone, Erin could almost taste a hint of magic in the chilly mist, some witchery that carried her far away from the field north of Atlanta and deposited her in the distant past, or in the bright watercolor pages of a favorite old book. To Erin's eye, shadows beneath twisted, knotted oak trees hid mysteries, and rings of toadstools marked the places where fey creatures danced in wild, seductive circles beneath the light of the full moon. She found a penny, but it was face down so she didn't pick it up. Instead, with a laugh, she turned it over to let someone else find it and have the

luck. She found herself wishing, suddenly, that she had more time to twirl and wander through the still morning looking for hidden luck. But she didn't. Her friend Caitlin McGregor waited for her in the makeshift fair-site apartment above the shop she shared with her husband, Carter.

Caitlin had promised to make a new dress for Erin to wear when the fair's summer season opened in a few short months. But when Erin had spilled red wine down the front of her usual garb while making a little too merry at the cast revels, Caitlin had promised to finish the new one early. A sorceress with cloth and bric-a-brac, Caitlin stitched costumes, colorful frocks and doublets that delighted fair patrons and cast members alike. Erin hummed a bit of an old Celtic morning tune mingled with a snatch of classic REM and hurried along.

The shop and its apartment were tucked neatly into the village square just west of the castle, before the main path rose toward the rocky bluffs behind the festival's back gate, and just inside the rushing stream that bordered the site. Erin could tell that Caitlin and Carter were already up and about. She heard their laughter and light morning conversation, and her belly rumbled as she smelled fresh coffee and sizzling bacon.

"Hallo the shop!" Erin called to the apartment above.

Carter laughed and opened the second story window. "Hallo Miss Erin," he called back. Erin heard the grin in his thick Scottish accent. "Hurry on up here, girl. Breakfast?"

"Yum!"

"Not yet!" Caitlin's voice called from within. "You're not feeding that child a bite until I'm finished with her."

"Well, hurry up then," Carter said. Erin could hear him fiddling with his hotplate. "I don't want to see that little wisp of a girl playin' and singin' around without a hot breakfast in her."

Carter had his way. Breakfast came first.



"There are three types of bodices," Caitlin said as she wove a tape measure spider's web around Erin's slender body. Erin had to use both hands to hold her waist-long, flaxen hair out of the way. The plumpish, rosy-cheeked, silver-haired woman smiled and gave Erin a wink as she explained. "Type one says, 'Hi! I'm Erin.' Type

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two says, 'Hi! I'm Erin and these are my breasts.' Type three, now that's the one *I* like, says 'Hi! These are my breasts.' Now then dear, how should I finish yours?"

Only black rings in the bottom of mugs remained of Carter's strong coffee, but Caitlin's teakettle began to whistle. Putting away her tape measure, Caitlin readied two mugs while she waited with raised eyebrows for Erin's answer. Caitlin always used fresh tealeaves in a strainer; she despised bagged tea.

Erin took a seat at a little folding table, drumming her fingers on the white lacy cloth. Two candles had burned down all the way to the sticks the night before, but they still smelled vaguely of smoke and vanilla. Erin's harp waited by the table where an arm of morning sunlight made a square on the plywood floor--Carter let her store it there at night. Part of the light fell across Erin, a gossamer blanket of pale morning gold. Erin wore blue jeans torn at the knees under a white linen peasant's blouse, making her look like a girl caught between worlds, between light and shadow, between past and future, memory and dream. Or so Caitlin thought as she fixed the tea.

"Well, dear?" Caitlin asked. The eyebrows arched higher. "Which will it be?"

Erin considered for a moment as she reached over and touched the strings of her harp. A single note broke the silence. "Hmmm." She grinned mischievously. "Is there anything *between* a two and a three?"

Caitlin laughed and began looking through her selections. "Darling, with a figure like yours, why don't we just *make* it a three? You'll never be able to spend the money you'll make on tips."

Erin smiled slyly and blushed. "Better make it a one," she decided at last. She didn't look up.

Caitlin sighed and shook her head. "Sorry, my friend. I cannot and will not waste good fabric making that body dowdy. Why don't we compromise on a two?"

"Deal. Can you do that in time?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm almost finished already." Caitlin added generous amounts of honey and milk into the two mugs. "I just need to hem the skirt and take it in a little."

Erin laughed. "So how did you know which I'd choose?"

Caitlin smiled. "Oh, I wasn't *really* giving you a choice, dear. Here, drink this and I'll be done in a wink."

Caitlin disappeared into the other tiny room to weave magic with needle and thread, and Erin pulled her harp closer. For a moment or two, she simply brushed her fingers across the strings. Then she began to tune. Somehow, almost before she realized it, the tuning became a melody. Music filled the tiny apartment, haunting and lovely, a timeless Celtic air, Turlough O'Carolan's *Sí Beag is Sí Mór*. The final note faded into lonely silence before Erin realized she had an audience.

Carter clapped his calloused hands sharply. Erin jumped a little, startled. She hadn't heard him come back up. He grinned. "Lassie, you play like an angel straight from Heaven."

The big man had a ready smile--that was one of the reasons Erin liked him so much. That, and the fact that with his blacksmith's muscles, wild red hair and beard, and gold earring, he looked like a storybook pirate. In his half of the shop beneath the apartment, Carter crafted swords well tempered and strong--they drew the crowds. But the other things he made, the candlesticks, jewelry, goblets, and delicately crafted objets d'art, paid the bills. "More O'Carolan?" Carter asked.

"Of course," she said, returning the smile and adding a wink. "Turlough O'Carolan wrote the best harp tunes *ever*. Why on Earth should I start my morning playing anything else?"

"I can't argue with that," Carter conceded. "It's mighty pretty music."

Erin beamed. "Thanks, Carter. Almost ready to open?"

"All set," he acknowledged with a nod. "Just need to change into some ... old clothes." Erin smiled at the joke. "So did you take a look at that old book yet?" Carter asked as he rummaged around in his battered chest.

Erin spun around, her eyes saucer wide with sudden interest hooked like a fish. "What old book?"

Carter looked up sharply. "Huh? Oh, Cate didn't say anything?"

Erin shook her head. "What old book?"

"Uh oh. She must be saving it for a surprise."

"She is in fact, Master Cavern Mouth," Caitlin called from the other room.

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“And,” said Carter, “since I don’t want her taking it out on me all the way to Boston, I’m not going to ruin it.”

“Wise man,” Caitlin called back to him. Carter grinned again.

“How about a hint?” Erin asked hopefully.

Carter shook his head as he found his costume--white shirt, gray leggings, black boots and a leather vest. “Sorry darling. You’ll have to wait for the Missus.” Erin pouted. “Nice try,” Carter said as he stepped into the other room. “Trust me, it’s worth the wait.”

With that he closed the door.

A surprise? An old book? Erin smiled to herself gleefully.

If Erin loved anything as much as music, or nearly so, it had to be the weight and feel of fine paper, the grace of rows of black ink, and the lure of secrets hidden within. She adored the books Caitlin wrote, scholarly tomes and collections of stories dealing with fairy lore, folk tales, and Celtic mythology, and Caitlin knew it. Surely the surprise must be some newly discovered source, some ancient collection of mysteries and lost tales. Anticipation tickled her tongue, almost too delicious to bear. Erin put her hands on the harp strings again. She played, thinking of long-forgotten mysteries lost in pages decorated with illuminated capitals, and the musty scent of paper and old leather.

Caitlin reappeared at last, carrying no hint of book or package. She brought the dress, however, and Erin gasped out loud. She tried it on and found the fit perfect. The skirt, which fell nearly all the way to the floor, was the deep blue of a clear sky in the instant before twilight, with accent panels of silver embroidered with gold thread that shimmered like sunlight on a mountain lake. The bodice, the same shade of blue, fit beautifully over Erin’s blouse. The neckline swooped low and rose to puffs at the shoulder, slashed and accented with glistening silver. The dress had only half sleeves; the sleeves of Erin’s blouse would be plenty in the Georgia summer, and they would keep her arms free for harping. She spun around, and laughed as the skirt twirled and danced and hugged itself around her legs. The dress was more elaborate than the garb she usually chose, and certainly less modest. Erin loved it. “How do I look?” she asked Caitlin.

“Girl, you’re going to break hearts. I expect a full report.”

Erin looked away. “Oh, I don’t know about *that*--”

Caitlin smiled. “Trust me. Here, let me check that hem line one last time.” The older woman knelt down and fussed with Erin’s skirt. “And remember--a full report. You hear?”

"I hear and obey," Erin said with a grave nod. "Now then, you were saying something about a surprise--?"

"I wasn't. That loudmouthed lug of a husband I married was."

"So what is it?"

"A surprise." Caitlin didn't look up from Erin's skirt.

Erin fought to hide a budding grin. "Please?"

"It's a book," said Caitlin, checking a seam to be certain it was straight.

"I know *that*. What *kind* of book?" Erin struck a pose, hands on her hips, and stamped her foot.

"Heavens, you'll have to do better than *that*. That pout wouldn't even work on Carter. But I'll give you this little taste and then no more. You'll just have to be patient, my girl. It's an old book filled with lost and secret things. There, raise your leg a little. That's right ... yes, there. Good."

"Those are the best books." Erin freed the grin to blossom. "When can I see it?"

"Hmmm. Let's see. Okay, this is done." Caitlin stood and sat back down at the table and finished the last sips of her tea. "Now then, you still have a decision to make, don't you? Something about what you're going to do with yourself until the summer fair opens?"

"I do," Erin admitted. She'd received her degrees in art and music from the University of Georgia at the end of winter semester, and she planned to start graduate school in the fall. That gave her more than half a year of glorious freedom for experience, adventure, and simply *living*. The quarterly Renaissance festival filled three weeks at a time, and she'd planned to find a job during the weeks when it closed between the spring and summer seasons.

But Caitlin had made an intriguing offer.

Since her writing scarcely paid the bills, she and Carter earned their primary livings traveling like gypsies to sell their handcrafted wares at Renaissance fairs and folk festivals all across the country. Caitlin had invited Erin to accompany them to fairs near Boston and Washington, D.C., and then back to Atlanta in time for the summer season at Blackthorne Faire. Erin would make money performing--her fondest wish--and she would earn a little extra by helping Caitlin with research on her new book, one on music in folklore, fairy tales, and myth. Plus, she'd have a chance to explore what Carter had promised her were two of the most fascinating cities in the country.

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Erin had never been away from Georgia for more than a week or two at a time. She'd never had a true adventure before, and oh! how she longed for one. She found Caitlin's offer more tempting than unwatched chocolate.

On the other hand, this was the last season she'd have together with her college pals--the first dear friends she'd made as an adult--before life and the world pulled them away. They'd helped her define the woman she'd become. Soon, she knew, they'd be lost to memory despite their most earnest promises to stay close forever. She found it hard to let go with so little time left to cling fast.

"You're coming back next year," Caitlin reminded her. "Everything will still be here, won't it?"

"It's not the place. It's the people."

"Ah." Caitlin nodded. "And a part of you wants to make the good-byes last as long as possible."

Erin chewed her bottom lip. "I guess I have some thinking to do."

"And not too much time to do it. But let me ask you this. Are you sure it's not uncertainty about the future that's clouding your thinking?" Erin didn't reply. "I only ask because fear is never the wisest reason to make a decision. The option that seems safest is seldom the best. Sometimes the scariest path is the true one." Caitlin shrugged. "Sometimes. So what's clouding your choice? That's the question to consider, I think."

Erin's brow crinkled as she frowned. "I wish I knew the answer." The vague uneasiness that had troubled her for the past few weeks stirred again and sank in her belly. But she had to admit that the feeling was not without a certain attraction; it was a delicious kind of fear, like the moment at the top of the rollercoaster, the last breathless second before the plunge. She shook her head.

Caitlin nodded. "Just something to consider. Here, finish your tea. Why don't you come back when you take your lunch break? We can talk then. Maybe that'll help you make up your mind."

"I'd like that."

"Well, that's grand. See you then."

"Wait! What about my surprise?"

"Hmph. Come back at lunch. *Maybe* I'll tell you about it then."

"A hint?"

Caitlin smiled. "It's a book, a book of secrets."

"You said that. What else?"

Caitlin's smile widened to a wicked grin. "There's music in it."
"Music!"

"That's all you get. Now run along. Break hearts. Don't forget my report."



It wasn't as bad as he'd anticipated, Brian Johnson decided. Apparently, the Blackthorne Faire Renaissance Festival wasn't just some amateurish living history exhibit after all. It was more like what Pseudo-Medieval Land in the Magic Kingdom would be if Disney World had such a thing. And if they relaxed their family-friendly standards just a bit. Buxom maidens shouted greetings and blew kisses as they sold t-shirts and flowery headbands. Meanwhile, jesters in bright costumes juggled, somersaulted, and chased the maidens--all while managing to direct the long line of cars to the far end of the vast, grassy field that served as a parking lot. Despite himself, Brian chuckled at their antics. Maybe the day wouldn't be a complete squander after all. Not that he had time to waste at a carnival, even one that ostensibly had some cultural content. He should be at the office--he had work to do. Billable work. Even if it *was* a Sunday. And even if it *was* an impossibly beautiful first day of May.

When he was working, he wasn't thinking about Tracy. He looked at his watch.

"So it's what, eleven now?" Brian said. "What say we hang out till, say, one? That way, I can get to the office by two or so, okay?"

In the passenger seat, his best friend Jimmy Malone grinned. "We'll see."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Seriously. So the day won't be a total loss."

"Oh it won't be. A loss, I mean. Trust me."

"I mean work-wise."

"Ah. Well. Then it probably will," Jimmy admitted with a shrug. "Sorry, pal, but you aren't a lawyer today, caprice?"

"*Capisce*," Brian corrected.

"Whatever. You might as well just take that Rolodex off and put it right in your pocket. Time's not gonna matter. We're in the Renaissance, remember?"

"It's a Rolex," Brian muttered as he pulled his brand new

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Lexus SUV into a parking space at the far end of the field.

“Whatever. Take it off.”

Brian sighed. “Look, I let you drag me all the way out here--”

“For your own good,” Jimmy pointed out. “Hey, you still got that little knife on your key chain?”

Brian pulled the key out of the ignition, showing Jimmy the tiny Swiss Army Knife. “Need it?”

“Yeah. Let me see it for a sec, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Brian tossed the keys over. Jimmy caught them nimbly and, grinning, dropped them into the pocket of his jeans.

“Now we *both* know we’re staying for the day, bud.”

“Hey!”

“You coming or what?”

Brian sighed, resigned to his fate. At least he had work he could do at the festival site. Not that he’d told Jimmy that. Brian looked at his friend and shook his head. Anyone who hadn’t seen the two climb out of the SUV together would never guess that the mismatched pair had arrived together. Brian wore neatly pressed khakis and a golf shirt over a crisp white t-shirt. Not a single one of his neatly groomed sand-colored hairs were out of place. Jimmy had to keep brushing his longer, dark hair away from his glasses. He wore torn jeans and a faded Lilith Fair t-shirt. They followed the crowd toward the fair’s main gate.

“I’ll get you for this,” Brian muttered with a half-hearted frown, the best he could manage.

“I know you will.” Jimmy put his arm around Brian’s shoulders. “But look, ever since you broke up with the bitc--”

“Call her Tracy, okay? And frankly, I don’t want to talk about her.”

Tracy.

When he didn’t think about her, the pain, still acute months after the bitter end of their relationship, faded to dull numbness. But the simple mention of her name brought the queasy feeling back to settle in Brian’s stomach. If he was lucky, he could choke it down until the numbness returned. Then he could lose himself in work again. If not, the ache would linger. He looked down at his feet as he walked.

“Okay,” Jimmy said, “Tracy the bi--”

“Jimmy,” Brian interjected firmly.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Brian wished he’d taken more of his St. John’s

Wort; the herbal tablets were supposed to help his moodiness. He wondered if increasing the dosage would make it more effective. Probably not.

“Um, anyway. I’ve gotta admit, I’ve been a little worried about you, Brian. Ever since you broke up with the, uh, Tracy. I really, really don’t like the way she treated you. And I wish you’d get over her. She’s not worth this much hurt, dude.”

“I’m getting over her,” Brian countered defensively.

“Bullshit. You’re hiding. That’s not the same thing.”

“I’m fine, Jimmy. Jeez. Let’s drop this. Okay?”

“Ha. Look, maybe you can fool the other lawyers with that act, but me, not so much. I’ve known you since the ninth grade. We played baseball together, for God’s sake. That’s sacred.”

Brian rolled his eyes again and sighed. “I suppose there’s a point to all this?”

“Just this.” Jimmy winked. “Nothing’s closer than the bond between a pitcher and his catcher.”

“Does that girl you’ve been dating know that? What’s her name?”

“Fiona, and you’re changing the subject.” The long line for tickets seemed to move quickly. Brian shook his head at a family in front of them. All four wore elaborate Renaissance costumes, complete with flowing cloaks, poet shirts, and feathered hats.

“All I’m saying is, I can tell you’re off your game,” Jimmy continued. “If you don’t mind me stretching the metaphor.”

“Christ. I’m okay,” Brian repeated. “Okay?”

“Just keep saying that. Sooner or later, you just might convince one of us. But it won’t be me.”

“I’ve been busy. You know that.” They neared the ticket window.

“I also know how you like to shut yourself up in your shell. That ain’t healthy, pal.”

Brian didn’t answer. Jimmy shook his head. “Well, a day of loud songs, drinking, and cute women is gonna be just what the doctor ordered. Trust me.”

Moments later, they followed the line through the castle gates and handed their tickets to a busty woman in a low-cut peasant blouse. Just beyond, a dusty path led to a town square. Shops surrounded a small stage platform where two women and a man, all in pirate garb, sang bawdy sea shanties to the delight of a small crowd that clapped, laughed, and sang along. Beyond the stage,

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paths wandered off in at least three different directions, leading visitors further and deeper into the festival site. In the distance, rising just above a line of trees, Brian could see bright flags flying atop the towers of a castle.

The busy woman handed them admission badges to wear around their necks. Then she bowed theatrically. "Enter, my lords," she said with an exaggerated English accent. "Enjoy your day at Blackthorne Faire!" Her hair fell in ringlets, Brian noticed, and she wore a circlet of flowers.

"How much extra for a wee kiss?" Jimmy asked, grinning. Brian rolled his eyes again.

The woman laughed merrily. "A quid gets thee a kiss, three gets tongue."

"Tongue for kiss or tongue for lashing?"

"It's the gentleman's money so it's his choice, though I'll wager we both know what he deserves." She clucked in mock disapproval.

Jimmy laughed. "Here then, let me get you a twenty--"

The woman stopped him before he reached his wallet. "Don't tempt me, rake. There's too much chance Fiona'll be by with that wicked sword of hers. A lashing's the least we'll have to worry about if she catches my tongue anywhere near your person, I dare say."

"I see your point. Speaking of her loveliness, and of points, for that matter, have you seen her?"

"She'll be on the lawn stage at the end of yon path on your far left." The woman pointed a thumb behind her at a byway that wound away from the main path. "Oh! You'd better run. You'll miss her."

"C'mon," Jimmy said to Brian. "Let's hurry." Jimmy moved quickly, leaving Brian to brush past the crowd as he rushed after, mumbling apologies when he could. The scent of beer and frying carnival food assaulted his nostrils.

Brian leapt aside as a man in full polished armor on horseback thundered past. He shivered--for one moment the day seemed subtly colder. "*Maniac*," Brian muttered. No one else seemed bothered, or even to have noticed, so Brian shrugged and scrambled to catch up with Jimmy.

A woman playing a lute and singing in front of a glassblower's shop caught Brian's attention but Jimmy didn't slow. Brian stepped aside to avoid a man in bright, multi-colored jester's

clothing on tall stilts, and came uncomfortably close to a woman with fairy wings who juggled knives and flaming torches. Brian shook his head and wondered what the county safety marshals would say about that. No one seemed bothered by her antics, either.

Brian saw Jimmy's ponytail and Braves cap bobbing above the crowd ahead, so he scurried after. Just as he caught his friend, two men and a woman swaggered by in elaborate Musketeer costumes. All three carried long rapiers. To Brian's astonishment, all three had ticket badges. They weren't staff.

"I knew we should have come in garb," Jimmy called back.

"I told you, no tights."

"Wimp."

"Look, Jim, I ... Jesus!"

Just ahead, a man dressed in the black and red doublet and feathered hat of a Renaissance dandy pulled a rapier from a sheath at his side and swung at a woman standing right before him. To all appearances, the sword would have swept her head from her shoulders had she not stepped back and executed a perfect somersault. She landed deftly on her feet, brandishing her cloak dramatically as she drew her own rapier gracefully. The woman's split black skirt allowed her to leap and move with the same dexterity as her opponent. She struck two blows at him, both of which he turned easily. The man struck back, but the woman stepped aside, sweeping her long auburn hair like a banner.

"Jesus!" Brian exclaimed again.

"Hurry," said Jimmy. "Let's get closer. That's Fiona."

"Jesus!"

The woman, Fiona, leapt to a stage behind her. She had the advantage of height. She and the man duelled relentlessly.

"So," said her opponent, a tall black man sporting a thin, Errol Flynn mustache. "The lady has a sting!" He was slender and fit, with muscles like a gymnast's.

"She does," Fiona shouted back. "And you'll soon feel it, I'll wager." She arched her rapier over her head and swept it down.

The man parried and returned the strikes. "And you'll feel mine," he taunted.

"Oh, you think it's long enough then?" She wiggled her hips as the crowd roared with laughter.

The man took two swipes but Fiona danced away. Her retreat provided the man an opportunity to leap to the stage himself. The

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two dueled faster. The clang of steel clashing against hard steel rang out over the noise of the festival.

A tall, blonde woman pushed past Brian. He stepped back to give her room to pass and noticed that from behind, she looked a little like Tracy. The queasy feeling rumbled again in his gut. With effort, he turned his attention back to the stage.

Fiona struck and, to avoid the blow, the man leapt deftly to the waist-high rail that ran along the back of the stage. The lady struck at his feet, but he leapt aside, raising his right foot nimbly. Fiona bashed again, and the man raised his left. She struck faster, and he jumped, first with one foot, then with the other, with almost comic rhythm. At last he raised his hands above his head, still gripping his rapier, and whistled a lively tune as his leaps to avoid the blows became a jig. She struck, he danced, and the crowd loved it.

“Ha!” said Fiona. “I always knew I’d make you dance to my tune, you dandy rascal.”

“We’ll see.” The man jumped, high and forward, and turned a flip over her head. He even managed a bow as he landed gracefully behind her. They both turned at the same instant, and their rapiers sang together as they faced one another again.

At last the two closed in and, and in a flourish of blows, the man slipped inside the woman’s guard and pressed the sharp edge of his sword against her bare throat.

“Sir,” she said, fluttering her lashes, “you seem to have me at a disadvantage.”

The man wiggled his eyebrows in the great tradition of swash-buckling villains. “Will you ... *yield* to me then, fair one?”

“Oh Heavens no.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“I said, you *seem* to have me at a disadvantage.” Her wide grin matched his.

“Whatever do you mean, devil woman?”

“Look down, milord.”

He did, and found the point of her rapier pointed directly at his crotch. The crowd roared again. “Great Heavens! My little buddy!”

“And if you want to produce any *more* little buddies, I suggest you, um, lower your weapon, sirrah.”

“A man’s no good without his rapier.”

“So you want to keep it then?”

“Yes please,” he squeaked. “It has given me great pleasure in the past.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear *someone*, at least, has derived pleasure from the thing.”

“Shall we, perhaps, continue this later?” the man pleaded.

“Why not here again at half-past noon?”

“Half past noon. I’ll be here and ready, and you’ll not have the best of me then, wench!”

The woman prodded him gently in the groin with her rapier. “I *could* have had the best of you *now*, I think.”

Whatever reply the man made was lost in the crowd’s laughter and applause. A younger man in town crier’s garb leapt to the stage and indicated the two with a sweeping gesture. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the town crier boomed, “I give you once again ... the Rapier Wits!”

Fiona and the man raised their hands above their heads, clasped them, and bowed.

“The Rapier Wits will return to this stage at half past twelve!” the crier cried. “In the mean time, how about another round of applause for Jamal and Fiona?”

The crowd obliged. Jamal and Fiona bowed again, this time sweeping their feathered hats from their heads. “Tips,” they called in unison, “are graciously accepted and greatly appreciated!”

By the time Jimmy and Brian made it to the stage, they found Fiona and Jamal counting the bills and coins that filled their hats. “Jimmy,” Fiona called when she saw him. “You made it!” She leaned down from the platform to offer him a quick kiss.

“I’d never dream of missing you, my sweet,” Jimmy said gallantly. “Let me introduce you to my friend here.”

“You must be Brian,” Fiona said with a wide smile. “The man we’re supposed to cheer today.”

“Brian Johnson.” Brian reached out to shake her hand, making sure she didn’t see the icy glare he fired with deadeye precision at Jimmy. Jimmy looked skyward and whistled innocently.

“Hi there,” said the black man. “I’m Fiona’s partner, Jamal Brooks.”

“Oh,” said Brian. “Mr. Brooks. I was looking for you.”

Jimmy turned sharply and raised his eyebrows. “You were?”

Brian produced a business card. “I’m an attorney with Patterson Dorvee.”

“Oh no,” said Jimmy. “No, no way. You’re not playing lawyer


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today. I forbid it.”

Jamal and Brian ignored him. “Let’s go somewhere and talk,” said Jamal.

Chapter 2

Story and Ritual

he Half-Moon Theatre dominated the square near the top of the hill where the main path through Blackthorne Faire ended. The builders, who'd intended the round structure to resemble Shakespeare's Globe, had managed to capture the charm and ambiance, if not the size, of the original. Hence the name Half-Moon--the moon is smaller than the globe of the world, and a half moon is smaller still.

The theatre was without question one of Jessica Holtzman's very favorite places on Earth, but just then, she wanted desperately to be somewhere--anywhere--else. Her heart thumped nervously as she ran a hand through the tight curls of her unruly dark hair.

The theatre might be small, but it boasted an ideal performance space. That day, nervous, shifting bodies sitting cross-legged or with knees tucked under chins and arms wrapped tightly around lower legs filled the large stage. Jessica fidgeted among them. The members of the Jester's Men Shakespeare Company kept their eyes focused on open scripts or notepads where they scribbled furiously. None of them dared look up. If they did, Arthur Goodfellow, the director, might single them out for a personal rant.

"I expect so much more of each of you," Arthur Goodfellow fumed at the assembled company of actors. "Look at me when I'm talking to you! Look at me!" With effort, the company did so. The little man already wore the Fool's costume he would sport in the afternoon's performance of *King Lear*. He didn't have his makeup on yet, but he didn't need any. With his pointed chin, bulb nose, and bushy eyebrows, he looked suitably Shakespearean already. His voice rose and fell like a buoy on an unsettled sea, now quiet and gentle, now swelling and booming to echo through the confines of the amphitheatre. Jessica looked quickly away when his gaze fell on her.

"Oh, you speak the words well enough, I'll give you that. Your

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accents are passable, I suppose. But that's not really the bloody *point* now, is it? Any fool, if you'll pardon the expression, can memorize words and parrot them back. But damn it all three times over!" His voice reached a crescendo. "That is not *performance*, my children!"

Goodfellow scowled at the cast and paced back and forth on the flat, level area in front of the stage where the groundlings would sit during the performances.

The afternoon would mark the final performance of *Lear*. *The Tempest*, the show with which it alternated in repertory during the fair's spring season, had ended its run the afternoon before. Now, the company worked hard to prepare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *MacBeth* for the opening of Blackthorne Faire's summer season.

The wind shifted, bringing with it the mingled scents of sweet frying dough, sizzling turkey legs, popping kettle corn, and melting cheese. Jessica's stomach rumbled.

Goodfellow raised one bushy eyebrow and glared at each actor in turn. His face turned red and for a moment Jessica feared that one eye, at least, would pop free from its socket and shoot across the stage, bouncing like a rheumy superball.

"By the blessed moon and the twelve secret roads, I expect more than good words well spoken. I expect--no, I demand, *demand* better."

Goodfellow removed his motley cap and made to throw it down to the ground, but seemed to remember, at the last second, his own rule about respecting the theatre's properties and costumes. Instead, he pulled it down over his head so hard that it pushed the upper halves of his oversized ears out from the side of his head like a pair of airplane wings. That only made him angrier. His pudgy face glowed like a polished tomato.

"You must respect the *story*. Don't think too much about the poetry or the language. Master Shakespeare's words can speak for themselves, I fancy. *Your* job is to tell the bloody *story*. *Be* these characters. Feel what they feel. You there--" Goodfellow pointed to a stocky actor near the downstage edge. "Be Bottom." His twig-long finger found a woman. "Stop scribbling in that blasted notebook and listen to me! Be Hermia! You there--be Snout! No no no, don't waste time writing this down! If that would help, I'd pass out a ream of notes and save us all a king's wealth of effort. You!" He pointed the bony finger at Jessica. "Be Lady MacBeth! *Be* her!"

Jessica risked a fast glance at her watch. She had a new role at

the fair--between morning rehearsal (which *should* have ended before the fair opened) and the afternoon's performance. She didn't want her wages docked, especially not since she hoped to keep the job on a permanent basis when the summer season came around. It was a choice bit--the afternoon shift as Madam Memory, the fortuneteller who read palms and cards in the gaudy gypsy wagon at the bottom of the hill. The previous middle shift Madam Memory had, according to rumor, met a handsome and wealthy, if older, man and run off to Florida with him. Whether or not the wagging tongues were to be believed, the wagon found itself short a fortuneteller for two shifts a weekend. The role delighted Jessica; it would give her a chance to work on her improv skills, although she still had to find a costume and practice with her new Tarot cards a bit if she could manage it. If she could get there. Working with Arthur Goodfellow thrilled Jessica--the man enjoyed a reputation as one of the very best Shakespearean directors on any continent. She even liked the odd little man. But he could be so awfully, frightfully intense. But if Goodfellow didn't finish soon, she was going to be late.

"Am I getting through to any of you at all?" Goodfellow spoke softly now, but his cast heard every word. "Even a little? This is our last regular rehearsal, children. We won't have much of a chance to get together, all of us at once, until the week before the fair opens again this summer." The voice began to build again. "We must break through now. *Now!* Are you even listening to me? For the stories. The audience can read the words in a book. But you, you can show them these characters. You, *you* can take them to another place. Can you even comprehend the power, the potential you have? Do you understand the *magic* there? Don't recite bloody Bottom at them! *Show* them Bottom! And don't dare giggle. You know bloody well what I mean." Goodfellow glared at his actors again, one by one.

Jessica heard shouts and laughter from the shops just outside the theatre. The festival had opened. She risked another glance at her watch. She had promised to take her shift at the Fortune-teller's Wagon just before lunch. She'd have to hurry.

"Bah. There's probably nothing more I can do." The anger faded from Goodfellow's eyes, the fury dimmed to something cooler, something almost like sadness. His shaggy eyebrows dropped down from his forehead, like a pair of furry flags lowered to half-mast. "Maybe I *do* expect too much of you babes. If I ha-

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ven't reached you yet, I probably never will, more's the pity. But I *feel* the talent blazing deep inside each of you, smoldering like a spark in ash. I see it shining! And I want others to see it too, to witness how great you can all be. If I blow too much hot air, forgive me. I only hope my breeze might blow the spark to roaring life. The stories deserve that, you know. The stories, the stories deserve nothing less than the very best you have inside you to offer. Shakespeare gave them his best, didn't he? Oh yes, I know he did. His best and more, more than you'll ever know, I think. You can hear it in his words. So how can you do less? Don't you see, my duckies? The stories deserve the best."

Goodfellow sighed dramatically. "Oh, never mind. I can't very well drag it out, can I? There's nothing more I can do for you. Run on, then. But mind that you're back, in costume and in place, on time! That, at least, will make a refreshing change."

Dismissed, Jessica hurried away. The Gypsy Wagon and Madam Memory's Tarot cards awaited her. But first, she had an errand. She had to find a scarf, a gypsy's skirt, and a character. She knew just where to go. She ran.

A row of shops bordered the path that led down to the Highwayman's Hideaway Pub and performance stage. The bells above the beaded doorway of the second shop from the theatre, one shared by a costumer and a blacksmith, jangled as Jessica hurried in. There, she found Caitlin McGregor packaging a blouse for a customer.

Caitlin looked up and smiled. "Be right with you, dear."

While Caitlin fussed with her customer, Jess wandered around the tiny shop. Everywhere she turned, she found more garb to fall in love with. Each flowing skirt suggested a new character; each hooded cloak hinted at a new persona waiting to be born. Jess grinned with delight.

Realizing that she'd already fallen in love with far more than the poor, worn plastic in her wallet could bear, she turned her attention to the other half of the shop. Carter, Caitlin's husband, showed a young Asian woman a tray of his delicate, hand-made silver earrings. Her boyfriend feigned interest, but Jessica's watchful eye caught his gaze wandering to the rows of bright swords hanging on the wall behind Carter's counter. "Yes, dear," the boy replied, though he clearly hadn't heard the question. Jess smiled. She wondered if he'd leave with a sword. She wondered how much jewelry he'd have to buy to compensate.

“Now then,” Caitlin said behind her, “what can I do for you?” Jessica turned around. “Oh, I know you, don’t I?”

“We’ve met,” Jessica said, offering Caitlin a hand to shake. “I’m Jessica Holtzman, Erin Winter’s roommate at UGA.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Caitlin accepted the hand and gave it a friendly squeeze. “Erin told me you’d be by. I hear you’re our new Madam Memory.”

“I’m the one.” Jessica smiled and produced a book and a deck of Tarot cards from her purse. Caitlin laughed as she read the title: *The Total Fool’s Guide to the Tarot*.

“So I see. What can I help you with?”

“Erin said that maybe you could help me put together a fortuneteller’s costume.”

“I just might be able to manage something.” Caitlin rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she gave Jessica an appraising once-over. “What does one look like?”

“Good question.” Jessica shrugged. “I see her as an Irish Tinker’s daughter, a traveling girl.”

“Ah. I see.”

“She fell in love with a fairy prince, and he with her. And since he couldn’t stay with her past dawn, he gave her the gift of, um, fortune telling and all. Sort of as a memento of their love. Oh! Maybe she’s carrying his child, and the prince gave her the gift so that she could afford to raise him.”

“*Humph*. I’m not sure it was supposed to work like that. Not in the tales I’ve read anyway. Let’s see... a Tinker’s daughter.” She glanced around the shop. “The skirt and blouse you have on will do just fine. Here, let me find you a scarf and a cloak. If we can add some patches to the cloak--”

“So how’s it supposed to work?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll just find some old thing and some cloth scraps--”

“No, I mean the fairy stuff. Do you know?”

“A little,” Caitlin admitted with a smile. She found a cloak behind the counter and held it up. “You’ll find some books on the counter behind you if you’re interested. This cloak should work, but I think it might be a little short.”

“That’s okay,” Jessica said. “Maybe a poor Tinker’s daughter would wear too-short clothes. You mean these books here?”

“Those are the very ones. Let me see if I can find some patches.”

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While Caitlin disappeared behind the cloth doorway into the tiny room behind the counter, Jessica peered at the bookshelf. The books were all paperback tomes on folklore and mythology--*Magical Traditions of the British Isles*, *Magical Traditions of the Americas*, *The Encyclopedia of the Fair Folk*, and *The Traveler's Guide to the Perilous Realm*. All boasted a familiar name on their spines. "Oh," Jessica exclaimed just as Caitlin returned. "You wrote all these!"

"I did," Caitlin acknowledged with a proud nod. "Surely you don't think the costumes and Carter's trinkets alone are enough to make a living, do you?"

"Actually, I did," Jessica admitted. "Your shop's always totally packed."

"And it's a good thing," said Caitlin. "Because I sure couldn't make one writing those books. You can borrow one or two if you'd like."

"Oh, I would." She picked up *Magical Traditions of the British Isles* and thumbed through it.

"Help yourself. I can have the cloak ready for you in twenty minutes or so. Sound good?"

"That's perfect. How much do I owe you?"

"Well, seeing that you're on a student's budget, you can borrow the stuff if you're just using it today. If you decide to play Madam Memory over the summer, we'll work something out. Deal?"

"Deal."



Leaving Caitlin stitching away on her Tinker's cloak, Jessica wandered down to the Sherwood Stage, where she was just in time to hear Erin playing a set of harp tunes to the delight of the small cluster of festival patrons gathered to listen. Jessica settled down to listen and read.

She'd been afraid she'd be wading through some dense, scholarly treatise. Instead, the lore in the book captivated her. She found that while Caitlin had gathered a great deal of data and presented it well, she never lost sight of the fact that she was recording tales of wonder. Her words made the stories and motifs come alive with strange and intoxicating magic. As Jessica read, she saw golden fingers of light reaching through a canopy of green leaves, she heard the music of water rushing over stones, she tasted true love's first

kiss at twilight, and she felt the cold weight of fairy gold that vanishes to twigs and dust with the first touch of morning sun. Gentle, fey music from Erin's harp washed over her like wind from an enchanted, perilous land.

Jessica was so engrossed in the book that she scarcely noticed when Erin finished her set. The crowd applauded and the next performer, a storyteller, made his way to the stage. Erin gathered her tips. Jessica remained oblivious. A few minutes later, Erin plopped down by Jessica's side.

"Hiya," said Erin. "Oh, you're reading one of Caitlin's books!"

Jessica smiled at her best friend. "Yeap. Hey, this is way good stuff--just right for Madam Memory."

Erin nodded and looked over Jessica's shoulder. "Caitlin's books are the *best*. Oh, look. The Second Sight!"

Jessica nodded. "This is a ritual that's supposed to enchant a deck of cards to give you the gift of seeing the Otherworld, and, you know, telling fortunes and stuff. Just the thing for my character, don't you think?"

"We have to try it."

"Oh, I can pretend." Jess shook her head. "I just need a little background. It helps with the improv."

"Don't be silly. What kind of Madam Memory *are* you, anyway? What do we need?"

"All kinds of stuff." Jessica shook her head. "Just look at this list."

Erin read. "Incense, candles... we can get all that right here at the fair. And you already have the Tarot cards, right?"

"That's a point. In fact, A Ren fair is probably the *only* place we could get all this stuff."

"And it won't take but a minute or two."

"I suppose it might be kind of fun." *Be the character*, she thought to herself. *It's all about the story.*

"Oh come on," said Erin. "We *so* totally have to try this."

Jessica hesitated. She gnawed her lower lip. "I'm already running late."

"Then we'd better hurry. Here, let me see that book."



A few minutes later, Erin met Jessica in the shade of Madam

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Memory's wagon. While Jessica fussed with a lace cloth over a small table, Erin cleared her throat and called out in her best Renaissance carnival barker's voice. "Hasten good folks. Gather and see! Right here at Blackthorne Faire, this morning only." A few people turned and listened. "Madam Memory is about to perform an ancient and secret ritual, one taught to her by her lover, a prince of Faery, a lord of the Perilous Realm! Watch as she calls for a blessing on her sacred heirloom Tarot deck!"

A few more paused. Jessica bowed theatrically. She lifted the iron cauldron she'd borrowed from Carter and placed it on the table next to her Tarot cards. *It's all about the story*, she reminded herself again. As she filled the cauldron with water from a clay pitcher, Erin lit two purple candles. Then, she and Jessica lit twin burners of mugwort and wormwood incense. A few more patrons gathered to watch. Jess placed her hands on the Tarot deck.

"Breathe," said Jessica, making sure that her voice carried, just as Arthur Goodfellow had taught her. With practiced ease, she changed her natural Long Island accent to an Irish lilt. "All of you gathered here to assist me in this most solemn and powerful of rituals, let your lungs fill with the sacred scents."

"Watch as she steps closer to the waters," Erin cried.

"Concentrate!" said Jessica. "Concentrate, my friends, concentrate on piercing the veil to my inner Sight!" *Careful*, she reminded herself. *Don't go overboard. Or would Madam Memory the Tinker's daughter overplay it? Just a little?*

Jessica moved forward, like a woman in a trance, and placed both hands on either side of the cauldron. She watched the gentle motion of the water until it stilled. Then she moved the candles so that they didn't shine either in her eyes or directly into the water. As the book instructed, she breathed gently on the water and focused her attention on the bottom of the cauldron. Then she moved her hands back to the cards.

"Gather close, gentlefolk!" called Erin. Murmuring happily, the small, curious crowd stepped closer. "Madam Memory begins the secret ritual of blessing for her sacred deck."

"Cauldron," Jessica called. She kept her voice soft, but projected it out over the crowd. "Bless my cards, I beg you. Great Mother, Queen of the Perilous Realm, open my inner eye that I may truly see. Cauldron, bless this seeker's cards--"


Carefully, she let a few drops of water from the cauldron fall on the deck. The audience applauded appreciatively.

From across the path and the green that separated the wagon from a row of shops, games, and food vendors, a tall, striking woman watched Erin and Jessica's ritual with unmasked amusement. Patrons passed by without seeming to notice the woman, despite her height and harsh beauty.

After a moment, Arthur Goodfellow, in his Fool's costume, approached and whispered something in the woman's ear. Her smile grew wider as she considered, and then she laughed.

She laughed again, and made a sign in the air.

Chapter 3
The Fair Folk

he boisterous crowd surrounding the jousting arena fell suddenly and utterly quiet. The only sound came from the pounding of iron shoes against hard earth, raising a cloud of dust that spread like billowing smoke. The very ground rumbled and Brian's heart thumped so hard he thought it would burst through his chest.

The beasts, like the men who rode them, wore armor of heavy metal—one bore polished steel that gleamed like silver, the other obsidian black. The armor gave them weight, but, to Brian's eye at least, it didn't seem to slow them. His mouth hung open.

The horses gained terrible momentum. The mounted knights raised their shields and lowered their lances. In the last split second before the clash, Brian winced and looked away. He heard a fearsome crash, like gongs the size of cities banged together by giants.

When Brian looked again, the riders swayed uneasily in their saddles, but somehow, both remained mounted. Their lances were splintered. The horses slowed to a stop and turned. Squires raced out onto the field to bring the knights fresh spears. The crowd gasped, and then roared and applauded appreciatively.

"Not bad, eh?" Jamal lifted an eyebrow and grinned.

"Jesus H. Christ!" said Brian. On the field, the two knights turned their mounts and readied for another charge. "Do they ever get hurt?"

"It's always a danger," Fiona said dramatically.

"Don't forget," Jimmy reminded her with a wink, "you're talking to a lawyer. A way good one. New car and everything."

"Oops," Fiona said quickly. Her eyes opened wide and she covered her mouth with her open hand. "Um, they *never* get hurt, oh no, never ever. Perfectly safe, yes indeedy!"

"Don't worry," Jamal said, giving Brian a friendly slap on the

shoulder. "It's all carefully choreographed. These guys are professionals. They know what they're doing."

"Most of the time," Jimmy added, waggling his eyebrows.

A waist-high wooden rail encircled the ground where the knights jousted, an area about the size of a soccer field. On the opposite side, a crowd filled rows of bleachers. Those who couldn't get a seat in the over-full bleachers surrounded the fence, pushing closer for a better view. Brian shook his head and whistled as he noticed how many wore Renaissance garb.

Behind the bleachers stood the faux-stone wall of a castle. The main tower sported a canopied balcony, where a man dressed as King Henry VIII munched a meaty turkey leg and watched the proceedings. Others, costumed as his queen and court, attended him. King Henry raised his hand, and the knights readied their shields and weapons.

The horses snorted and pounded the ground impatiently.

And then the king lowered his hand with a flourish.

The knights charged again.

They met with another great crash, and once again, both lances splintered. The crowd cheered again. The two squires brought fresh weapons.

"Jesus," Brian muttered. Fiona chuckled softly. Jimmy put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. He gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head.

"So the outcome's always the same?" Brian asked Jamal.

"No," said Jamal. "We mix things up. A lot of people are Ren fest regulars, you know. Nobody likes to see the same story over and over again, right? At least, that's what the little guy who runs the theatre tells me."

"Theatre?" asked Brian.

"A Shakespearean theatre," Jimmy explained. "The Jester's Men at the Half-Moon Theatre. They're doing *King Lear* this afternoon, and we've got reserved seats. Don't worry; they're damn good. Even you'll like them. My friend here is totally the pretentious art snob." He directed the last to Jamal and Fiona.

"Well, I think they'll meet your high standards," Fiona said with a smile. Her nose crinkled when she smiled. Brian liked her. *Jimmy's damn lucky.*

"I hope we can please you," she added.

"I'd be pleased if we could have our talk real quick," Brian said, turning back to Jamal.

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“So what’s this about?” Jamal said. “Your office didn’t say.”

“Wait a minute,” said Jimmy. “You mean you had an *appointment*? You *planned* this?”

Brian shrugged sheepishly. “I’d never’ve gotten a darn thing accomplished if I’d told you.”

Fiona kissed Jimmy on the cheek. “He’s got you there, sweetie.” Jimmy pouted to hide his grin.

“So why don’t we go on and get started?” Brian asked Jamal.

“You don’t want to see the rest of the joust?” Jamal sounded disappointed.

“I thought you said it was all choreographed.”

“It’s drama!” said Jamal.

“So you can catch me up later.”

Jamal sighed and shook his head.

“Is this something you can handle quickly?” Fiona asked. “Jamal and I have another Rapier Wits show.” She gave Jamal a glance and pointed at her wrist where a leather glove covered her watch.

“I was hoping I could take a look at your lease contract,” Brian told Jamal. “Shouldn’t take more than a second or two. One of my client corporations has some business with the property owners.”

“Wow,” Jimmy said with an exaggerated yawn. “Now *that* sounds exciting.”

“I’ve got a copy in my office,” said Jamal. “Just on the other side of the field here. We can take the path around.”

“Perfect,” said Brian.

“I’ll give you ten minutes,” said Jimmy. He shook his finger menacingly at his friend. “Ten. Not eleven. In fact, not a second more than ten. After that, we drink beer and have fun. Got it?”

“Got it,” Brian said. “I just--”

“No negotiations. Ten minutes. Ten. Exactly.”

Jamal led the group up the hill to the path that ran past the jousting field. Behind them, a maze that looked like it had been shaped from living thorns bordered the jousting field and the castle wall. The path made a circle around an open area filled with children’s activities--a medieval-themed playground and a huge swing shaped like a pirate ship. “I wish I could ride that pirate ship swing,” Jimmy said wistfully.

Fiona winked at him. “Maybe we can work something out later, matey,” she whispered back, narrowing her eyes suggestively. Brian shook his head and smiled.

Past the jousting field, the path wound by a row of game stands where fair patrons tried their skills at archery or throwing daggers and axes at targets. Brian watched with mild interest. He liked games of skill. Others tossed darts at balloons. Those who actually managed to hit the red star in a target circle or pop a sufficient number of balloons were awarded prizes--usually a ticket that could be traded in for food or beverages. Brian chuckled. From the looks of things, he doubted that the lost turkey leg and beer revenue hurt the fair's profits much.

As Brian watched, a man threw two knives. Neither stuck in the wooden target; both fell to the ground with a thud. The man flushed red and rolled his eyes with good-natured amusement. His girlfriend howled with laughter. Brian wondered whether the knives were poorly balanced, or if the man simply lacked skill. *Probably both.*

"Enjoying yourself?" Fiona asked Brian.

Brian nodded. "There's a lot to see here."

"That there is," Jamal agreed. His swashbuckler's mustache curled upwards when he grinned. He raised his eyebrows. "And we're just getting started."

Jimmy wasn't fooled. "You're thinking about work, aren't you?" Brian shrugged.

"Well," Jimmy conceded, "I suppose that beats thinking about the, um, Tracy." Brian didn't bother to answer.

"Well, there *is* a lot to see," said Jamal, not without a hint of pride in his voice. The path turned away from the games and climbed a gentle slope. The group passed a building with a brightly painted sign above the gated entry that proclaimed it *Richelieu's Dungeon*. Two burly men in executioner's garb invited passers-by to brave the terrors within. "Like the haunted house there," Jamal continued. "Check it out later if you have time. It's a hoot."

The path turned again, now winding past a row of shops along the opposite side of the maze and playground. Brian paused for a moment to appreciate the works in a stall identified by a bright sign as Eaglestar's Chandler's Shoppe. He took a deep breath as they passed an herb vendor, savoring the rich aromas of natural scents. He made a mental note to come back later and look at the pillows stuffed with lavender and other herbs that promised relaxation and pleasant dreams. He hadn't been sleeping well. As they passed the herb shop, an attractive woman in faire garb approached them. She wore a white peasant blouse, a green bodice,

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and a gaudy skirt patchworked with all the colors of a Crayola box. She must have used an entire stick of ruby red lipstick to make her full lips that bright.

“Kisses from the Kissing Wench?” the woman asked with an exaggerated English accent. She winked at Jimmy. “How about a wee kiss, master? A dollar for a kiss from the wench?”

Jimmy grinned. “I’d never think of charging so charming a creature as you a dollar for a kiss. Come hither, my sweet!” Fiona gave him an affectionate punch in the shoulder.

“Oh,” said the wench, “aren’t you the bold and ungentlemanly scoundrel!”

“Ah,” said Jimmy, “you wound me. Come and let me make amends, dear girl.” As he reached for his wallet, Fiona cleared her throat pointedly. Jimmy smiled. “Relax, my heart. My affections are for you alone. The kiss is for my dear friend Brian.”

“It better be,” Fiona said, casually fingering the rapier at her side. Her blue eyes sparkled.

Jimmy gave Fiona his best innocent look, and then passed a dollar to the wench. She smiled as the bill disappeared into her ample cleavage. Brian rolled his eyes. Jimmy bowed and gestured to Brian. “Milady, your target. Have at him.”

“That’s okay, really,” Brian stammered, backing away. Jimmy and Fiona laughed. Brian actually blushed.

He backed up another step, but Jamal was there to block his way. “Forget it, amigo. You’re getting kissed by a wench.”

The wench stepped forward and seized Brian’s ears. Before he could protest, she pulled his head down and, with a loud smooching sound, planted a long wet kiss on his forehead.

“Wow,” said Brian, sounding rather dazed. His blush deepened. “I’ve got a giant red lip print smack in the middle of my face, don’t I?”

The others looked away nonchalantly. “Not at all,” said Jimmy.

“It’s hardly noticeable,” added Jamal. Fiona hid her mouth behind her hand.

“Great,” Brian mumbled. The wench smiled, waved, and wandered away to find another customer.

Fiona laughed. “Looks like your little plan is working, Jimmy,” she said. She turned to Brian as the group started walking again.

Brian’s eyes narrowed as he turned to regard Jimmy, who whistled a tune and looked innocently skyward. Fiona danced nimbly aside when he tried to kick her shin.

"Jesus, Jimmy. What, did you take out an ad somewhere?"

"I just told a few folks," Jimmy assured him. "These guys, plus Fiona's friend Jessica and her roommate Erin."

"Two of the biggest gossips in the cast," Fiona pointed out.

"Great," Brian muttered again.

"They're going to make you have fun no matter how hard you resist, got it?" Jimmy poked Brian in the chest. "Hey, I couldn't let those St. John's Wort capsules do all the work, now could I?"

Fiona frowned slightly. "You're taking St. John's Wort?"

"It's supposed to help my moods." Brian shrugged. "I guess I've been a little down lately."

"Is it working?"

Brian shrugged again. "I think so. Maybe. It's hard to tell."

"Interesting," said Fiona. "I've never really studied herbal remedies, but some of my patients swear by them."

"Patients?" said Brian, surprised. "Are you a doctor?"

"Not yet, but I will be this time next year," Fiona said proudly. "I'm finishing up my doctorate in psychology at the University of Georgia."

Brian nodded. "So the Rapier Wits is only a temporary gig?"

"Oh, I don't know." Fiona shrugged. "I'd like to keep it up. No reason I can't be a weekday Jungian analyst and a weekend swash-buckler, right?"

"What better place to meet potential patients, eh?" added Jimmy.

Fiona gave him another punch. "Careful," she said. "I'm armed. You don't want to make me an angry Jung woman."

Jamal groaned. "You're a terrible person," he told her. "Come on, Jung lovers and lawyer, let's go in." Jamal motioned them to a small Tudor-style cottage tucked in between a shop and another performance stage. A sign above the door read: Faire Staff Only. Jamal unlocked the door and ushered them all through. Like much of Blackthorne Faire, the cottage wasn't what it seemed. The building was a façade. The door led to an open area outside the wall that surrounded the fairgrounds. There, Brian saw three trailers, presumably offices and dressing rooms, and a picnic table. Jamal led them to one of the trailers.

Inside, the group found a sparse room furnished with two cheap wooden desks, a safe, and a series of wooden filing cabinets. Faire posters and photographs were tacked up on the walls. In addition to office chairs behind the desks, there was a small, thread-

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bare sofa and two folding chairs for guests. Jamal slipped around the filing cabinets and sat down behind one of the desks. Brian pulled up a chair. Jimmy and Fiona took the sofa. Jimmy put his arm around Fiona and she snuggled close.

“Now hurry up,” Jimmy said. “You’re using up all our fun time.”

“And we have a show,” Fiona reminded Jamal.

“Relax,” said Jamal with a smile. “So Brian, I am now taking off my swordsman’s hat and donning my manager’s lid. Figuratively speaking of course, since I doubt the charming Fiona will afford me the time for a costume change. Imagine me in a suit instead of a puffy-sleeved shirt and doublet. What can I do for you?”

“I have a client named Mick Giovanola. Do you know the name?”

Jamal shook his head. “Should I?”

“I got the feeling his company had tried to make contact before he hired us,” Brian said, probing. “He represents a development group that wants to purchase this land.”

Fiona sat up abruptly. “The fairgrounds?”

Brian nodded. “This is valuable real estate,” he said. “There’s not much undeveloped land along the 400 corridor, at least not this close to Atlanta. Although, to be honest, my clients seem willing to pay awfully high dollars, even considering all that.”

“Why’s that?” asked Jamal.

“I don’t really know any more than I told you,” Brian admitted. “I don’t even have a good guess. Maybe they’ve bought some other land that’s close by. But it’s not my business, of course.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well, Giovanola’s employers have been having a hard time. Like I said, they’re willing to pay top dollar, but there are two, well, issues. First, they’re having a hard time finding out who actually *owns* the land.”

Jamal tilted his head to the side. “Isn’t that public record?”

Brian nodded. “It’s supposed to be. The truth is, I’ve been having a hard time tracking down the deeds. Apparently, the property’s belonged to the same family, the O’Briens, for more than a century. But there’ve been some courthouse fires and, to make a long story shortish, a lot of paperwork seems to be missing.”

Jamal’s eyes narrowed. “That’s weird.”

Brian nodded again. “As near as I can tell, the current owner is part of the same family, a woman named Betty O’Brien. Prob-

lem is, I can't seem to find her. Or even if she's still alive. She'd have to be pretty old, I think. I'm hoping your lease will help."

"Curiouser and curiouser," said Jamal. "What's the second problem?"

"Well, for the land to be worth anything, the developers would have to get the owners of the festival to agree to break that lease."

Fiona snorted. "Fat chance."

"Giovanola's investors are willing to pay a lot for that lease," Brian said. "A whole lot. It won't be hard to find another site for a carnival--"

"Renaissance festival," Fiona corrected him defensively. "Look, this isn't just some cheesy side show, lawyer boy." Jimmy took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Consider me corrected and suitably chastised," Brian said, putting his best negotiation smile in place. "Anyway, it won't be hard to find an alternative site. Especially not with that kind of incentive. But like I said, the owners of Blackthorne Faire, as holders of the lease, would have to agree. I think so, anyway. I'll have a better idea when I see that contract."

"So is that all?" asked Jamal.

"Not really," said Brian. "To tell you the truth, I'm having a hard time figuring out exactly who the owners of this festival *are*. They haven't returned my calls. It's hard to negotiate when I can't even identify two of the players."

"And let me guess," said Jamal. "The trail of paperwork is a labyrinth."

"One designed by M. C. Escher," Brian agreed with a nod.

"I'm not surprised. They've had me do some legal legwork for them in the past. It's always a nightmare. I think they might be foreigners or something, because there're usually currency issues involved. They like to deal in gold."

Brian chuckled. "Sounds like a bunch of eccentrics. Those are always fun to deal with."

Jimmy and Fiona laughed.

"You nailed it, brother," said Jamal. "I think Blackthorne Faire's a hobby for them. A lot of their business practices just don't make sense otherwise. Like, they only open for a few weekends at a time, four times a year. I've shown them stacks of paperwork and spreadsheets showing that the festival would be a *lot* more profitable if they stayed open longer, and only ran once or twice a year. They won't hear of it. You know, it's funny. I always

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have a stack of good ideas, but when I actually present them, I get tongue-tied. I forget what I'm planning to say, and I leave thinking their way must be better after all. But then I run the numbers again--" He shook his head, not bothering to finish.

"But you can't change their minds."

"Not even close." Jamal shook his head again. "Some manager I'm turning out to be, huh?"

"So how often do you see these folks?"

"Not often," Jamal admitted. "They mostly communicate by mail. Not even e-mail. Real handwritten notes, no less. I think they have somebody hand-deliver them, because the letters never have stamps. Like I said, the fair owners don't appear around here too much."

"The fair folks sound like the fair folk," Fiona said.

Jamal grinned at the pun. "At least they're good neighbors," he returned.

Brian's brow creased. He didn't get the humor but decided to let it pass. "So Jamal, it's up to you to pretty much run the place?" he asked to return the conversation to the topic.

"I guess that's a good thing. Otherwise, they wouldn't need me. The Rapier Wits draw enough for mad money, but not enough to make a living. Can you imagine if I had to get a *real* job?"

"No," Jimmy and Fiona said together. Jamal laughed with them.

"So they're not here much," said Brian. "The, um, fair folk."

"Not often," Jamal said. "They usually show up towards the end of the run. In fact, they usually costume up and ride with the parade to close the fair. That's another reason I think they just run this place for a hobby, you know? You might be able to catch up with them tonight, though. I'll introduce you if I can."

"That would be great," said Brian. "I'd appreciate it. In the meantime, can I look at that lease?"

Jamal hesitated for a second. "Tell me the truth, as a friend. Is there any harm I can do my bosses by showing you this?"

Brian shook his head. "Not unless there's something illegal or irregular. Probably not even then. I don't think so, anyway."

"Let's get it over with," said Jimmy.

"Okay," said Jamal. "You win." He winked at Jimmy, then turned back to Brian and grinned. "But only if you promise not to play lawyer any more afterwards. Deal?"

Brian sighed, and then laughed. "Okay, okay," he said, lifting his hands in surrender. "I give up. "Jim, I'm in your hands until this parade thing."

"I'll be gentle," Jimmy promised him.

"Okay then," Jamal said, standing. "Let me grab it for you."

"Thanks," said Brian.

Jamal produced a key from the leather purse he carried at his belt and unlocked one of the filing cabinets. He fumbled around inside for a moment or two, then went back through the contents again. And again. Then he did so yet again, faster.

Brian sighed with frustration. "You know," Jimmy told him, "in nature, scientists measure intelligence in animals by their ability to play."

"Like dolphins and ravens," Fiona added.

"Just something to think about," Jimmy pointed out. Fiona nodded her agreement.

When Jamal finally turned back around again, his eyes were wide. "I don't understand. It should be right here."

Brian frowned. "What's wrong, partner?" asked Fiona.

"The file with the lease contract. It's gone."

"Are you sure you're looking in the right place?" asked Brian.

"I'm sure," Jamal said, nodding. "I put it there myself."

"Does anyone else have a key?" asked Brian.

Jamal's eyebrows lowered, making a narrow V above his eyes. He gnawed at his lower lip. "I don't think so," he said after a brief hesitation. "It's possible the owners do. I didn't think so, but... well, it's possible."

"And they'll be here tonight," prompted Brian. "Maybe we can ask them?"

"Maybe so. This is weird. I swear I saw it in the file."

"And you're sure it's gone?"

"I can't explain it... but yeah. I'm sure. Man, I hope this isn't something bad."

"I'm sure the owners can straighten it all up tonight," Jimmy said reassuringly.

Jamal's frown deepened. "I guess there's nothing more we can do until they show up regardless."

"I guess not," Brian conceded.

"So no more lawyering till then, got it?" said Jimmy.

"But you'll introduce me?" asked Brian.

"It'll have to be later," said Fiona, pointed to the clock on the

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wall. "We've gotta get a move on."

Jamal hesitated uncertainly for a moment, then nodded. "I'm sure we can get to the bottom of all this tonight," he said. "But damn! Just damn. I just don't know what could have happened."



Jamal led the others back out to the fair. When they reached the path, they found a commotion. Brian and Jimmy stopped and watched with interest. Four men dueled furiously with an equal number of men in red uniforms, their blades flashing in the sun. Three of the four wore black tabards that Brian recognized from *Three Musketeer* movies. A crowd gathered around them.

"Hurry, D'Artagnan," called one of the Musketeers. "We must get the Queen's jewels before the Cardinal's agent does!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to convince these gentlemen, Porthos," the man he'd addressed replied. "I'm fighting as fast as I can!"

"Come on," said Jamal. "We can catch more of the storyline later."

Brian hurried to catch up. "Storyline?"

"Yeah," said Jamal. "There's a story that runs throughout the fair. You'll bump into episodes throughout the day."

"It's based on *The Three Musketeers*?" asked Brian.

"You bet," said Jamal. "As adapted by yours truly."

"You wrote the skit?" asked Brian. "Wow, you're a busy man around here."

"That I am," Jamal announced with obvious glowing pride as he navigated through the crowd. "I'm the artistic director as well as the manager." He winked. "And I still have time to help my friends cheer up their peeps."

"Impressive," Brian admitted.

"I write and choreograph the main storyline every season," Jamal said. "I'm a huge Alexander Dumas fan, so I totally had to do a Musketeer story."

"No kidding," Jimmy said. "I didn't know that."

"Although knowing his swashbuckling tendencies, you should have guessed," clucked Fiona.

"That you should have, my man," said Jamal. "But Dumas didn't just write good stories, he *lived*. The dude had quite a few real-life adventures of his own, believe you me. And besides, he

was half black, you know.”

“I didn’t,” Brian confessed. “Is it always a Musketeer story?”

“No, we do a bunch of different stuff,” Jamal called back. “Shakespeare, Robin Hood, you name it. I think we’re going to do King Arthur this summer.”

“King Arthur in modern Atlanta?” Brian frowned. “I don’t know. That sounds kind of silly.”

Jamal shrugged. Just as they reached the main path that led from the Half-Moon Theatre down to the main gate, Brian came to a stop. A woman playing a harp on a stage nestled in a corner of the crossroads had caught his attention. The others walked on a few steps before they realized Brian wasn’t following them.

“You going to stay and listen?” asked Jamal.

Brian didn’t answer. He stood still and listened. His mouth hung open and his eyes were wide.

“Apparently so,” Jimmy said with a grin.

“Then we’ll catch up with you later. We’ve gotta hurry. The Rapiers are on in three minutes.”

“We’ll find you,” Jimmy promised.

Brian didn’t even notice them hurrying away. He listened to the music, entranced. The melody, a simple tune that he guessed must be an old Celtic air, washed over him like a breeze from another world. Brian drank it in like wine, and the strange, unexpected sweetness shook and intoxicated him. The woman pulled notes from the harp’s metal strings, warm and gentle, and they reached down deep inside him to wake something, something that had slept, raw and sheltered, for far too long, something that stirred and moved and took wing. Brian gasped.

“You like harp music?” Jimmy asked him.

“My God,” said Brian. “She’s amazing.” Jimmy grinned.

She was young, younger than Fiona, Brian guessed. And she was lovely. Her hair, long enough to spill down to her waist and into her lap, was the color of fresh, late autumn straw, but shining fingers of light reached through the canopy of trees to turn it to the color of spun gold. Even from a few paces away, Brian saw that her bright eyes were the green of the clear sea near the shoreline.

Jimmy’s grin widened. “So you like?”

“Who is she?” said Brian. “My God. She’s incredible!”

Chapter 4
Madam Memory

Jessica smiled. Through the beaded doorway, she saw a line forming outside the fortuneteller's wagon. It was short, but if they all paid for readings, she'd make more than fifty dollars even after the fair took its considerable cut. And the day was young. Most of the people in the queue had lingered after Madam Memory's show-spell to bless the Tarot deck. Erin was right; the ritual had been a grand idea.

Taking a second to adjust the gaudy kerchief that tried gamely to keep her wild tangle of dark curls in check, Jessica turned her attention back to her first customer, a young woman who kept squinting as she glanced back over her shoulder at the pathway outside.

The woman who played Madam Memory during the morning shift had left two candles on the table. Jessica made a show of lighting them--the cheap tablecloth looked more or less like Irish linen in shadow, so she kept the overhead light off. Then she took a deep breath to find her character. When she spoke, it was with Madam Memory's Irish peasant's lilt.

"Welcome, friend. In this place, my cards form a pattern. In the shape of their images, we'll find a window to pierce the veils of this world, won't we just? And see what secrets we shall find beyond. Tell me. What troubles you?"

The woman laughed and tossed her hair. "Trust me. You don't want to know."

"Hmmm," said Jessica. She took a moment to appraise the woman, looking for clues that might help with the reading. She was older than Jessica but still youngish, probably not long out of college. She was well dressed in a smart khaki skirt and a button-down blouse--meaning she probably had a job, something yuppy-ish like marketing or middle management. So she wasn't a slacker or a grad student. Unless, of course, Jessica was way off base--which, she admitted to herself, was certainly possible. Maybe

she'd simply dressed up to impress a date. That would certainly explain the furtive glances over her shoulder. She fidgeted uncomfortably, but not so much that Jessica would have noticed if she hadn't been studying her carefully.

"If you don't tell me your question," Jessica said, "it'll be harder to find the answer, won't it just?"

The woman looked over her shoulder again. This time, Jessica nodded to herself as she saw where she focused her gaze. A red-headed man, stylishly dressed, slightly plump, strolled down the path. He never even glanced back at Madam Memory's garish wagon. When he vanished into the crowd, the woman relaxed, apparently satisfied that she'd successfully avoided the encounter. Her shoulders slumped as she let the tension in them evaporate.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, turning back to Jessica. "What's that again?"

"Your question?"

She smirked. "Can't you see all the answers anyway?"

"You should be more careful when confronting the greater mysteries," said Jessica, wagging a finger. She narrowed her eyes gravely and lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "If you don't ask the spirits a specific question, they'll show you what they will, won't they? And you may not always like what we'll see." She smiled slightly, enough to take the sting out of her words. *Chastised customers don't tip.*

"I see."

"Now then, why don't you tell me your problem?"

The woman looked up, eyes wide. "Problem? What problem?"

"The one you paid twenty-five dollars to hear my insights on? The one you said I don't want to know about?"

"Oh, it's nothing." The woman sighed and leaned back in her chair as she relaxed.

"And I take it the nothing is outside?"

"I'm afraid so," she admitted sheepishly.

"And this would be a... Mr. Nothing?"

The woman laughed. "In more ways than one."

"With red hair?"

She laughed again. "That's him. You're good. But believe me, it's probably not what you think."

"I see. And what is it I think, then?"

"Why don't you tell me? Aren't you supposed to be the mind reader?"

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Jessica chuckled. “Card reader. Why don’t we start with your name?”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m Angie, Angie Henderson.”

“A pleasure to meet you, milady Mistress Henderson. You may call me Madam Memory. Now, why don’t you tell me about your problem?”

“Oh, I don’t really have one,” said Angie. “Not one that needs supernatural help anyhow. Really, I just came in here to avoid... um, the sun.” She ran her finger along the neckline of her blouse. “It’s getting kind of hot out there. And this kinda looked like fun, you know?”

“We’ll see.” Jessica unwrapped her Tarot deck from its silk scarf and pushed it towards her customer. It felt strangely, subtly warm. “Here, place your left hand on the deck. No, your left one.”

Angie obeyed. “Now what?”

“Just keep your hand there for a moment. Think about your problem.”

“I don’t *have* a problem,” she insisted again.

Jessica showed just a hint of a smile. “As you say. Then simply think about your general life direction and situation, milady, why don’t you?”

“Um, okay. Sure. Whatever.”

“When you’re ready, cut the deck three times. Be sure to use your left hand. It’s closer to your heart, you know.”

“How do I know when I’m ready?”

“Whenever it feels right.”

Madam Memory’s Irish brogue came more easily; the character felt natural. She’d found her center, as Arthur Goodfellow would say. It seemed contagious. Angie, too, seemed to be getting into the mood. She nodded. After a moment, she used her left hand to divide the deck into three piles. Jessica restacked them, then shuffled the deck nine times, just as her book had suggested. Then she had her customer cut the deck one more time.

For a long moment, Jessica held the deck against her breast with both hands. Then she took three deep breaths and dealt a single card, face down. “This first card represents you, yourself. It is the significator. Some like to choose this card consciously, but my deck is a special one. You saw the ritual of blessing yourself, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Angie admitted.

Jessica turned the card over, revealing the Knave of Coins. “An

up-and-comer. You work in the financial industry?"

"Marketing for an Internet bank."

Lucky, Jessica thought to herself. "The Knave is climbing, not yet a knight or a king. That makes you middle management, I guess?"

She smiled and shrugged. "That's me."

"I thought so." *I could tell by the shoes.*

The next card was of the same suit, the Knight of Coins. The picture showed a plumpish man with flaming red hair and an up-turned nose. "This is the heart of the matter," Jessica said. "This crosses you. It can be the subject that concerns you, or something that blocks your progress."

"Jesus Frickin' Christ," Angie muttered, eyes wide.

Jessica raised an inquisitive eyebrow. *Let her talk*, she reminded herself. *Don't volunteer anything. See what she'll reveal that might help the reading.*

"Sorry," the young woman said. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's okay," Jessica replied, mentally wincing at the word 'okay.' *Madam Memory wouldn't say that*, she chastised herself. "He reminds you of someone, doesn't he? The man pictured on the card, I mean. The knight."

She nodded.

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

Angie chuckled softly. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you'd snapped a picture, or that the son of a bitch had modeled for your card artist. I'd know that expression anywhere."

Jessica studied the card more carefully. The man wrapped his imperious air tightly about him like an ermine cloak. His countenance revealed carefully practiced disdain. "Let me guess," Jessica said. "This is Mr. Nothing?"

Angie grinned. "Nothing," she concurred with a nod.

Time to go fishing. "He's of the same suit as your card," Jessica pointed out. "That usually suggests a co-worker or someone close to you in business."

Angie looked up. "You're good."

"But his rank is higher than yours. Am I right?"

"The King Bastard. He's my boss, and if you want the truth, he makes my life a living hell."

"Tell me about him."

"Not much to tell. He's a slave driver, but doesn't do much himself. You know the type. Makes us work weekends, and then

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doesn't bother to show up himself. He just calls with some lame excuse and tells us what to do. God forbid he should miss a stupid tee time."

"Is that all?"

"I'm just getting warmed up," said Angie. But she offered nothing more.

"The card in this position usually represents obstacles or blockage," Jessica prompted.

"Hmph," Angie snorted. "That's for sure. He's got the job I want."

"You mean you want the job he's got."

Angie shrugged. "Whatever. He should have been promoted a long time ago. But he never does enough to advance, and never screws up enough to get fired. And he won't let me transfer. He's in my way." She spat the last four words.

"Maybe he needs you," Jessica suggested. "Maybe he likes you."

"No way." Angie leaned back again, shaking her head. "The King Bastard hates me worse than I hate him. Trust me."

"Let's continue. The spread I'm going to use is called the Hidden Gate."

The what? Jessica asked herself. That wasn't what she'd meant to say at all. She'd studied the entire *Total Fool's Guide to the Tarot* book, but for the most part she'd concentrated on the traditional Celtic cross spread, the pattern the book claimed was the most common. It was the best she could do, given the limited time she'd had to prepare for the role. She'd skimmed the others, but she didn't remember anything called a gate, hidden or otherwise. She must be remembering unconsciously something she'd read late at night. She felt vaguely strange. She felt a tickle behind her eyes, like an itch she couldn't scratch.

Well, I wanted to work on my improv, here's my chance. Actors are supposed to trust their instincts, aren't they? She just hoped she didn't screw up too badly. "The Hidden Gate shows ways around problems," she continued. "It reveals the path to a goal, doesn't it just? Shhh--Concentrate. Let's see where it leads us, why don't we?"

Quickly, she dealt nine more cards, creating an arch shape like one of the standing structures at Stonehenge. Some of the cards were familiar to her--the Six of Coins, the Seven of Cups, and the Lovers. Two of them, though, were cards she would have sworn she'd never seen before: the Seven of Masks and Secrets and the

Fox Lord. She swallowed hard.

Jessica was proud of how well she kept Madam Memory's face composed. Inside, though, she scowled in the direction of her backpack, where she'd stashed her copy of *The Total Fool's Guide to the Tarot*. Apparently, the book wasn't as complete as she'd hoped; she should have chosen something more comprehensive than a quick and easy volume from the gaudily colored and cartoonish *Total Fool's* series.

Improv, Jessie girl, she commanded herself. *Improv!*

"Most of these cards are of the suit of coins. See? That's expected. We were speaking of your career path, weren't we just? And see? The numbers get higher as we go along, with the lower numbers clustered here, at the bottom of the first pillar. That seems to indicate slow advancement, but progress all the same."

Now what? She wasn't sure where to go next. Would the next card in the reading be at the bottom of the second pillar? Or should she go across the top of the arch, and then back down?

Jessica was already speaking before she'd even finished asking herself the question. "The next card, this one here, is the Seven of Masks and Secrets." She pointed to the first card at the top of the arch. "I think its purpose in this position is to remind us of the first card after the signficator, the one that crosses you. The heart of the problem."

"The bastard."

Jess smiled. "Let's say Mr. Nothing. I don't like that word. We Irish hear such appellations a wee bit too often, thank you. Especially the Tinkers."

"Tinkers?"

"The Traveling Folk. Irish Gypsies."

Angie smirked. "Check. Sorry."

"T'is nothing. But yes, Mr. Nothing. He's at the heart of your issue, I think. Yes. Hmmm. Heart. An interesting choice of words, no?"

"How so?"

Jessica smiled. "Never you mind, dearie. This card, though, it's a card of surprises and hidden things. I think there may be more here than either of you are aware of. And look here, see? Look at the card that completes the arch."

Jessica pointed to the Fox Lord. The brightly painted card showed an anthropomorphic fox wearing a bright and foppish Renaissance dandy's costume—a forest green doublet fastened with brass

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buttons and a red cap adorned with a long white feather. The fox had his back turned, as though the painter had captured him in mid-stride as he sauntered away. He looked back over his shoulder, revealing his salacious grin and a mischievous gleam in his small black eyes.

“This card,” Jessica continued, “is opposite the Seven of Masks and Secrets. It’s a card of tricks and sudden reversals, of unexpected things, of deceptions that lead to wisdom and surprises. But look at his smile, at his eyes. The bold rogue’s smile is not a chaste one, I think. What does that tell you?”

“I don’t know,” Angie said uncertainly. “What *should* it tell me?”

“Let us see,” said Jessica. “The cards relate to the heart of the problem, that which blocks you. Here--” Jessica pointed to the first pillar. “--we have slow progress towards your goal. Wealth and material success, if the preponderance of coins is any indication. Now we come to the top of the arch, that which impedes your progress. These refer back to the Knight of Coins.”

“The King Bastard.”

“Mr. Nothing. And I think you’re right. But see? Here we have Masks and Secrets, meaning there’s something else underlying the problem, something hidden that causes the tension between you. And the answer is here, with the Fox Lord. Sudden reversals. Something very surprising must be revealed, and your path must change, if you’re to make progress.”

“What?”

“I think you’ll find the answer to that here, in the final pillar of the gate. Look. These are cards of Cups. They relate to emotions, to matters of the heart. The first is the Two of cups, a card of partnership. So when the unexpected secrets are revealed, when the masks are lifted, I see partnership.”

“With *him*?” Angie chortled. “That’ll be the day.”

“Hmmm. Be that as it may, here we have the Nine of Cups, love, and here we have the Three of Cups, celebration. Next we have the Lovers. I don’t need to interpret *that* one, do I? And finally, the Ace of Coins, success.”

Angie frowned. “What are you saying?”

Jessica shrugged. “You tell me. Something is blocking your progress. A man who is above you, at least in a hierarchical sense. You seem to think it’s our friend Mr. Nothing. Right so far?” Angie nodded once, quickly and curtly. “And here, we have a mask,

something that hides a truth. That's what's causing the block. And here we have a sudden reversal, a trick that may *seem* cruel, but which leads to unexpected wisdom."

My God. None of this was in the book, I'm sure of it! Where is it all coming from?

"And here," Jessica continued, "here we have matters of the heart. Partnership and love. And that leads you to success. See?"

The woman shook her head. "That can't be right."

"It may seem cruel and unexpected, but that's where your answers lie. Masks that conceal matters of the heart. A man, a man with red hair, perhaps. Sudden reversals. Love. Success."

"No. Uh uh. No way. I'd quit my job and become a nun first."

"You really don't like him?"

"Him? You heard me say nun, right? With the chastity and all? Not so much."

"Not even a little?"

"As something to kiss, he ranks somewhere below a piranha. At least you know where you stand with the piranha. And it'd be warmer and a whole lot less slimy."

Jessica lifted an eyebrow. "Is that really true?"

"Of course it is. Eww!"

"But you have a block keeping you from your goal, and here you have an answer. Is it the right one? Only you can answer that. Well, you and Mr. Nothing, anyway."

"I can answer that right now. No way. No way in hell. Look, I just paid twenty-five bucks to slip in here just to avoid him."

"I suppose you did at that," Jessica admitted. "But the cards say what the cards say. If there's another way to interpret them, well, I'm sure your heart will tell you so."

"Me and the bastard?" She made a show of hugging herself and shivering. "Brrr! I can't even think about that."

Jessica smiled, gently. "The cards suggest that each of you harbor feelings for the other. Feelings that block you, strong ones. Feelings that are masked, hidden, maybe even from yourselves. And I see sudden reversals that lead to celebration and joy. See? Something is going to happen, something wonderful between the two of you. Soon, I think. Very soon."

Angie shook her head. "No way," She declared firmly. "No. I'd rather become a nun."

"We'll see," said Jessica.

So the day went. Jessica read her Tarot cards for a steady stream of customers. More than once, she found herself arranging the cards in new and unexpected patterns--the Great Wheel, the Tree of Life, the Secret Path. But as the morning progressed, she found it increasingly natural to find stories in the pictures and the patterns they formed.

Fortune telling's not all that different from acting, she realized. It's all about instinct and intuition, body language and character. It's about story. Arthur Goodfellow would be proud.

When she paused to think, she found herself puzzled. She didn't feel like she was *inventing* the patterns, but rather that some deep part of her was *remembering* them, even though she knew she'd never played with the Tarot cards before. She chewed her lower lip as she wondered, but no answers came. There wasn't much time to think, though. Too many customers wanted to hear what Madam Memory might learn in the fall of her cards.

Time and again, unfamiliar cards turned up in her readings. The Nine of Lost and Forgotten Things and the Rogue Prince both appeared when she read for a tall Asian woman who wondered about her birth parents. Jessica planned an answer, but when she opened her mouth to speak, she found herself saying something else altogether.

"You won't find them," she said softly. "Your parents have gone to their rest. That's why they never came for you. Don't stop looking, though. They left a gift for you, something important, something that ties you to roots and a past. But their lawyer hasn't been able to find you."

The woman lifted a hand to cover the O of her mouth, and Jessica saw tears shining in the corners of her eyes. She dropped a few crumpled bills into Jessica's tip jar as she left.

The Fountain appeared next to the Three of Cups, a card she remembered from her book, when she read for a woman who asked about the growth the doctors had found in her uterus. Jessica knew that she wasn't qualified to offer a medical opinion, but she also knew that the girl hadn't come for one. *She's come for comfort. And that, Jessica thought, is something Long Island Jewish girls know all about.* The woman never looked up; she kept her gaze fixed on her hands folded in her lap. The poor girl was far too young to

worry about such things. She wasn't all that much older than Jessica herself.

Once again, Jessica found herself speaking before she realized she'd thought of anything to say. All the same, the words must have been the right ones, because the girl wept when Jessica told her about the yet-to-be-born children in her future, a son and twin daughters.

The Six of Sorrows turned up in a reading for a woman who had lost her job. Troubles were ahead. But the final card, the outcome, revealed the Ace of Staffs. "It'll be a hard road," Jessica told her, "but you'll be just fine in the end, sure you will, dear. See? This is a card of empowerment."

The Five of Falling Leaves and the Hidden Book of Secret Knowledge turned up later, more cards that Jessica didn't recognize. Each time, her brow creased and she gnawed her lip. She was certain, certain they hadn't been mentioned in her book.

I've either got the suckiest book in the whole damn world, she thought, or a defective Tarot deck. Crap. That's what I get for shopping at that damn novelty store.

But, for the moment, there was nothing to do about it. So before each reading she took a deep breath for courage and did the best she could, looking for clues to meaning in the pictures themselves, or in the stories she found in the context of the patterns. The answers didn't seem to come from the book anyway. Instead, she found herself drawing on some combination of intuition, facts that the customer revealed, body language clues, and imagination, an alchemical amalgamation she didn't bother to analyze. After all, Madam Memory wouldn't think about it too much. For the most part, her strategy seemed to work. Her customers went away more or less satisfied.

All the same, Jessica promised herself that she would buy a better book before the fair reopened for the summer. Maybe Erin's friend Caitlin could recommend one. As she made that resolution, she realized two things. First, strange cards or no, the role had gradually become more comfortable. Second, at some point, without even realizing it, she had decided that she *definitely* wanted play Madam Memory again. It was too much fun--and lucrative, at least by starving drama student standards--to abandon after one day. She made a mental note to find Jamal and ask for the job for summer season.

Morning turned to afternoon and Jessica's first shift wound to an end. A thin young man in an oversized REM t-shirt would be her last customer of the shift. Jessica's brow furrowed as she watched him cut the deck three times. She knew the boy, or she'd at least seen him somewhere, anyway. She was sure of it. But where? School? No, he didn't look like he was old enough to have graduated high school. Even though the freshmen seemed to look younger with each passing year, at least to Jessica, a senior in her sixth year of college. So where then? Had she seen him somewhere around the festival? Maybe. The boy pushed the cards back to Jessica. She held the deck to her breast and looked the boy in the eye. He fidgeted and looked away. "Now then," she said. "Tell me. What troubles you? What wisdom do you seek from the world beyond?"

She was overdoing it, she knew that, but it seemed in keeping with Madam Memory's character, with her bright Tinker's daughter's clothing, so she went with it.

The boy grinned without looking up. "Romance. Do you see any, um, lovin' in my, like, *immediate* future?"

Jessica looked him over again, but didn't deal the cards. "Is there someone specific you're wondering about? A girl, then? A pretty young thing you have your eye on?"

He hesitated before answering. "A pretty young thing," he agreed after a moment.

Jessica nodded, and dealt the cards. As the pattern began to take shape, a six-card V shape she called the Bird spread, she remembered, suddenly, where she'd seen the boy. He'd been a volunteer at the Half-Moon; she'd seen him working with the stage hands who moved the flats and curtains that created simple sets. How could she have forgotten? She'd caught him staring at her, shyly, twice, when he'd thought the shadows in the wings hid the intensity of his glances.

Oh my God. It's me! He's got a little crush on me. How cute!

But even as the thought occurred to her, something in the fall of the cards made her realize that her guess was wrong. She hadn't been alone either time she'd thought he'd been watching her. She'd been with Jason, a high school junior in his second season with the Jester's Men Shakespeare Company. He hadn't earned a speaking

role yet, but he had talent. If he stuck with the company for another season or two, he'd do well. Yes! The boy liked Jason. How could she have missed it? When Jason left her, the boy's eyes had followed him. They hadn't lingered on her, even though the long skirt of her costume hugged her figure in a way that she knew flattered her curves.

The poor thing. No wonder he's shy. That sort of thing's hard enough when you're older. It must be awful for a high school boy.

Jessica chewed her lip for a second. How could she broach the subject? It would have to be done delicately. She didn't have to wonder long. Once again, she heard the sound of her own voice before she realized she'd begun to speak. "Look," she said. "There's a lot of cups in this reading. That's the suit of emotions, of the heart. I'm seeing a nice pair of legs in tights--Ren clothing. Your love is here, close. Am I right?" The boy nodded, once, uncertainly. "On stage? But no lines yet. A small role."

His eyes opened wide. Jessica thought he was going to speak, but he made no sound.

"It looks to me like your, um, love hasn't noticed you yet." Jessica took care to avoid gender specific pronouns. The boy looked disappointed, so Jessica continued, quickly. She knew Jason well, and knew that he liked men. But would he like *this* boy? Who was she to say? She wanted to give him hope, but not too much. She wanted to give him courage, but prepare him for disappointment, just in case. "But that's not to say that your intended won't notice you. Look here, these are cards of action and courage. I think you'll have to make the approach. *Make* your love see you. Do you understand then, me boyo?"

The boy nodded, thoughtfully. Jessica frowned. The last card was another she didn't know--the Lame Beggar, a young man on a crude wooden crutch, a single brass cup or bowl in his outstretched hand. The figure in the card looked more than a little like the boy in front of her, she realized, right down to the fine sandy hair that hung down over his forehead. But what did the card mean? She racked her brain, but once again, she felt certain she hadn't seen the Lame Beggar among the Major Arcana in her book.

"What's your name?" she asked, stalling for time.

"Bradley."

"Bradley," she repeated. She studied the card intently, looking for some clue to its divinatory meaning in the picture. There must

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be a standard, literal meaning, she was sure of it. But even as her brain reached for it, she knew, suddenly, that the usual meaning, whatever it might be, wasn't what she was looking for. The card was trying to tell her something else. Something more obvious. But what? She felt the strange tickling sensation in her eyes again.

This is great. That's just what Madam Memory would think. I am so totally getting into this character!

"Be bold," she told him. "Approach your love. You don't have to tell h... that is, you don't have to say what you're feeling. Just be noticed. Make a friend. That's a great first step. And don't worry too much about the outcome, because nothing that we do for love is ever lost."

"But you see, um, potential?"

"I do," she said, her voice soft as a whisper. "Possibilities, anyway. There are always possibilities."

Then she frowned. What she'd told the boy felt right, but incomplete. She'd spoken of what the first five cards told. What about the last one, the end of the story? What about the Lame Beggar? She looked at the card more closely. He was standing on a plank, perhaps a part of a boardwalk, or... no. A stair. Yes, a stair! That was it.

"Be careful," she said. "Something's going to happen if you're not careful. Be careful on the stairs." She pointed to the card. "Do you see his crutch? It will be yours, I think, if you're not careful. See how his leg is bandaged? It's like his leg is broken. Be careful on the steps, do you hear me?"

"What about the rest?" Bradley asked. Jessica smiled again. Like all young men, straight or otherwise, he had a one-track mind. "About, uh, my love. What happens if I'm, you know, bold?"

Jessica smiled. "If you're bold, yes, I think your love will notice you. I think your paths may run together, if only for a while."

The boy beamed and Jessica sighed. She knew he hadn't heard a single other word she'd said. He left a crisp five dollar bill in her tip jar.



Nearly an hour passed before Jessica saw Bradley again. When she did, her jaw dropped. As she made her way back to the Half-Moon theatre, sudden commotion caught her attention. Four of

the festival's security people were carrying a young man on a stretcher. She recognized Bradley at once. The security men were rushing him towards the gate.

"Oh my God!" said Jessica. "What happened?"

"He fell on the stairs back stage," one of her fellow cast members told her. "They think his leg is broken. Poor guy."

Jessica felt her face go pale. It was just like her reading.

Now that's one freaky weird damn coincidence.

Something else made her smile, though. Jason was with him, hurrying along side the stretcher, holding Bradley's hand. She watched them scurry down the path until they were lost from sight. Still smiling, she turned back towards the theatre.

And then her heart froze in her chest.

Ahead of her, at the point where the main path crested the hill near the back gate of the festival, she saw Angie Henderson, the woman for whom she'd done her first reading of the day. She was there with the chunky redheaded man, the one she'd called Mr. Nothing. They were doing the one thing she'd assured Jessica was impossible. Oblivious to the crowd and the festival around them, they were kissing, deeply and passionately. Her hand caressed his cheek tenderly.

Jessica's jaw fell again. Another reading had come true.

Chapter 5
The Game is Afoot

Jimmy Malone nodded with satisfaction as a woman behind the counter at The Highwayman's Hideaway Pub filled two plastic cups to the brim with foamy ale. He grinned. "I'll trade you a kiss for the pair of them," he suggested with a wink.

The young woman put a hand on her hip and grinned back at him. "And why would I want them back, then, you bold rascal? You haven't even paid for them."

Jimmy scowled good-naturedly. "Wench," he muttered as he handed over the bills.

The woman laughed. "Thank you, kind sir. Please come again."

Jimmy chuckled as he wandered to the back end of the open-air pub and handed one of the cups to Brian. The waist-high rail provided an excellent surface for resting beer cups between sips. The pub's floor, a deck raised two or three feet above the path below, afforded the men an excellent view over the crowd that meandered by or paused to watch the spectacle on the Sherwood stage. There, the Rapier Wits dueled with astonishing speed and acrobatic moves that made Brian gasp and grin. "Jimmy, I am impressed," he admitted.

"That's my sweetie," Jimmy agreed with a proud nod.

On stage, Fiona, backed away, as though she needed a moment to catch her breath. Jamal showed no sign of giving her quarter. "Ah ha!" he said, brandishing his rapier and twirling the ends of his mustache in the grand tradition of swashbucklers and movie villains. "So, I have overpowered the lady at last! Tell me, dear, was it the... strength of my deft sword work?" He made each word drip with wicked suggestion.

Fiona laughed, parried a blow, and took a step backwards. Then she leapt to a bench behind her and, in the same motion,

vaulted forward, turning a perfect somersault over Jamal's head. She landed on her feet behind him, spun, and launched a series of ringing attacks. "Not so, milord. On the contrary, it was the stench of that *Eau de Mule Piss* cologne you're wearing that momentarily overpowered me. *Phew!* But it's a little better now that I'm upwind!"

The crowd laughed and cheered. Fearsome clangs echoed across the fairground when the blades clashed together.

"That's amazing," Brian said.

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed, waggling his eyebrows. "I've got some ideas for that flip move myself. I'll suggest 'em when I get her alone." He swung his leg over the rail and sat down.

"I'll bet." Brian rolled his eyes. "But I don't just mean the moves. It's hard to believe those two are the serious manager and psychology student we were talking to earlier."

"They're good." Jimmy took a long sip of his ale. "And I don't mind admitting, I'm proud of 'em both. Especially Fi. Let's drink to them." They took a sip from their cups. "But speaking of babes, what are you going to do about this harp chick?"

Brian shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose. It's pretty obvious the lady's not interested."

"Objection. Hearsay. You haven't even talked to her."

"She disappeared quickly enough," Brian pointed out. "Nobody vanishes like that when they're looking to chat and get acquainted."

"Maybe. But I don't think so. I saw the way the two of you were making eyes at each other."

"I couldn't even get close enough to say hello."

"No, pal, you spent way too much time working up your courage and deciding what to say. You're going to have to do better with *her*. Besides, knowing Erin Winter, she probably just wants to lead you on a merry chase."

Brian spun around. "Wait a minute. You *know* her?"

Jimmy smiled smugly. "She's a friend of Fiona's. And she's not the type to moon like that unless she means it."

Brian laughed. "You son of a bitch. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask. But now that you do, if less politely than one might expect given that you're asking for a favor, I should mention that she's one of the people I recruited to help with my little cheer-up-Brian program."

On the stage, Jamal unleashed a series of blows that Fiona seemed hard-pressed to parry. The blades flashed when they

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caught the afternoon sun. Brian whistled. He had to remind himself that the whole act was carefully choreographed and rehearsed.

“Ah ha!” shouted Jamal. “I think the lady is impressed with my sword work after all.”

Fiona turned her head demurely and looked up at Jamal through fluttering lashes. “Perhaps a bit,” she said breathily. “In fact, I did have a dream last night... a dream about you... and your long, hard sword--”

Jamal grinned salaciously. He wiggled his hips suggestively. “Did you so? Why, lady, I’m flattered!”

Fiona shrugged. “I was disappointed.”

With that, Fiona turned her wrist and flicked her sword. The blow caught Jamal’s blade and pushed in down, driving it thrilling into the stage floor. Jamal struggled to pull the still vibrating blade free.

“Um, er... perhaps we should continue this... conversation at a later time?”

Fiona laughed, loudly. “Perhaps, my lord. Shall we say the Minstrel’s Stage in three hours time?”

“I’ll be there,” Jamal declared.

“Good,” said Fiona. “That should give you plenty of time to... get your sword up again!”

The crowd roared and cheered. Fiona and Jamal doffed their feathered hats and bowed theatrically. “Tips,” they said in unison, “are welcomed and appreciated!”

“But not sword tips,” Jamal added.

“I don’t know,” said Fiona. “You could use a few tips. Be generous, good patrons. Help this rascal pay for lessons!”

Brian downed the last of his beer. “Are we going to hook up with them again?”

Jimmy nodded and stood. “Before the play. We’ve got just enough time for you to buy another round. Who knows? Maybe Fi can help us find your lady.”

Brian smiled. “She’s really something, eh? And that harp. My God, that woman can play.”

Jimmy shook his head incredulously. “She was wearing that bodice and you’re watching her *fingers*?” Brian shrugged. “No wonder I worry about you so much.”

“Incorrigible.”

“Guilty as charged. Part of my charm. Now then, I believe someone mentioned another beer? Guinness this time, I think.”

“C’mon then. Jeez. I still can’t believe you know her.”

“Believe it, pal,” said Jimmy. He took a long sip of ale and returned his empty cup to the rail.

“And you were planning to tell me this, um, when?”

“I was *planning* to let you find out for yourself. Where’s your spirit of romance and adventure?”

“And you really think there’s a chance?” Brian asked softly. “That she might be, you know, interested?”

“I don’t speak for her.” Jimmy shrugged. “But I *did* see how she looked at you. Although personally, I can’t see it.”

“Thanks a lot, art boy.”

Jimmy gave Brian’s shoulder a squeeze. “Yeah. Maybe there’s a chance. Maybe there is.”

“Really?”

“Hey, dude, this is Blackthorne Faire. *Anything* can happen here. Now c’mon. Let’s see if we can cut in line.”



“You’re kidding,” Jessica scolded Erin. “You didn’t even *talk* to him?”

Erin shrugged. “I was going to. Or at least get close enough to make it easy for him to talk to me. Know what I mean?”

“Mmmm,” Jessica agreed with a nod. The two walked along the fair’s main path, making short work of a pair of snow cones. “But you liked him, right?”

“Oh, he was so totally gorgeous,” said Erin. “Blue eyes to die for.”

“You could see that from the stage?”

“I could tell,” Erin said. “And he dressed nice. Good shoes.”

“Since when have you, like, *ever* looked at a guy’s shoes? Even when you had someone with exquisite taste, like yours truly, for example, to point them out?”

“Since that boy was wearing them.”

“Ah.” Jessica took a slurp of snow cone and frowned. “I hate when all the flavor juice is gone.”

“Me too,” said Erin. She tilted the paper cone and tapped the bottom to empty the last bit into her mouth. “We should talk to Stan. I think he’s getting cheap with the syrup. But at least the ice is good when the day’s all hot and dusty.”

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“Just wait till summer season.” Jessica made a ball of her paper cup and tried a hook shot at a nearby waste can. It hit the rim and bounced out. She frowned and picked it up. Her follow up slam-dunk proved more successful. “So back to the subject at hand.”

“Snow cone syrup?”

“Boys with nice shoes.”

“Oh. I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t we talk about what’s bothering *you* instead?”

Jessica looked away. “What d’you mean?” Her voiced sounded just a little too casual.

“I’ve lived with you for four years now. Long enough to know when something’s got you all freaked. So why don’t you save us both some time and just tell me about it?”

“It’s nothing.” Jessica walked a little faster, turning to avoid people on the crowded path. “Just some weirdness with Madam Memory and the Tarot cards.”

“No kidding.” Erin quickened her pace to keep up. “Really?”

“It’s nothing,” Jessica repeated. She still didn’t look at Erin.

“You can tell me. You know that.”

“I know. It’s just--weird. The cards, well, it’s weird.”

“They say those things are powerful,” Erin said seriously. “Remember how Fiona told us all about the deep psychological archetype stuff? Maybe they’re not toys to mess around with.”

“Maybe.” Jessica shook her head dismissively. “I don’t know. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Erin sighed. “If that’s what you want. But give me a hint, okay? Just so I won’t worry.”

Jessica grinned. “Let’s just say I’m an even better actor than I thought.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Hmph.”

“Must be something else,” Erin said, grinning. “Probably my ritual.”

“Hmph,” Jessica repeated. “Let’s change the subject before I’m forced to smack you sillier. Now then, about this boy.”

“What about him?”

“Well, let’s start with the obvious. Why him?”

“Did you not even *hear* me mention the blue eyes?”

Jessica laughed. “I did. But look around, girl. This is Blackthorne Faire. You couldn’t throw a snow cone without hitting a pretty boy. And I’ll bet half of them have good shoes.”

“Jess!”

“You should come to the theatre with me. It’s just full of luscious boys, even if you don’t count the gay ones. Oh, girl, and they’re in shape, too! And they wear shoes. Usually, anyway.”

Erin laughed. “That’s okay.”

“So what is it then?”

“What?”

“What?” Jessica mimicked mockingly. “What is it? About this boy?”

“What do you mean?” Erin turned to look at the chandler’s shop they were passing. Studying the candles made it easier to avoid Jessica’s gaze.

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth, Winter.” The two turned onto a side path that led to the Robin Hood section of the festival. Jessica sighed with exaggerated exasperation. “Why *this* boy?”

Erin blushed and looked away. “I don’t know.”

Jessica laughed. “You can do better than that.”

“I really don’t. It’s just... I saw him when I was playing *Carolan’s Farewell to Music*, you know?”

“That’s a good one.”

“And he was into it. The music, I mean. Like he was really *hearing* it, you know? Like it--like it *meant* something to him. Does that make any sense at all?”

“Of course it does,” Jessica said, putting her hand on Erin’s arm. “I’m a performer, too, remember? I know what it means to communicate on that level. Trust me, girlfriend, it’s rare and special.”

“It is.”

“So he liked the music,” Jessica prompted.

“I think he did, Jess. I really think he did. And you’re right. Somehow, somehow we were, you know, *communicating*. Just like you said.”

“Mmmm. Smell the cinnamon almonds! I love it when they’re fresh and hot. So you were playing your O’Carolan tunes.”

“I pulled out all the stops,” Erin acknowledged. “There’s magic in them.”

“And you told all the stories that go along with them?”

Erin nodded. “And Jess, he was *listening!* Especially the one about when he touched his love’s hand again after going blind. How he recognized her just by her touch, even after all the years,

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when he helped her board the boat.”

“I remember it.”

“I think he really liked it, Jess.”

“It’s official. You’re smitten, girl. And if he was paying attention to all those O’Carolan fairy tales of yours, it sounds like he is, too.”

Erin grinned. “And did I mention that he was *so* totally gorgeous?”

“A time or two, I think. So what happened?”

Erin shrugged uncomfortably. She looked down at her feet and kicked a pebble along the path as she walked. “I was going to go over after I finished playing--”

“And?”

“Well, we made eye contact, and I started that way. But the crowd was in the way, you know? And a lot of them were tipping, and buying the tape--”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Don’t make me slap you, girl, ’cause I will.”

Erin laughed and raised her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Anyway, before I could get over to where he was waiting, I saw him talking to Jimmy Malone.”

“Jimmy? Fiona’s sweetie? You’re kidding.” Erin shrugged. “So that must be the guy we’re supposed to help cheer up.”

“Guess so.”

Jessica grinned salaciously. “Sounds like you’re ready to do your part!” Erin blushed again. “So what happened?”

“I don’t know,” said Erin. “It just--I don’t know. I felt all... weird all of a sudden.”

“You mean,” said Jessica, “that faced with the prospect of an actual introduction, you chickened out. Didn’t you?”

“Maybe so,” Erin confessed.

“Well, all is not lost. When we hook up with Jamal and Fiona, we’ll just have to arrange a meeting. In a comfortable, no-pressure sort of way, of course.”

“Like you even know the meaning of that.”

“Hey, I’m a Long Island Jewish chick, remember? My sisters have been fixing me up with nice boys since I was twelve. It’s your turn now, fair and square.”

“But didn’t Fiona say he was a lawyer?”

“So?”

"I don't know. Aren't lawyer boys all supposed to be such... such...."

"Lawyer boys?"

"Exactly."

"Normally, I'd agree. But this time I think you're just making excuses."

"Maybe."

"Maybe nothing. Remember, he listened to the music, Erin. Really listened, you said. A lawyer's what he is on the outside. The man who listened, that's him on the inside. That's the man you're attracted to. Whatever you put in there just for him, he heard it. That's got to mean something. At least enough for a date. Besides, he's with Jimmy Malone. I like Jimmy. If lawyer-boy's his friend, well, he must have some merit, right?" Erin didn't answer. "Right?"

Just then, Erin came to a sudden stop. Ahead, Jamal and Fiona were just finishing a Rapier Wits show on the Sherwood Stage. The crowd cheered. "What is it?" Jessica asked her.

"Oh my God," she said. "It's him."

Jessica turned and saw where her friend was looking. A few yards ahead, two men were leaning against the rail of Friar Tuck's Tavern. One of them was Jimmy. The other was a tall man with a blue golf shirt over a white t-shirt and neatly pressed khakis.

"So that's him," Jessica said appreciatively. "My! You're lucky you saw him first." Erin turned and slowly backed away. "Hey," said Jessica, "where d'you think you're going?"

"Go over there and talk to him for me!"

"What? Why? Hey, I'm just here to say something fast to Jamal. I've got call at the Half-Moon."

"Just say something for me! Something... I don't know. All mysterious. You're good at that."

"Why? Girlfriend, why don't you just *talk* to the boy?"

Erin grinned. "I want to be pursued," she said with a laugh. "If he's a romantic, he'll pursue me, won't he? Like a knight in a story."

"And they call *me* the princess," Jessica muttered. "You're crazy, Winter." Erin shrugged again, but didn't argue. "And what if he doesn't pursue?"

"Then why on Earth would I be interested in some drab, mundane boy without a single romantic bone in his whole stupid body? But he will, Jess. He will! He heard the music, remember? O'Carolan's tunes." Erin's smiled widened. "There's magic in

them.”

With that, she disappeared into the crowd.



Jessica found Jimmy and Brian on the deck of the pub. “Hey there, Jess,” said Jimmy, waving. “Wow, I like the gypsy look.”

She curtseyed. “Why thank you, milord.” She spoke with Madam Memory’s Irish accent.

Jimmy lifted an eyebrow. “Always on stage, aren’t you? But that’s not your usual persona, is it?”

“I’m the new Madam Memory,” she explained. “Who’s your friend?”

“Oh. Sorry. Meet Brian Johnson.”

“Hi. Madam Memory’s the name. But when we meet to party later, call me Jessica Holtzman.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Brian.

Jessica giggled. “Then show it by looking at me. What, did you lose something in the crowd?”

“Sorry,” said Brian with obvious embarrassment. “I was just, um, looking for something.”

“Someone,” Jimmy corrected him.

“I see,” said Jessica. She twisted a strand of her curly hair around a finger. “Anyone I might happen to know?”

“Matter of fact,” Jimmy answered for him. “What happened to your charming roommate?”

“Oh, she had somewhere important she had to be. Harpers are in great demand here at the fair, you know. Hey you,” she said to Brian, “don’t look so disappointed! Stick with your friends. Who knows? Maybe, just maybe, you’ll find her later.”

“Really?” asked Brian. “Do you, um, know where I might look?”

“Hmmm. Maybe.”

“Think you can introduce us?”

“Maybe later,” said Jessica. “Maybe. But right now, I have to get to the theatre. The director doesn’t like it when we’re late, and I don’t have enough butt left to let him chew off more.”

“Besides,” Jimmy reminded Brian, “We’re seeing Jess in *King Lear*, remember?”

“Maybe afterwards?” Brian suggested.

“Well, I have another shift in Madam Memory’s wagon after-

wards. Why don't you come by for a reading? Maybe I'll see romance in your cards. We Irish tinker girls know all about that sort of thing, you know."

Jimmy chuckled. "I didn't know they had Tinkers up north. Remind me again where you're from, Yankee girl. Jersey?"

"Lawn Guyland," Jessica said, exaggerating her normal accent and smacking an imaginary piece of gum. Then, effortlessly, she switched back to Madam Memory's brogue. "But come by my wagon later, laddie. I think you might like what I'll have to tell you. After I've read your cards, that is."

"Are you any good?" Brian asked with a grin.

"That I am, laddie." She winked. "I'm not so bad with the cards, either."

Jimmy laughed. "Really? That's something new."

Jessica smiled and shook her head. "You wouldn't believe it. I've been on a roll this morning. But we'll talk later. Right, now, I have a call, and I'm gonna be way late."

"Later," Brian agreed.

Fiona joined them then. Her skin was flushed and damp with a glow of moisture after the exertions of her performance. "Hey there, gang." She gave Jimmy a quick kiss. "What's happening?"

"What's happening," said Jessica, "is that I'm late and leaving. But would you tell Jamal I need to talk to him later?"

"I will," Fiona promised as she slipped her arm around Jimmy's waist.

"Then I'll catch you after the show. Don't forget," she said to Brian. "Madam Memory's wagon. After *Lear*. Don't you be late!"

"I won't," Brian promised.

"Well," said Fiona to Brian, "you certainly seem to be getting into the spirit of things. Why do I have the feeling that I missed something?"


"Because you did, my heart." Jimmy smiled mischievously as he tilted his head towards Brian.

"Care to enlighten me?"

"I think," said Jimmy, "that the game is afoot!"

Chapter 6

The Hidden Book of Secret Knowledge

aitlin McGregor started up to the apartment above her shop just as the teakettle began to whistle. She found Erin Winter waiting for her at the table by the window. Erin's elbows were on the table and she rested her chin in the cups of her hands. "Sorry I kept you waiting," Caitlin said. Her long Renaissance skirt twirled around her legs as she bustled in. "No, don't get up. I'll make the tea."

"Hiya." Erin bent her fingers in a wave. "You looked like you were busy with those customers, so I let myself in. Look, I made sandwiches, see?"

"Mmmm! Roast beef?" Erin nodded. "Good. Oh, by all means, don't wait for me. Start your sandwich, I'll be right there."

"I already had one," Erin confessed. "But I made myself a second so you wouldn't have to eat alone."

"Very generous of you," Caitlin acknowledged with a smirk. "Well then, let me get some milk and honey and I'll be right over."

Erin grinned. "So you can tell me about my surprise?"

"What surprise?" the older woman asked innocently. She put a jar of honey and a small pitcher of cream on a tray with two steaming mugs. "What surprise was that, then?"

"Tease," Erin pouted.

"Mmm hmm." Caitlin sauntered over to the table and set the tray down. She took a seat opposite Erin and pushed one of the mugs toward the girl. "Here, let it steep for another minute or two. Did you put mayo on my sandwich?"

Erin crinkled her nose. "Ewww! White slimy lard. No way."

"You know me too well. Now then." Caitlin looked Erin in the eye. Erin looked away, but Caitlin waited patiently until, after a moment, the girl turned back to meet her gaze. "I believe you owe me an answer. Have you made a decision yet?"

Erin sighed. "To be honest, no. Caitlin, it's so tempting. To see those wonderful cities, and new people--"

“But?”

“But. See, that’s the hard part. This is the last chance I’ll have to see some of my friends.” She sighed. “They’re special to me, Caitlin.”

“Your last friends as a child, your first as an adult. Believe me, I know. And you’re afraid that you’ll all scatter and lose touch when life in the real world grabs a hold of you. Am I right?”

Erin nodded.

“I can tell you from experience, you will. You *will* lose touch. That’s the way it works, I’m afraid. People grow apart, dear ones move far away, and friendships wither with time, even the best and truest ones. That’s part of the great sadness of life. Nothing is permanent; everything fades.”

Erin lifted an eyebrow. “Is that supposed to help?”

“I’m afraid not. But Erin, listen to me, friendships endure in the heart, despite the years and miles. And sometimes, sometimes the dearest ones flare up again, suddenly, when you least expect it. Maybe after a chance meeting, or after an unexpected phone call late in the evening. Then they live again, new and evergreen.”

“Caitlin, again, not helping. Okay?”

Caitlin laughed. “So you’ll miss the ones you’re close to, and you’re not quite ready to let go. You hope the good-byes will be easier if you prolong them. You hope that somehow, you can find a way to hold on after all.”

Erin nodded. “That’s about the size of it.”

“And I suppose it doesn’t help much to remind you that you’ll just be away until June? Not when every moment counts.”

“Not so much.” Erin looked down and studied the way her hands lay folded in her lap.

“But you also don’t want to miss an adventure, I think, a chance to explore, to stretch your wings a bit and play for new audiences.”

“That’s right, too.” Erin sighed. “I’ve been waiting so long for my *life* to start--”

“I understand, truly I do.” Caitlin smiled gently. “Is that all?”

Erin blushed. “And, well, I kind of met someone.”

“Kind of?”

“Well, I saw a guy, and ... and ... there was this, this spark, you know? A connection. Does that make any sense at all?”

“Of course it does. Believe me, I’ve been there, dear. That big Scottish lug Carter and I weren’t *always* married, you know. And

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he can still take my breath away when he sets his mind to it. But you didn't talk to him?"

"Well, he's a friend of some friends, so they can introduce me. And he's interested too, Caitlin, I know he is."

"Of course he is, dear. You're wearing my bodice, remember?"

Erin's blush deepened. "Would you believe it was the music that caught him? I think so, anyway. Oh, Caitlin, I really, really do. We ... we *connected*. Can you believe it?"

Caitlin studied Erin appraisingly. "You know, I just might. Music reaches places words can't. Especially when *you* play it, child. But listen to this. If he's that special, he'll wait. And if not, well, shouldn't you at least talk to him before he starts affecting your decisions?"

"Both good points," Erin admitted.

"Just something to think about. Now then, how would you like something *else* to think about?"

"Yes, by all means." Erin laughed. "Please, please make this decision harder."

"I never pretended I was here to make things easy. Now then, I think that tea's brewed quite enough. Why don't you drink it while I go see if I can find that surprise?"

Erin perked up in her seat. "The book?"

"A very rare one," Caitlin confirmed with a nod. "In fact, there's only one like it in the whole wide world. It's not ours to keep, I'm afraid, but if you come with us, well, maybe it *can* be ours to peruse. For a little while, anyway."

"What is it?"

Caitlin smiled. "Patience, dear. You just sit tight and drink your tea. I'll be right back."



The crowd at the Half-Moon stood and cheered. Brian had to lean close to Jimmy and raise his voice to be heard over the thunder of the applause. "I gotta admit, Jim, that was pretty amazing."

"I told you," Jimmy shouted back. "They're good, aren't they?"

"Dude, I've seen Shakespeare in New York, London, Stratford ... these kids could hold their own with any of them. Especially that little guy that played the Fool."

"That's the director. But hey, wasn't Jessica great?"

"That she was," Brian acknowledged. "She's got boatloads of talent. Hey, let's go congratulate her, why don't we?"

"And maybe ask her about her babe roommate while we're there?"

Brian smiled sheepishly and shrugged. The crowd cheered through two more curtain calls, and then only slowly began to disperse. By the time Brian and Jimmy managed to push their way to the backstage area, they were too late.

"Jessica Holtzman? Oh, she's already gone, I'm afraid," a portly little man with big ears and a great bulbous nose told them. He wore a large bathrobe, a cap, and, as near as Brian could tell, nothing else. "She's down at the fortuneteller's wagon doing a shift as Madam Memory, sure."

"Thanks," Jimmy said. "We'll try and catch her there."

"Pardon me," Brian said, stepping forward and offering his hand.

"I think one generally needs a priest for that, the Pope, ideally, or at least a high-ranking government official of some sort." The little man accepted Brian's hand and gave it a shake. He spoke with a very precise, crisp British accent. "The president works best hereabouts, or so I'm told. Although it's best not to ask close to an election, unless, of course, you're in a position to make a rather sizeable campaign contribution. Then, I suppose, you can ask whenever you please. Of course, if you aren't in such a position, well, it probably doesn't do you much good to ask anyway. Although personally, I'd stick with the Pope. Secular absolution only goes so far, after all."

"Um, excuse me?" Brian tilted his head, confused.

"For pardon," the little man explained patiently. "As for excuse, that's something else entirely."

"Ah," said Brian. He smiled. "Well, if I don't get yours, pardon, I mean, I'll know where to turn. In the meantime, I was hoping to ask you a question. Aren't you the man who played Lear's fool?"

The man beamed. "How lovely to see a hope fulfilled!"

Brian shook his head. "Excuse me again?"

"You were hoping to ask a question, if I heard you correctly, and with ears like these I almost certainly did. And now you have. Bravo. Although, if I may presume, you were likely also hoping for an answer, even if you didn't say so. In that case, I am happy to oblige you by providing one. That was, for a fact, myself and none

other. Arthur Goodfellow, at your service.” The man doffed his cap and bowed low.

“Then I’d like to congratulate you. That was quite a performance. In fact, that was one heck of a production. You directed it?”

“I did,” the man said, not without obvious pride.

“That was ... amazing. I was just telling Jimmy here, I’ve seen a lot of Shakespeare, all over the world as a matter of fact. That was honestly one of the best productions of *Lear* I’ve ever experienced.”

Arthur Goodfellow beamed. “I see you have excellent taste,” he said, pleased. “Are you an aficionado of our good Bard?”

“Something of one,” Brian admitted modestly.

“Something nothing,” Jimmy interjected. “This guy knows more about Shakespeare than near about anyone who doesn’t carry the title Professor before his name.”

“Is that so?” Goodfellow asked, rubbing his pointed chin thoughtfully. “Tell me then. What do you think of all those theories that suggest that someone else may have written the plays of Shakespeare?”

“You mean like Bacon or Marlow?”

“Just so,” said Goodfellow. The little man’s robe opened a little more as he spoke, revealing a generous expanse of rounded belly. Brian found himself hoping rather fervently that the thin terry-cloth belt would hold and prevent it from opening any further. “Some say Kit Marlow faked his death in that brawl, and lived the rest of his days in exile, hmmm? And that he wrote the plays abroad before sending them on to his actor friend to produce under his own name. That’s why so many of them deal with themes of exile, and why so many are set in exotic locations. How about that, eh?”

Brian shook his head dismissively. “The plays are set abroad in name only, I think. Despite the names of the places, they pretty clearly take place in Elizabethan England, or so it seems to me. Besides, there are stronger theories than that, if you’re of a mind to consider such things.”

“Like?”

“Well, the Earl of Oxford, for example.”

“What did I tell you?” said Jimmy with a wide grin. “My boy’s wicked into Shakespeare.”

“So I see,” said Goodfellow. “Tell me then. You actually believe that an uneducated glover’s son from an out-of-the-way no-

where like Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the greatest works in the entire canon of English literature? Doesn't that seem unlikely?"

Brian sighed. "I'm going to give you the same answer I give when UFO nuts like Jimmy here try to convince me that the ancient Egyptians couldn't possibly have built the Pyramids without alien help."

"You have to admit that's worth considering," Jimmy interjected.

Brian ignored him and continued. "Why are we so quick to dismiss human potential? Why is it so easy to discount genius on those precious, rare occasions when we're blessed with it? Why can't we just accept the miracles that the best of us are capable of? Why do we always rush to belittle our own achievements?"

Goodfellow's smile widened. "Good for you, lad, good for you. So you enjoyed our little production of *Lear* then? We met your high expectations?"

"Oh, you exceeded them!"

Goodfellow chortled. "So you weren't expecting much here at a local Renaissance festival?"

Brian shrugged. "No offense."

"All this didn't impress you, then?" Goodfellow gestured around him. "You don't like our little theatre?"

"Actually, I *am* impressed by this theatre. It reminds me quite a lot of the Globe in London."

"That's the idea," Goodfellow returned. He leaned close and whispered conspiratorially. "Although I'll tell you, this one, size aside, is an even more accurate recreation. But back to the point. You weren't expecting much from our poor company here at modest Blackthorne Faire?"

"To tell you the truth," Brian said, "nothing here at Blackthorne Faire has been quite what I expected." Jimmy snorted.

"We *do* seem to have that affect," Goodfellow said with a nod.

"But no," Brian continued. "I wasn't expecting this. Oh, I was expecting competent, even good. But world class? No way."

"Pity," said Goodfellow. "And what was that you were saying about discounting human potential?"

Brian shrugged and shifted uncomfortably. "I stand admonished. But your name is familiar to me, sir. You've directed in New York. Broadway and Shakespeare in the Park, I think. Am I right?"

"Very good," said Goodfellow. "That I have. Although most of my work has been in the Mother Country, as it were."

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“London? The West End?”

“And the Globe. And even humble Stratford-upon-Avon.”

“The RSC? No kidding! Would you mind if I ask an awkward question?”

“What am I doing here?”

“No offense,” Brian repeated with a shrug.

“Not at all. But let me put it this way. *Anyone* can create good theatre with the cast of the RSC, right? Or with the talent in the West End or Broadway?”

“I don’t know about that,” Jimmy said. “I’ve seen some pretty sucky theatre in New York.”

“Point,” Goodfellow acknowledged. “But all the same, isn’t it more of a challenge to create something wonderful in a more modest, unexpected setting?”

“But surely,” said Brian, “the rewards, the recognition--?”

“Oh, I’ve had all that,” Goodfellow said dismissively. “Here, I can teach people who really want to learn. And my friend, you forget. Shakespeare was a poet of the *people*. The people deserve to see the stories well performed.”

“I see,” said Brian.

“And trust me, there is something special here. Blackthorne Faire is a very ... let us say *interesting* place. Wonderful things can happen around these fair acres.”

“Well,” said Brian, “I can’t argue with the results. But I notice you made some alterations to the *Lear* text--”

“Not alterations. Rather, restorations. Closer to the original, as the Bard intended.”

Brian whistled appreciatively. “You must be quite a scholar.”

Goodfellow laughed. “Oh, believe me. I know Will Shakespeare. That I do. But here, I’ve kept you too long. You were after young Miss Holtzman, weren’t you?”

Jimmy nodded. “My pal here wants Jessica to introduce him to a friend of hers.”

“Ah,” said Goodfellow. “I see. That would be the lovely young Miss Winter, wouldn’t it? The girl with the harp? I’d heard there was a handsome young man sniffing around after her.”

Brian glared at Jimmy. “What is this, published somewhere?” Jimmy shrugged.

“Don’t think too much of it,” said Goodfellow. “News travels fast in a cast. And what is Blackthorne Faire, after all, if not one big theatre company? Believe me, your pretty Erin Winter is the

type to draw attention. Talent like hers is rare. Very rare indeed. It does not go unnoticed.”

“You don’t have to convince my friend here,” said Jimmy.

“So it seems. So it seems.” Goodfellow rubbed his chin again. “Yes, yes. You should go at once. Find Miss Jessica at the Fortune-teller’s wagon. Yes, do that. Have her read her cards for you, why don’t you? I fancy she’ll have something to tell you.”

Brian glanced at Jimmy. “Is he in on it, too?”

Jimmy laughed. “Beats me. But like the man said, this *is* a small company.”

“Great.”

“Go on, then. Go. Go!”

“Okay, then.” Brian lifted his hands in surrender and chuckled. “I’ll go have my fortune told.”

“But let’s get some food first,” said Jimmy. “I don’t want to hear my fortune--or yours--on an empty stomach. One of those turkey legs would do me some serious good about now. As would a cold beer. Heck, I’d even settle for a pickle from that Pickle Man dude.”

“If you must,” said the little man. “But don’t dawdle. See what our Jessica’s cards will tell you.”

Brian laughed again. “Mr. Goodfellow, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were directing me like one of your actors.”

“And why not?” Goodfellow returned, raising a single bushy eyebrow. “It’s all about the story, after all. And besides, didn’t our mutual friend tell us that all the world’s a stage? Now go on, then! Play your part!”



Erin ran her fingers over the heavy book’s weathered, hand-tooled leather cover. “Oh, Caitlin,” she gasped. “It’s beautiful!”

Caitlin nodded. “Yes. I’ve spent quite a bit of time admiring it myself.” She pushed the book a little closer to Erin. “Why don’t you open it?”

Erin did. Inside, she found pages that felt rather like heavy parchment. The front page was illuminated with careful, hand-drawn letters. “This language. What is it?”

“The penmanship is a bit antiquated, but it’s good old Irish Gaelic. Look closely, dear. You should be able to read it.” Erin had studied some of the language and Caitlin had been teaching her

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more.

Erin's brow creased as she concentrated and she chewed her lower lip. "Oh! I see now. Yes. Whoever wrote this made the letters all weird, but I can read it, I think. It says, *The Hidden Book of Secret Knowledge*. That's right, isn't it?"

"That's it," Caitlin confirmed. "A ... *gentleman* named Keith Winkler hired me to track this particular book down and purchase it for him. I'd heard of it in my research, of course, but I thought it was just a legend. But a private collector with an interest in the occult had it all the time. When he passed away, a dealer in Hay-on-Wye in Wales purchased the library. He knew I'd been looking, so he contacted me. I bought the book as Mr. Winkler's agent, and it just arrived yesterday."

"So what's the book about?"

"*The Hidden Book of Secret Knowledge* is a collection of tales about harpers from the Celtic lands. Interested yet?"

"You've *got* to be kidding."

"They're all mythic tales. Tales of harpers and musicians like the famous Thomas the Rhymer who supposedly had encounters with the Sidhe court and other Celtic faeries. The last tales are about one Turlough O'Carolan. I believe you know of him?"

"Caitlin!"

"The author of the book is an Irish monk. He claims to have known O'Carolan personally." Erin gasped, but Caitlin simply smiled. "He claims to have recorded his secrets."

"What secrets?" Erin asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"A folklorist's dream." Caitlin's eyes sparkled. "Folktales from a possible original source."

"Tell me!"

"Well, the monk claims to have recorded O'Carolan's firsthand account of his own encounter with the 'good neighbors.'"

"That's supposed to be how he learned to play!" Erin exclaimed. "After he went blind, he learned when he heard faery music under two hills--"

"The little hill and the big hill," Caitlin agreed with a nod. "*Sí Beag is Sí Mór*. And I haven't even told you the best part. Turn to the last page, why don't you?"

Erin did, finding three rows of shapes arranged on fine lines. She gasped again. "Oh, Caitlin! Is this what I think it is?"

Caitlin nodded. "It's old-style music notation. The author claims it's an O'Carolan tune called *An Geata Rúnda*."

“*The Secret Gate*,” Erin translated.

“Just so,” Caitlin confirmed with a nod.

“But I’ve never heard of that one.” Erin frowned, puzzled.

“Neither has anyone else, or so it seems, anyway. The author claims that O’Carolan played it for him alone, and only once.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, not yet. To tell you the truth, I haven’t read much of it yet. The letters *are* strange, and it’s slow going. Besides, I wanted to leave something for *you* to discover.”

“Me? But Caitlin, what about the *tune*?”

“I only know that, apparently, it’s one that hasn’t been played by anyone save for the master harper himself, and is recorded nowhere else save in this book. And this is the only copy in existence.”

“Oh my God. A lost O’Carolan tune.”

“So it seems. Can you read it?”

“Oh, I wish I had my harp!” Erin exclaimed. Then, hesitantly, she began to hum.

“Is that it?”

“I think so. More or less. No ... well, it’s close. I need to work it out better. Of course, that’s just the melody line. There would be more, to add complexity, you know. And it would repeat with variations.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” Erin admitted. “Only the basic melody is here. But I know O’Carolan’s style.”

Caitlin chuckled. “That you do.”

“Given a little time, I bet I could reconstruct the tune ... I could ... oh!”

“What, child?”

“But you said this book is for someone else.”

“Mr. Winkler, yes. He’s a wealthy old eccentric who retains me now and again to research or locate old esoteric texts for him. I’m like his personal folklorist.”

Erin’s face fell. “And this belongs to him.”

“I’m afraid so, dear.”

“I wish we could keep it.”

“So do I, Erin, but I never could have afforded it on my own. It’s quite rare, you know. And at least this way, we get to have a look at it. At least we’ll know what’s in it. Besides, Mr. Winkler knows I’m on the trail, but he doesn’t know I’ve actually located it

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yet, does he? And he'll want it translated. A rich old coot like Keith Winkler may well have many talents, but a knack for ancient languages isn't one of them."

"Don't tease me, Caitlin."

"I have to give Mr. Winkler this book," Caitlin said. "He paid quite a pretty penny for it, and I have a contract. Besides, I gave him my word. But I never said *when* I'd deliver it, did I? He's such a pushy, unpleasant man. He can bloody well wait a little while, can't he? Long enough for me to research and make some notes. Say, until I return to Atlanta for the summer season."

"Caitlin, good for you."

The older woman smiled. "But to do anything meaningful in that limited time, well, I'd need a research assistant, wouldn't I? Someone who can read Irish, and someone who knows music--"

Erin beamed. "And you're looking for a volunteer."

"That I am. Now then, did I make your decision any easier?"

"You bet you did," Erin said with a grin. "Count me in. I'm coming with you."

"And what about this handsome man you haven't met yet?"

"There's always Facebook. I'll just have to tell him to find me again in June."

Caitlin smiled. "A challenge for your knight?"

"Exactly."



Mick Giovanola stopped dead in his tracks and his heart froze in his chest.

Just ahead he saw someone he knew. In a crowd of thousands of strangers, he'd spotted a man who could identify him. It was a lawyer. What was his name? Brian Johnson. That was it. The fucker did some work for Winkler and his associates, just like Mick did, even though his work was on the so-called *legitimate* side of the business. Mick had hired the son of a bitch himself, and even wrote his checks. Hell, the lawyer was probably at the fair for the very same reason as Mick himself, although of course his methods would be different. It would be just like Winkler to try two very different tactics at once, law and muscle. Anything to get what he wanted. Mick had to admire that.

But the fact remained: Mick had been the lawyer's primary

contact with Winkler's organization, so the lawyer would recognize him. Lawyers have an eye for detail, or the good ones do, anyway. Johnson was supposed to be one of the best, a real hotshot. That meant he could point a finger. The last thing Giovanola needed was a man who could place him at Blackthorne Faire. If things went wrong, the son of a bitch might be in a position to say the wrong word to the police. Or worse, to Winkler. That wouldn't do at all. Old man Winkler might be confined to a wheelchair, but Mick didn't let that apparent weakness fool him. People who screwed up on Winkler's dime got hurt. Bad. If they were lucky.

He stepped backwards. The lawyer hadn't seen him. Not yet. Mick looked around frantically. The crowd was too thin to allow him to lose himself with any assurance. If the bastard lawyer happened to look the wrong way, Mick would be easy to spot. Instant witness.

Mick turned. There was only one avenue of escape open to him. Behind him waited a gaudily-painted wagon. A sign above the door read "Madam Memory, Fortuneteller and Card Reader." A young woman emerged. Bingo. There was a short line, but Mick pushed his way past them. A smart ass at the front of the line opened his mouth, but Mick was hired muscle. He knew how to deal with a punk like that. A glare, and the man choked back his protest. Smart man. Mick slipped through the beaded doorway and glanced back over his shoulder. Good. The lawyer hadn't stopped. There was no reason to think he'd spotted him.

"Welcome, friend."

Mick turned. A babe in a bright gypsy getup sat behind a table covered with a lacy white cloth. Three candles burned on the table, and the air reeked of some smelly shit, probably incense or something. Before her, a deck of large cards rested on the folds of a colorful scarf.

"Please," said the babe. She motioned to the chair opposite her own. "Be seated."

Mick obeyed, smirking a little and he lowered himself down onto the little wooden folding chair. "Hey there. You must be the fortuneteller."

"The same," the girl acknowledged with a nod. "Why don't you tell me what brought you here?"

"Oh, I just came in to have my fortune told." Mick yawned and leaned back in his chair. "You know, see what the magic cards have in store for me and all." Not that Mick believed in cards and

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fortunes and shit like that. No way. They'd always said that his Great Aunt Claris had the power, but what did she know? The old bitch used to say Mick would come to no good, and now who was the one who strolled around with a little bank in his pocket, huh? Not his nancy-ass college boy cousins, that's for sure.

"Have you any problem? Perhaps a question you wish to ask the spirits?" She spoke with an Irish accent. Mick wondered if it was real. Probably not. Nothing was real around this place.

"Do I have to just to have my fortune told? I've got the twenty-five bucks--"

The babe shrugged. "Well then, let's just see what the cards have to say, shall we?"

Mick nodded. As Madam Memory shuffled her deck, Mick took the opportunity to look her over. Not too bad, he appraised. A little skinnier than he liked 'em, but she had a decent rack on her. Of course, she had the look of a snooty college bitch about her, probably full of all kinds of pretentious airs and feminist bullshit. Probably had her sights set on sensitive, faggoty college boys. Unless she was a fucking dyke. Yeah, he knew her type well enough. If he wanted to get between those skinny little legs, he'd have to spread 'em himself. Then he'd make her scream for him. Do her some good.

Not that it mattered. He didn't have time for her anyway, her or any other pretentious college bitch. No, he had business. It was time to stay focused. He patted the sharp, long knife hidden beneath his loose shirt. It made him feel strong.

"Here," said Madam Memory. "Cut the deck for me. No, use your left hand." Mick obeyed, smirking. "Good. Now do it again ... and one more time. Okay, now slide the deck over to me."

Madam Memory took the deck and held it against her breast. "Now then. Are you sure there's nothing on your mind? No problem you want to ask me about?"

"What's the big deal? I just want my fucking fortune told, huh? Is that going to be a problem?" Why did people always have to fucking argue? Wasn't he the customer here?

"No, no problem," Madam Memory assured him. "I just wanted to be sure." With that, she began to deal.

Mick had only one *problem* on his mind. That was the job. And if there was any *problem*, well, it sure as hell wouldn't be his. All he had to do was lie low until the stupid medieval carnival thing closed. Then he'd hide until the place emptied out. He had busi-

ness with the assholes who ran the place, and it was best if nobody was around when he conducted it. No witnesses.

Madam Memory dealt a series of cards in a sort of cross pattern, then started dealing more cards in a row next to it. Mick hardly noticed. His mind was on the job. Focus is important.

He'd been by before to shake down the fuckers who ran the place. Show them a little about what's what. Explain that operating the place was going to be a little more expensive from now on. That should make them a little more eager to break their lease so that the owners could sell the place and Winkler's people could buy it on the cheap, all reasonable like. Mick didn't know why his bosses wanted this particular dump of land, but he wasn't paid to ask questions. When Mr. Winkler spoke, Mick Giovanola did what he was told. That's the way to get ahead.

He'd shaken the assholes down good and proper. Put a little fear in them, just enough to teach them respect. Made it clear it was a good idea to pay. And if he added a little extra for himself, well, what about it? His bosses didn't give a rat's ass, not so long as they got their part paid in full, and not a penny short. Anything on top of that is nobody's business but his own right? Shit. A guy's got to make a living.

But the owners had tried to fuck him over. They'd showed him the bank, not cash money but real, honest-to-God gold, and then pulled some kind of switch. They'd made him look like an idiot, and worse. And if he didn't make things right, it'd be his own ass on the line. Yeah, Mick knew enough not to let the wheelchair fool him all right. When old man Winkler got pissed, things got bad.

Mick didn't intend to let that happen. Somebody was going to pay, damn straight, and it wasn't going to be him. Fuck no. He didn't take that kind of shit. Not Mick Giovanola. He just had to lay low for a while. Let the place empty out. And then conduct his business all private like.

And make sure the bastard pretty boy lawyer didn't see him in the meantime.

Madam Memory finished dealing her cards and frowned. For a long moment, she didn't speak.

Mick shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well?" he said at last. "What's my fortune, babe?"

Madam Memory didn't answer. Her hands twitched and she kept fingering the final card, the Ten of Swords. Her frown deepened. Mick saw something in her eyes, in the way they darted

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here and there a little too quickly. It was a look he knew well. God knows he'd seen it enough, although he usually enjoyed it more.

The bitch was afraid.

That wouldn't do. The last thing he needed was to stand out in her memory. He needed to calm her down, show her things were cool. Mick smiled his most charming smile, the ones the girls back home liked. Of course, those girls knew what a real man was all about. They weren't all uptight like these college bitches. They knew their places. "Ain'tcha gonna tell me what you see there?" he asked.

"No," she said at last. "I don't see any fortune for you. It's ... I don't understand. It ... it's like the window's closed."

Fucking figures. Bitch. Probably thought she was too damn good for him. Mick wished he had time to slap her around a bit. He'd make her talk all right, and a lot more besides. Make her learn a little respect. And he'd make her look him in the eye while he did it, so he could drink her fucking terror like liquor.

But he didn't have the time. And he couldn't afford the attention.

"I'm sorry." She swallowed. "Please, I don't ... I ... I'm sorry."

Jeez. The bitch was really afraid. Had she recognized him? Did she know him somehow? No, he'd never seen her before. He was sure of it. He'd remember a face like hers. And those tits. Mick eased himself out of his chair.

"You wouldn't be trying to cheat me out of my money's worth, now would you? 'Cause I ain't planning to pay no more. And I ain't leaving without what I paid for."

"You don't have to pay. I'm sorry. Really. Just, please, go. No, wait. I--"

Mick stopped in mid-motion, halfway between sitting and standing. "What is it?" he demanded.

"I ... I do have one thing to tell you. I don't know what it means, but listen to me. Listen carefully. Okay? This is important."

"What?"

"Just this. Beware. There is danger for you."

Mick's eyes narrowed. Something in her voice, some shrill edge, made him lean forward and listen.

"Beware," she said. "Beware of straight paths, and daggers from the dark."

Please let me know if you'd liked to be notified when the complete *Blackthorne Faire* is published.

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